

# The Hermeneutics of Tradition

*Explorations and Examinations*

*edited by*

CRAIG HOVEY *and* CYRUS P. OLSEN



CASCADE Books • Eugene, Oregon

THE HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION  
Explorations and Examinations

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Cascade Books  
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3  
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-498-5

Cataloging-in-Publication data:

The hermeneutics of tradition : explorations and examinations / edited by  
Craig Hovey and Cyrus P. Olsen.

xx + 252 pp. ; 23 cm. Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-1-62564-498-5

1. Tradition (Theology). 2. Hermeneutics. I. Hovey, Craig, 1974-. II Olsen,  
Cyrus P. III. Title.

BS476 .H36 2014

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Last Update: November 12, 2014

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## The Wound of Tradition

JONATHAN TRAN

We have to learn what finding is, what it means that we are looking for something we have lost. And we have to learn what acceptance is, what it means that we have to find ourselves where we are, at each present, and accept that finding in our experiment, enter it in the account. That is what requires confidence.

—STANLEY CAVELL, *THE SENSES OF WALDEN*

WHAT HAS BECOME A Christian preoccupation with tradition might be better expressed in terms of lament, and the consternations regarding the flagging status of tradition a kind of salve on the wound of the church's many catastrophes. Otherwise, tradition becomes overconfident in its overdrawn rhetoric. To be sure, a vapid individualism poses a significant challenge to the church's ecclesial life, but too often churchly tradition-language forgets itself, swallowing up individuals in the process. And then the separateness of individuals gets subsumed within an account of tradition deployed for the sake of "tradition" as a counter-assertion. If in our response to secular individualism we deploy a monolithic tradition and if in the deployment of that monolith we overwhelm the separateness of each person, then we will have constructed an account of community at the cost of its benefits. Meaning, too many accounts of tradition are simply the far side of a false dichotomy

between individual and community, as if the response to individuality as an assertion must take the form of community as an assertion. This seems to me an evasion of a serious problem, which has gotten lost. In relation to *this* problem, which Stanley Cavell characterizes as "the threat of skepticism," the false dichotomy of individual and community is a pedestrian issue. In the attempt to resolve that issue by way of a Hegelian subsumption of the individual, we have put forth something ugly.

When Alasdair MacIntyre emplots this dichotomy through valances like "emotivism" and "the failure of the Enlightenment moral project" his followers quite naturally conclude with tradition as the only viable rejoinder to "the new dark ages."<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre's work has profoundly shaped Christian (and Muslim) theology, so much so that we can now speak of tradition as a proper name. For example, the authors of the essays comprising *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* turn out creative exercises of this appropriation in a series of essays that repeat with little divergence the same formula Stanley Hauerwas made famous, where good liturgy = good people and bad liturgy = bad people, based on the equation that something's wrong with modern individualism and the church's eucharistic politics offers a liturgical alternative. You take this formula and cast it as a fix within the dystopic epic MacIntyre tells and you seemingly have a solution for all the troubles that beset us.<sup>2</sup> But a methodological issue troubles the narrative and its Christian appropriation: are things bad in this way, or are they simply cast in this way in order to give the claim to community traction? My misgiving here isn't with the indictment of secular individualism for its corrosive effects on ecclesial life (and otherwise) are readily evident. My initial concern is the way "tradition" gets pitched in order to champion a certain version while countenancing anything made to count as tradition. This I will refer to as a problem of overconfidence. My larger concern, which the first falls into, is the way the story misses the point and evades what is most central. And here I mean what first provoked the Idealists (all the way to MacIntyre) even if they could not long abide it: alienation as the sense of estrangement that can at best be acknowledged and never overcome. Addressing this is what takes up the bulk of Stanley Cavell's career, and something I hope to convey here as a sense of lament.

1. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 263.

2. *The Blackwell Companion* deals with everything from racism to cloning to war. I say this as a great admirer of the *Companion*, but I also sometimes worry about what I'm teaching when I teach it to undergraduate students. For better ways of stating these concerns, see Kelly Johnson's and Peter Dula's respective essays in *Unsettling Arguments*, 300–314 and 3–24.

My considerations follow two texts, each offering contrasting expressions of tradition. I begin with a historical critique of tradition's overconfidence. Theological appropriations of tradition have tended toward this overconfidence as a reaction to the arrogance of modernity. Overcompensating, these accounts of tradition employ suggestive rhetoric regarding tradition for the sake of offering the best account available, a tendency common for most Hegelian-bourn notions of history.<sup>3</sup> Through Willie Jennings' *The Christian Imagination*, I show how this rhetoric both results in excessive political warrants and turns a blind eye to those excesses. Following, I present, through Stanley Cavell's *The Senses of Walden*, a different kind of tradition. Cavell hardly speaks of tradition, but much of what he says about mutual attunement and maintenance intimate it. Cavell's ruminations on Thoreau's *Walden* present tradition as a wound suffered between despair and hope and I will argue that the church's many tradition-constituted wounds admonish lament as tradition's appropriate theological expression.

## The Promise of Tradition

If tradition does as claimed, how do we explain José de Acosta Porres? Willie Jennings knows most Christian purveyors of tradition have never heard of Acosta, even though Acosta stands as one of the great exemplars of theological tradition, and Jennings thinks this is telling. In *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* he chooses Acosta as his subject explicitly because Acosta fits the MacIntyrian bill on tradition-constituted moral formation so well and yet turns out so badly. Because Acosta receives and inhabits his predecessor culture as seamlessly as he does, rather than departing from it, because his education was so exacting, rather than vague, because he negotiated change so deftly, rather than ignoring or abdicating, because through him Christian moral inquiry progresses forward, rather than stalls, Acosta proves the ultimate test case. By relating Acosta's disastrous story, Jennings means to offer a counter-history to the one usually paraded by popular theological approbations of tradition, not because Acosta failed to live up to the Christian heritage, but because he realized it so splendidly.<sup>4</sup>

3. "Best account available" references Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*; I understand Taylor's work largely operating in this rubric. Consider for instance the fascinating similarities between *Sources* and Taylor's *Hegel*.

4. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*. Hereafter page references will be made parenthetically.

Jennings begins with a straightforward reading of MacIntyre—a reading already put forth to great effect in this volume by Craig Hovey and one which readers interested in *MacIntyre* rather than *uses* of MacIntyre (my present concern) hopefully at this point presume. Jennings picks up on MacIntyre's account of "traditioned inquiry," drawing specifically from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*<sup>5</sup> His reading focuses on three aspects of MacIntyre's account: the ability of traditions to interpret the world, the critical juncture of re-interpretation, and the kinds of figures necessary for interpretation. Quoting MacIntyre, Jennings speaks of tradition as ongoing formation, such that respective traditions do not only form individuals, but also take on the character of temporal agency themselves:

We are now in a position to contrast three stages in the initial development of a tradition: a first in which the relevant beliefs, texts, and authorities have not yet been put in question; a second in which inadequacies of various types have been identified, but not yet remedied; and a third in which response to those inadequacies has resulted in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations. (69)

Over time, a MacIntyrian tradition gathers as a working body of "beliefs, texts, and authorities" cohere in response to identified challenges that arrive as inadequacies to a traditioned community's conceptual resources, resulting "in a set of reformulations, reevaluations, and new formulations and evaluations, designed to remedy inadequacies and overcome limitations." As new challenges mount within and outside a community, so the process begins anew (indeed, it never truly ends), emanating in a tradition that *lives* as such (with the implication that traditions unable to achieve each stage eventually die). Tradition takes on dynamic form for MacIntyre, foreclosing tradition as stale, static, or stolid. By construing tradition accordingly, MacIntyre offers a response to modern grievances with "religious tradition" that war against intellectual growth, with his most shocking conclusion painting modernity as itself a tradition. (In this sense, Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* is less the self-purported argument against MacIntyre and more an articulation of democracy on MacIntyrian terms. In a moment, I will look to Stout to fill a lacuna in MacIntyre.)<sup>6</sup>

5. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* As I am more interested here in what Jennings has to say about MacIntyre, I will reference Jennings' text, which quotes primarily from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

6. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. For a depiction of Stout along these lines, see my "Laughing *With* the World: Possibilities of Hope in John Howard Yoder and Jeffrey Stout."

Underlining what has famously come to be known as “an epistemological crisis” Jennings quotes MacIntyre:

At any point it may happen to any tradition-constituted enquiry that by its own standards of progress it ceases to make progress. Its hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally. Moreover, it may indeed happen that the use of the methods of enquiry and of the forms of argument, by means of which rational progress have been achieved so far, begins to have the effect of increasingly disclosing new inadequacies, hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems for the solution of which there seem to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief. This kind of dissolution of historically founded certitudes is the mark of an epistemological crisis. (70)

Such junctures arrive as forks in the road for MacIntyre’s “tradition-constituted” community. At each juncture traditions can either stall and sooner or later die, or develop around new epistemes fomented by each respective juncture. Either way, the crisis functions as the very torsion of a tradition’s development in time and communities able to receive crisis accordingly display the requisite vitality MacIntyre’s account of tradition envisions. In true dialectic fashion, that which threatens to kill a tradition becomes the condition of possibility for its discursive survival.

MacIntyrian traditions are embodied in individuals able to carry on inquiry as a form of life. Not only do these traditions cultivate virtues created in the image of each respective moral community, those most thoroughly formed are able to carry on the work of the tradition itself, to imbibe its history in such a way that guides its future. Similar to what Hegel called “world-historical figures” these ones heroically survive the vicissitudes of epochal time and become microcosms of the entire dialectic (setting up MacIntyre’s Thomas Aquinas to steal the show). As Jennings states, “A tradition is embodied both in a community and in its individual members. . . . The embodiment is not a matter of perfection, but of faithfulness and a constancy to working out the questions that face a tradition from within the *telos* of that tradition itself” (69).<sup>7</sup> The tradition’s wholeness expresses itself in individuals able to hold together the various parts of the tradition’s life in order to carry forth its existence. The Aristotelian formation of character matches the MacIntyrian progression of tradition, the former the neces-

7. Vis-à-vis Cavell’s Emersonian perfectionism, I will return later to qualifications of perfection.

sary constituent for the latter and the latter embodied in the former. Again MacIntyre,

It is only individuals . . . educated into the making of certain kinds of discrimination that enable them to order the expression of the passions in the light of an ordering of goods—something which in the first instance they will have to learn from their teachers. . . . For someone who lacked altogether the kind of training and development which Aquinas—and Aristotle—takes to be required would develop the expression of their desires in a piecemeal, uncoordinated way so that they would come to have in adult life desires which appeared essentially heterogeneous, aimed at goods independent of one another and without any overall ordering. (69)

Stout’s consideration of tradition is instructive here, for it shows how MacIntyre’s account of tradition underestimates the role of embodied individuals in precisely the way Jennings intends. According to Stout, MacIntyre, and those who follow him, construes exemplification without leaving space “between example and doctrine.” However, without that space, MacIntyre’s notion of exemplars, a central aspect of his Aristotelianism, can only do shallow work (or goes on holiday altogether). Yet, those (from transcendentalists to the black intellectual tradition) most central to the modernity MacIntyre critiques happen to typify the character and narrative MacIntyre requires, maintaining the indispensable space between “example and doctrine.” The individual stands within this space between example and doctrine, mediating the distance by Stout’s democratic revision of piety and bridging separation through the civic nation’s dialogical life. Stout writes, “emulation can easily become a form of slavish idolatry, in which we are dazzled and bound by the person we admire. We must therefore take care to emulate also the excellence of self-trust, which consists in freedom from such subservience.”<sup>8</sup> Between example and doctrine, between history and future, between knowing and being, stands the individual, allowing Stout to bring to conclusion MacIntyre’s dialectic between idea and history, “opening up a space in which the ideal of democratic individuality and expressive freedom could be self-consciously pursued” toward intersubjectivity, or what Stout calls democracy.<sup>9</sup> Again, Stout’s claim here attempts to advance, not undercut, the MacIntyrian concept of tradition; he only wants to properly recognize the individual as an essential facet of that conception. It is on the back of individuals that traditions go forth.

8. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 172.

9. *Ibid.*, 282.

Which is why Jennings' portrayal of MacIntyrian tradition features so prominently the Jesuit José de Acosta. After all, for Jennings, Acosta exemplifies not only his own medieval scholastic tradition but tradition-constituted inquiry as such, and Jennings means to make use of Acosta to show tradition's great promise and the glaring omissions such promise requires.

Acosta's context is significant for Jennings' case. Acosta was trained before the Reformation would split the church and hence represents a pre-Reformation, premodern point of reference, important given how most traditionalists want to locate their favored account of tradition in this period. For them, most that goes wrong occurs after this period and so the Reformation and modernity are to be blamed for the enervation of the church's pre-Reformation and premodern tradition. Second, Acosta was trained as a Jesuit, in the best of the Thomistic tradition, in the very form and content of the *habitus* so often espoused by followers of MacIntyre. It is precisely that Acosta epitomizes the tradition that interests Jennings and the outcome of Acosta's life, his Thomistic ecclesial formation, that Jennings thinks missing from these prevailing depictions of tradition. "By everyone's account this young man was exactly what the new emerging order, *La Compañía de Jesús*, the Society of Jesus, hoped for—a supremely trained, profoundly devout agent of ecclesial renewal who would foster in those he taught a learned piety" (65). The "tradition shaped Acosta" foreshadowed "the kind of *Bildung* (formation) that Hegel would envision two centuries later; yet with Hegel it would be without the deep Aristotelian and Thomist, that is, theological, underpinnings." Trained in "classic rhetoric and the study of classic languages," Acosta represented the very best the Jesuit order had to offer, which itself embodied "a mystical theology that bound learning to aggressive piety and inward examination and service. . . . The curricular goal, for the Jesuits, existed within the wider idea of the interpenetration of devotion and knowledge that was the hallmark of the formation desired by the order. The crucial foundation documents of the order, Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, the *Formula*, the *Constitutions*, and *Autobiography*, all drew the Jesuit reader to desire both intellectual excellence and inward purity of soul established in obedience of Christ-centered spirituality and higher learning also the need for this synthesis to be embodied in Christian life and performed through service." In Acosta and the heritage that produced him, one finds the unity of the virtues and the aggregate discursive resources—"Thomist theology, moral philosophy, and Sacred Scripture. . . along with the other sources of theology in the church fathers and the councils, for the edification of the faithful"—espoused by MacIntyre as the rudiments of moral formation. For MacIntyre, Thomas Aquinas, the world-historical figure able to inherit and further two traditions (Augustine and Aristotle), not only

exemplifies the content of Christian intellectual tradition but himself offers the form of MacIntyre's notion of tradition. To that end, Acosta fulfills the MacIntyrian vision of a Thomistically imbued moral education.

His deepest theological sensibility was that of a Thomist, with a clear, precise doctrinal understanding and articulation joined to a conceptually clear vision of how the world is and ought to be ordered. As a Thomist, Acosta understood what the joining of Augustinian and Aristotelian logics meant for the rational articulation of Christian faith. His teachers understood that in Acosta they had one of the very best, very brightest students. (68)

Reflecting the account of MacIntyrian moral formation conveyed already, Jennings writes, "The kind of education MacIntyre described here and in many other important texts is *precisely* the kind of education and the kind of moral formation Acosta received" (69, emphasis added). In other words, whatever MacIntyre requires, Acosta provides. Hence, Jennings is keenly interested in watching how Acosta lives out what MacIntyre promises, and so puts MacIntyre, through Acosta, to the test. Not only does Acosta show what happens to tradition, but tradition as lived out, as Stout rightly showed, through the individual who stands "between example and doctrine." For MacIntyre, and therefore for Jennings in this instance, everything rests on Acosta and Acosta's ability, or inability, to carry forward the Christian theological tradition in a manner befitting MacIntyre and all his theological admirers.

### The Complicated Distance between MacIntyre's Tradition and Christian Tradition

For Jennings, there is no better instance of a MacIntyrian epistemological challenge than Acosta's and European Christianity's "colonialist moment" which we know historically gets enunciated in the language of "Old World" and "New World" as if to bring MacIntyre's dialectic to sharp relief. Jennings follows Acosta along his missionary and colonial ventures and focuses on this point of engagement:

He stepped onto the shores of Lima a theologian of the first rank, ready to do ministry. Not simply a Catholic theologian in the New World, he was one of the most important, if not the most important, bearer of theological tradition of Christianity to set foot in the New World in his time and arguably for at least

one hundred years after his arrival. *Indeed Acosta was the embodiment of theological tradition.* He was a traditioned Christian intellectual of the highest order who precisely, powerfully, and unrelentingly performed that tradition in the New World. (68, emphasis added)

And how did it turn out? Jennings put it simply: “when Acosta looked out onto the New World, the Christian habitus in which he had been shaped became the expression of a colonialist logic” (104). The historical incidence and consequence of European Christian colonization are well known and need not be rehearsed here; Jennings does well to encapsulate its hitherto unimaginable occurrence using the Andean term *pachachuti* which means “world turned upside down” or “the turning about of time” (72). What we get in Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination* is a much more complicated and even laden rendering of tradition, one that balks at MacIntyre’s too easy account while resisting tradition’s modern despisers, an account of tradition that continues MacIntyre’s reasons for hope while also demonstrating how those hopes require what I will be inveighing as lament.

As quoted in part already, Jennings characterizes MacIntyre’s account of tradition-constituted inquiry: “A tradition is embodied both in a community and in its individual members. In Acosta one can see this embodiment. The embodiment is not a matter of perfection, but of faithfulness and a constancy to working out the questions that face a tradition from within the *telos* of that tradition itself” (69). The succession of a tradition’s development is a bit more complex than MacIntyre’s overconfidence allows and involves discovery of a tradition’s *telos*.<sup>10</sup> Because a *telos* cannot be known in advance, overconfidence becomes dangerous, blinding one to where a line of inquiry will lead and the consequences that follow (93). For Acosta, following the line of a theologically determined vision of creation entailed interpreting each historical incident within the terms of that vision, without allowing that engagement to critically trouble—or “judge” as Jennings’ incisively puts it—the vision itself. The presumption that one’s end will legitimate one’s cause (a teleological certitude) results in an overconfidence endemic within dialectical projects.

Earlier, we had seen how for MacIntyre a tradition-constituted community utilizes historic resources to negotiate new challenges, overtime developing as a repertoire of engagements and modes of engagements with internal and external challenges to that repertoire. In a passage rich in MacIntyrian allusions, Jennings writes, “Acosta exhibits the stretching of

10. For a different rendering of this overconfidence, see Coles, “MacIntyre and the Confidence Trickster of Rivalish Tradition,” in *Beyond Gated Politics*, 79–108.

theological speech in an attempt to make intelligible its vision of the world to the faithful of the Old World. This is a matter of coverage, of coherence, and of holding the entire world within theological sight” (89). Along the way, Jennings makes a provocative suggestion regarding the circularity of Acosta’s rationale, the synthetic transitions of MacIntyre’s stages of tradition, and the incessant expansion of capital:

Acosta’s efforts imitated the economic circuit that was quickly enfolding the expanding known world in cycles of production and consumption. The economic circuit’s coherence was beautiful and constantly self-correcting. The economic circuit showed how merchants were able to adapt to newness, overcoming geographic barriers, transforming the inhospitable into livable habitation, and exacting goods and services from all it touched. The economic circuit was taking the New World and channeling it through the Old World and taking the Old World and performing it through the New World. (89; see also 224)

In Jennings’ eyes, MacIntyre’s pluralplastic tradition resembles how capital evolves and condescends to the various demands of each new engagement.

As if anticipating Stout’s figuration of the individual, Acosta held no slavish allegiances to “tradition” (as moderns fear authority), just the opposite. While he was always careful to do so with delicacy, decorum and the appropriate deference, Acosta followed Thomistic form (again, MacIntyre’s Thomas) in bringing along and then refashioning Aristotle and Augustine for his purposes. Given how deeply conscious (supremely in control) Acosta remained of the tradition he captained, Jennings portrays this subtle and careful appropriation and advancement as “Acosta’s laugh” (85). Acosta was overwhelmed neither by past nor future. Instead Acosta’s “powerful suturing of Scripture and tradition to this new space” enabled him to gamely transpose anything that came along through everything he already knew (105). An inherited schematics of divine providence portends the Spanish mission to the nations and assuages for the missional Christians both the Spanish fear of the unknown and the agony of the natives. A thoroughgoing doctrine of creation explains indigenous barbarism. A moral piety eases the distress Acosta encounters. A clever (one might say, MacIntyrian) shift in the narration of early church persecution requisitions suffering as an occasion for colonialists’ forbearance. Through each of these maneuvers, theology culminates in a tradition-constituted set of conclusions: “God is responsible for colonial desire” (92).

Jennings argues that Acosta’s colonialism stems from a defective Christology and cataclysmic supersessionism—“the most decisive and

central theological distortion that exists in the church”—that blinded Christian colonial thinking from recognizing the catastrophe unfolding before its eyes and at its hands (113, 32). Since in its mind the Spanish church replaced Israel as God’s favored, it continuously interposed itself as divinely chosen and its actions providential. This resulted in a replacement rationale that rapidly read its way forward. If it could have interpreted itself by way of a “simple Gentile remembrance,” then it might have aligned itself more closely with the natives and allied itself to their fate (98). The supersessionist mistake led to hermeneutic disasters of astronomical moral and political magnitude.

Yet Jennings can make this critique only by tracing a central thread guiding Christian theology. Insofar as he inscribes before hand the telic structure of Christianity in these terms (“simple Gentile remembrance”) does Jennings make this argument. His assessment of supersessionism allows Jennings to attest that within the Christian theological tradition there existed resources to do otherwise than Acosta’s colonialism (Jennings repeatedly raises the specter of humanism but leaves it undeveloped), even offering a counterexample in Bartolomé de las Casas’ *In Defense of the Indians* (100–102). This is surely the right and necessary move for any Christian trying to find a theological way out of colonialism. But this doesn’t let MacIntyre and especially theological appropriations of MacIntyre off the hook. One could retort that Acosta doesn’t actually approximate MacIntyre’s traditioned mode of inquiry just to the extent that he failed to carry out an incarnational and non-supersessionist version of it. But this begs the question. Because MacIntyre’s traditioning articulates a form of inquiry without demanding any particular content, a MacIntyrian order of things would have to allow any number of possibilities (including Acosta’s colonialism). What MacIntyre requires is a repertoire that allows the future to be read in terms of the past and the past to be corrected by future encounter. In both these ways Acosta completes the MacIntyrian line. To be sure, what Jennings so effectively describes as the colonialist moment “encases” Christian theology in just these ways, occluding its ability as a tradition “to question itself and generate principle-referential arguments that expose its own internal incoherence.” Still, there is nothing in a MacIntyrian conception of tradition that guarantees internal incoherence be exposed as incoherence (as “internal,” how could such a guarantee work?). Jennings’ appeal for a theology resistant to Acosta’s (European) Christianity obtains as a retrospective judgment on Acosta’s catastrophes (107). In time, as MacIntyre does well to recognize, there is no way to know otherwise (and concomitantly, do otherwise). Las Casas’ *supersessionist* (as Jennings concedes) generosity did otherwise; Acosta’s supersessionism did not. The insistence of MacIntyre’s contentless

formulation (the threat of its open-ended form) reminds us that Jennings’ anti-supersessionist Christology could go either way. Which is why something like lament is required.

The nature of MacIntyre’s mode of traditioning, its tendencies for overconfidence, cannot ensure the kinds of adjudications Jennings thinks so crucial, nor can it safeguard against the kinds of judgments Acosta made standard. Lament does not guard against catastrophe, but it may guard against overconfidence. Lament is a sensibility resident (and I would argue, native) to Christianity (including one that too regularly breeds catastrophes like colonialism) and Christian appropriations of tradition should issue as lament so as to (among other things) guard against and respond to overconfidence. Jennings targets theological expropriations of MacIntyre that do not properly mind “the colonialist moment” as expression of Christian tradition. In this way, his argument is less with MacIntyre and more with theologians who seamlessly situate Christianity as a lived MacIntyrian tradition, specifically naming Herbert McCabe, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas (71, 307). (Jennings could have included Radical Orthodoxy’s *ressourcement* trends. Consider for example Yves Conger’s rather paradigmatic description: “The very concept [of tradition] implies the delivery of an object from . . . one living being to another. It is *incorporated* into a *subject*, a *living* subject. A living subject necessarily puts something of himself into what he receives.”<sup>11</sup>) And yet, as critical as his anti-supersessionism is, the way Jennings uses it against MacIntyre (vis-à-vis Acosta) feels similarly devised, once again overconfident (counting on right theology—like right tradition—to save us from ourselves, or the distance between us).<sup>12</sup>

## Wound and Acknowledgment

Jennings calls “immoral” that theologians have claimed tradition a category of moral deliberation without adequately taking stock of how Christian tradition unfolded in catastrophes like colonialism. This disconnect is more than accidental for Jennings, and makes possible its deployment. The fact that most purveyors of tradition have left out any mention of tradition’s overconfidence and the impressive violence it often unleashed is telling for the schemes that usually follow. Though some may pay lip service to the violence of tradition’s overconfidence (embodied here in Acosta’s theological imagination), more often than not, they do so, as Jennings says of

11. Congar, *Meaning of Tradition*, 112. Kim, “*Apatheia* and Atonement” apprised me of this passage.

12. Natalie Carnes helped me see this.

MacIntyre, to little effect. Hence, just as a “simple Gentile remembrance” might force (or invite) the care necessary for the moral judgments Jennings recommends, so a “simple Traditionally remembrance” might go a long way in helping us rethink theological conferrals of tradition. This is not to obviate theological uses of tradition (which is impossible) nor to extricate contemporary theology from MacIntyre’s considerable influence (which is wrongheaded) but mainly to keep an eye on tradition’s tendencies for overconfidence.

A simple remembrance would bid a different posture toward tradition (indeed, a different tradition), one which I am concerned to articulate in the second half of this essay. It would be to think of tradition in terms of lament, and to pay heed to a community’s wounds and the disabilities of its moral vision given those wounds. This I understand to be the opposite of overconfidence, yet without kowtowing to tradition’s modern despisers, offering an account of moral authority without allowing that authority to outstrip the good practices of attentive (honest) deliberation.

As a way into this concern, consider for a moment the fictional character Elizabeth Costello’s mode of argument in a speech about “the lives of animals.” In her discussion, Costello distances herself from certain sorts of arguments regarding animals, and instead turns to moral status as a point of departure.<sup>13</sup> Speaking of and likening herself to a monkey forced to demonstrate intellection, Costello says, “Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behavior but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak.”<sup>14</sup> What if the use of tradition as a moral strategy were conceived as displaying a wound, and the remembrance of wounding? I suspect this would offer a corrective of the kind Jennings thinks necessary though conveniently absent in most theological uses of tradition. Costello’s speech argues for the good of animal life without embarking on arguments that both distance us from animal life and blunt the particular contours of humanness. The wound she mentions alludes to the traumas we each bear (because the things we do and the things done to us) and the intellectual tactics we employ in order to cope. Such strategies cover the distance and cover over the silences those wounds create. They overcompensate. Instead, Costello acknowledges the wound, and out of that acknowledgment makes

13. On the significance of moral status in ethical deliberation, see Wells, *Improvisation*, 87–102.

14. Coetzee, “Lives of Animals,” 124.

a certain kind of argument (just like acknowledgment, as I mean to show, makes for a certain kind of tradition and use of tradition).

*Acknowledgment* is the key term here. In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell revisits Wittgenstein’s work on pain, pain behavior, and responses to pain. Cavell relates how philosophy since Descartes has been obsessed with epistemologically legitimizing (or delegitimizing) claims of pain. In a famous section of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein raised questions about aspects of human existence (our relationships with one another) that elided the standard warrants. When it came to pain, how does one know another is in pain? Wittgenstein seemed to resolve this difficulty by suggesting that pain, like his metaphorical “beetle in the box,” operated within a language game that precluded the question altogether, such that the presence of the beetle like the presence of pain became secondary to the forms of life linguistically coordinated around agreements about beetles and pain.<sup>15</sup> In other words, whether a beetle or pain was “in there” did not matter. This reading seemed to subjugate privacy to something Wittgenstein was thereafter associated with, the publicness of language. For Cavell, such publicness conferred a troubling disregard for (if not privacy) separateness, subsuming individuality in the name of community. In a remarkable passage, Cavell countered this reading by reclaiming Wittgenstein, and through that reclamation, the human:

In Wittgenstein’s work, as in skepticism, the human disappointment with human knowledge seems to take over the whole subject. While at the same time this work seems to give the impression, and often seems to some to assert, that nothing at all is wrong with the human capacity for knowledge, that there is no cause for disappointment, that our lives, and the everyday assertions sketched by them, are in order as they are. So some of Wittgenstein’s readers are made impatient, as though the fluctuating humility and arrogance of his prose were a matter of style, and style were a matter of pose, so that these poses merely repudiate, not to say undermine, one another. To me this fluctuation reads as a continuous effort at balance, or longing for it, as to leave a tightrope. It seems an expression of that struggle of despair and hope that I can understand as a motivation to philosophical writing. I am led again to recognize, and again with no little astonishment, how at odds I find myself with those who understand Wittgenstein to begin with, or assert thesis-wise, the publicness of language, never seriously doubting it, and in that

15. Wittgenstein picks up these questions throughout *Philosophical Investigations*, but specifically I refer to §§243–326 and especially §293.

way to favor common sense. I might say that publicness is his goal. It would be like having sanity as one's goal. Then what state would one take oneself to be in?<sup>16</sup>

To Cavell, interpolating Wittgenstein as arguing for the publicness of language results in an empty argument, with the façade of having resolved philosophical skepticism in the name of publicness. Publicness on this score overrotates in response to the threat of skepticism, which Cavell thinks can (should) no more be resolved than humanness.<sup>17</sup> Rather the threat of skepticism, as rehearsed in what Cavell refers to as the Cartesian Recital (i.e., “how do I know . . .” in relation to other minds [i.e., Wittgenstein's boxed beetle] and external worlds [i.e., Austin's goldfinches]), should not press the question of epistemological certainty at all. Rather, the “truth of skepticism” brings to the surface a deep awareness of our separateness as persons, a separateness that cannot be overcome by way of certainty, epistemological or otherwise, and rather arrives as a claim on us: “The truth here is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated* (by something); that we are, each of us, bodies, i.e., embodied. Each is this one and not that one, each here and not there, each now and not then . . . we are endlessly separate” and yet (and so) “we are answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Cavell introduces acknowledgment. If someone cries out in pain, and in answering her and her pain, we question the legitimacy of her cry (e.g., “Is pain *in* there?” or “Is pain *really* there?” just like, “Is the beetle *in* there?” or “Is there *really* a beetle in that box?”), then we will find ourselves relating to her in terms of legitimacy, as if her pain were a matter of analysis. And yet a cry of pain does not invite questions of legitimacy, and if they do for us, then no matter how we answer (e.g., “Yes, I believe you are in pain” or “No, you are not in pain”) we will have transformed the moment (from companionship to something other, something diminished); we will have misunderstood the situation, what is being asked of us, or forgotten that something *is* being asked of us. Cries of pain invite acknowledgment, not certification. The question is one of personhood, which cannot be thought of in terms of certainty (what would it mean to be certain here?). Persons are to be acknowledged, not made certain of. Cavell is not so much denying the publicness of language as wondering why it is at issue. That philosophy seems bogged down by such issues demonstrates

16. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 44. See also Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1–72, 236–66.

17. Michael Tai helped me explain this as “overrotating.”

18. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 369.

for Cavell its loss of humanity, a loss Cavell means to address by ordinary language philosophy's efforts to return words from their metaphysical to everyday use (metaphysical being questions like “How do I know you are in pain?” and everyday like “What is expected of me when someone cries out in pain?”) as Wittgenstein says in §11.6 of the *Investigations*.<sup>19</sup>

It seems to me that something like acknowledgment is missing in how theologians have utilized tradition, “tradition” evading what is at stake in its invocation in the first place, that is, the wounds that Christianity suffers. Overcompensating it invokes tradition all the more as if greater exertion will somehow make the invocation right. And yet claiming tradition is like claiming publicness as one's goal; what could be truer; what would it mean to deny tradition? Claiming tradition occurs as making sanity one's goal, as if somehow tradition will ground one in the world (as if grounding a world one feels slipping away). From what I can tell, those claiming tradition suffer a wound (probably Christendom and the loss of Christendom and the many vestiges of that mistake and loss), and suffer it unacknowledged; in turn, they invoke tradition in ways that continue wounding and unacknowledgment.

## Walden Pond and the Place of Lament

One of the voice-overs narrating Terrence Malick's film *The Tree of Life* intones, “Father, make me good . . . brave.”<sup>20</sup> In *The Tree of Life* Malick, who studied under Cavell at Harvard (and who translated Heidegger under Gilbert Ryle at Oxford) before launching a critically acclaimed (though uncommonly bare) career as a film writer/director, puts forward a work of profound Cavellian sensibilities.<sup>21</sup> The entreaty for God/our forebears to bequeath to us our goodness comes with it the possibility of refusal. And so we require courage for whatever comes, and for the threat/truth of that ambivalence. I am concerned in what remains with speaking of tradition in terms of this sensibility, what might be called the constancy to abide the past in granting or withholding what we long for.

As quoted already, Cavell writes, “To me this fluctuation reads as a continuous effort at balance, or longing for it, as to leave a tightrope. It seems

19. Morgan, “Subjectivities of Possession” reminded me how and where Cavell and Wittgenstein respectively take up these issues.

20. *The Tree of Life* (Fox Searchlight, 2011). Of Malick's films, two explicitly deal with imperialism and colonization: *The Thin Red Line* (Fox, 1998) and especially *The New World* (New Line, 2005). For discussion of the latter, see Neer, “Terrence Malick's *New World*.”

21. See Heidegger, *Essence of Reasons*.

an expression of that struggle of despair and hope that I can understand as a motivation to philosophical writing.” He speaks of struggling to balance despair and hope and I think this gets at what is going on with theology’s invocation of tradition, what is evading and being evaded in how tradition is schemed. Using MacIntyre to make sense of contemporary Christian existence is theology’s attempt to settle its life between hope and despair, and I see this struggle motivating theological writing about tradition. In order to explain what I mean here, I turn to one of Cavell’s texts that indirectly deals with tradition. I hope to illumine not only what he is doing, but what theological writing is too often not doing in its work on tradition.

In *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell focuses on Thoreau and his dismay with the received past.<sup>22</sup> This is a relationship of hope and despair and Cavell stresses how hope and despair best name the tensions/promises of tradition. Cavell tells us “The writer is aligning himself with the major tradition of English poetry, whose most ambitious progeny, at least since Milton, had been haunted by the call of a modern epic, for a heroic book which was at once a renewed instruction of the nation in its ideals, and a standing proof of its resources of poetry” (6). Thoreau, in Cavell’s reading, inhabits a legacy that both demands adherence and makes clear the unlikeliness of that adherence. Tradition here is austere and finds its fullest expression in what Cavell calls elsewhere “this new yet unapproachable America.”<sup>23</sup> The question before Thoreau is whether the nation can live up to its own best hopes and if it doesn’t, what its true patriots are to do (24). For Thoreau, the answer lies at Walden Pond, which is both an escape from and a step into the hopes and demands that constitute American life. Writing becomes the chief task of this vocation because America is best understood as literary in shape, an epic that bequeaths to Thoreau’s generation Romanticism’s revolutionary promise and the despair those promises visit upon the generations that followed, “the whole hope of it in their adolescence, and the scattered hopes in their maturity” (Ibid.). Because in “Thoreau’s adolescence, the call for the creation of an American literature was still at its height: it was to be the final proof of the nation’s maturity,” the great endeavor now falls to Thoreau and his cohort to script America (its past and future, the meanings of its past and future). Thoreau’s responsibility comes as a textual enterprise insofar as the whole experience of America can be summed up, even recapitulated, in Thoreau’s Walden Pond notes (13, 22).

22. Cavell, *Senses of Walden*. References will be made parenthetically.

23. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*. Cavell portrays themes of engagement and estrangement most readily in his stunning essay “A Cover Letter to Molière’s *Misanthope*,” which Cavell describes as “a love letter to America,” in Cavell, *Themes Out of School*, 104.

In his turn, reading *Walden* engrafts Cavell into the very tradition he comments on, and yet ensconcing that tradition does not grant him bearings but the opposite—“vertiginous” Cavell calls it:

How far off a final reading is, is something I hope I have already suggested. Every major term I have used or will use in describing *Walden* is a term that is itself in play within the book, part of its subject—e.g., migration, settling, distance, neighborhood, improvement, departure, news, obscurity, clearing, writing, reading, etc. And the next terms we will need in order to explain the first ones will in turn be found subjected to examination in Thoreau’s experiment. The book’s power of dialectic, of self-comment and self-placement, in the portion and in the whole of it, is as instilled as in Marx or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, with an equally vertiginous spiraling of idea, irony, wrath, and revulsion. Once on it, there seems no end; as soon as you have one word to cling to, it fractions or expands into others. (12–13)

Notice for Cavell, self-comment follows emplacing oneself in the story one tells, lending to a “vertiginous spiraling of idea, irony, wrath, and revulsion,” and again, “Once in it, there seems no end.” Those claiming what Cavell names “an epic ambition” ought to pay heed to the type of drama at play; the movement speaks as much to the respective individual’s movement within a tradition (the continual production of tradition as a heuristic of the self’s relations) as the respective tradition’s movement in history. Much like Foucault’s self-care, Cavell admonishes cultivation of virtue, but virtue of a specific kind.<sup>24</sup> Quoting Thoreau, “I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops” (25); and yet the tending of virtue comes back empty, or returns to Thoreau unexpected (unwanted) fruit: “Alas, I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obligated to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up” (24–25, quoting from *Walden*, VII, 15). The promise now results not in a requiting of expectation but the revelation of its endlessness: “Walden shows that the we are there; every tongue has confessed what it can; we have heard everything there is to hear. There were prophets, but there is no Zion; knowing that, Jesus fulfilled them, but the kingdom of heaven is not entered into; knowing

24. For Cavell’s and Foucault’s similarities, see my *Foucault and Theology*, 125–59.

that, the Founding Fathers brought both testaments to this soil, and there is no America; knowing that, Jonathan Edwards helped bring forth a Great Awakening, and we are not awake." Within this vein the challenge of patriotism arrives as the remittance of utterances like, "What is left to us is the accounting. Not a recounting, of tales or news; but a document, with each word a warning and a teaching; a deed, and each word an act" (30).

Cavell speaks of lament in terms of mourning (as moulting) and morning, which comes to greatest intensity in the middle of *Senses of Walden*.

The writer comes from a sense of loss. . . . Everything he can list he is putting in his book; it is a record of losses. Not that he has failed to make some gains and have his finds; but they are gone now. He is not present to them now. Or, he is trying to put them behind him, to complete the crisis by writing his way out of it. It is a gain to grow, but humanly it is always a loss of something, a departure. Like any grownup, he has lost his childhood; like any American, he has lost a nation and with it the God of the fathers. He has lost Walden; call it Paradise; it is everything there is to lose. The object of faith hides itself from him. Not that he has given it up, and the hope for it; he is on the track. He knows where it is to be found, in the true acceptance of loss, the refusal of any substitute for true recovery. (51–52)

Cavell goes on to explicate loss variously in senses I am trying to use to touch on tradition as loss, wound, and lament: "The first step in attending to our education is to observe the strangeness of our lives, our estrangement from ourselves, the lack of necessity in what we profess to be necessary. The second step is to grasp the true necessity of human strangeness as such, the opportunity of outwardness" (55); "That life on earth is a test and a sojourn is hardly news. We merely sometimes forget what a land of pilgrims means, or forget to discover it. It is not the writer's invention to be peregrine is to be a stranger, any more than it is his fancy that perdition is the loss of something" (52); "The writer of Walden suffers this gladly, and uses the loon to exemplify the book's theme of insanity" (42).

Elsewhere Cavell encourages "we become ashamed in a particular way of ourselves, of our present stance, and that the Emersonian Nietzsche requires, a sign of consecration to the next self, that we hate ourselves."<sup>25</sup> Harkening back to themes that comprise the Cavellian universe, he imagines the self thrown off and into a world that continuously takes and returns. Here the relations travel between Thoreau and himself as writer at Walden, between Thoreau and his readers, between Thoreau and Cavell,

25. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 16.

and between Cavell and us; in other words between the text, the traditions within which it stands (or does not stand) and the varied selves granted: "Here the writer fully identifies his audience as lost to it. The fate of having a self—of being human—is one in which the self is always to be found; fated to be sought, or not; recognized, or not. My self is something, apparently, toward which I can stand in various relations, one in which I can stand to other selves, named by the same terms, e.g., love, hate, disgust, acceptance, knowledge, ignorance, faith, pride, shame" (53).<sup>26</sup> Tradition can be figured in these tones, and at its most honest, theology too, something of "a phenomenological description of finding the self, or faith of it, is one of trailing and recovery; elsewhere it is voyaging and discovery" and most critically in terms of intellectually strategic yet disingenuous deployments of tradition, Cavell offers a contrast: "[Thoreau's] descriptions emphasize that this is a continuous activity, not something we may think of as an intellectual preoccupation. It is placing ourselves in the world. That you do not know beforehand what you will find is the reason the quest is an experiment or an exploration" (53).<sup>27</sup> Thence, "The very awareness of time compromises presentness; the succession of words is itself a rebuke. There never is but one opportunity of a kind. That is the threat, but also the promise. To go on, untransformed, unchaste so far as you know, means that you have not been divided by the fact and concluded your mortal career. But to learn to await, in the way you write, and therewith in every action, is to learn not to despair of opportunity unforeseen. That was always the knack of faith" (61). Here one comes to grips with the critical insight offered in Cavell's use of "morning" within the landscape of Thoreau's imagery. The unraveling of the self is also its recovery, and so with the world and the traditions that place oneself into the world. For Cavell, hope endures—*Senses of Walden* says regularly that we are "perched" "on the verge of something"—and the trick is to not allow the self's unraveling and tradition's lubricity to unlink one from the expectation that tradition will give one the world.<sup>28</sup> Without

26. Cary Wolfe helpfully comments upon Cavell's notion of the loss of self and its connection to "the thing-in-itself" (95): "[for Cavell] we find ourselves in a position that is not just odd but in fact profoundly unsettling, for philosophy in a fundamental sense then fails precisely insofar as it succeeds. We gain knowledge, but only to lose the world." Wolfe, "Exposures," 4.

27. Consider Cavell's splendid autobiographical reflections on his dissertation topic prior to coming under the influence of Austin: "what dissatisfied me was . . . it, or my use of it, was mechanical, that I was repeatedly arriving at conclusions that I already knew. I could not take myself by surprise, and, or therefore, I could not say whether I was losing faith in the pertinence of the ideas or losing interest in what I had to tell about them." Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 320.

28. On "lubricity" see Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 38.

hope, our various realisms will not only infect the world, but fail to give it to us at all: “we despair ourselves and let our despair dictate what we call reality.”<sup>29</sup> This, Cavell calls “a sort of a disease of the imagination, both of the private imagination we may call religion and of the public imagination we may call politics” (72, 73).

For Cavell, politics is properly an issue of maintenance, the responsibilities we hold because of mutual attunement in language. His correction of what Peter Dula pines as the “rush to community” is not meant to undermine political life but show it to be all-important, too important to leave as an epistemic issue.<sup>30</sup> Cavell says, “Knowing oneself is the capacity for placing-oneself-in-the-world.”<sup>31</sup> All of his efforts in the service of skepticism is meant to shift one toward another kind of confidence, one he believes there along (residing in our speaking, it could be no nearer) yet disparaged in our quest for a cheap certainty. (Recall Wittgenstein: “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. . . . we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.”<sup>32</sup>) In seeking goodness and foisting staid conceptions of tradition as its conveyance, we have lost the courage necessary to receive the goodness we desire, and so have traded genuine goodness for lesser versions.<sup>33</sup> Much of Cavell is present in theological reflection on tradition, but tends to get lost, and so, comes to no effect. (How does the tradition-constituted history Jennings relates effectuate how we understand tradition and whether our conception of tradition allows us to receive truthfully that history?)

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell showed how in speaking one claims community (what *we* ordinarily mean, not what is metaphysically given us), which is to say, in speaking, one speaks for others, and it is “we,” not some others who are “fully authoritative in this struggle,” who confer the meaning of our words.<sup>34</sup> Hence in claiming a tradition one claims belonging with a

29. With characteristic insight and aplomb, Stanley Hauerwas considers these matters in his Society of Christian Ethics 2012 Presidential Address, “Bearing Reality.”

30. Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology*, 42. Also see *Modern Theology* 27.3 (2011), which focused on Cavell’s work, with Cavell in response.

31. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 108.

32. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §129.

33. Nowhere does Cavell portray this more powerfully than in the remarkable final part of *Claim of Reason*, “Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance,” where he moves among automatons who think themselves humans, humans who think themselves automatons, slave masters who think of their slaves as human, and Othello’s drive to possess Desdemona.

34. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 17–36. If “disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then to beyond some eventual us” (19). Cavell borrows from one of his favorite passages in the *Investigations*, §217, where Wittgenstein, his

tradition as a discursive community that houses space for belonging and companionship. To speak for a tradition is to belong to it, to others who speak thus. This is why for Cavell acknowledgment is so important, just as why for him the threat of skepticism bespeaks duty (and the disavowal of it, shirking duty). What Cavell says about sharing language can also be said of those sharing a tradition, the sharing of which is achieved by nothing more than the claiming of it: “Wittgenstein’s appeal to criteria is meant, one might say, exactly to call to consciousness the astonishing fact of the astonishing extent to which we do agree in judgment; eliciting criteria goes to show therefore that our judgments *are* public, that is shared. What makes this astonishing, what partly motivates this philosophizing on the subject, is that the extent of agreement is so intimate and pervasive.”<sup>35</sup> One of *The Claim of Reason*’s chief points, drawing on the *Investigations* §373, is that judgments are based on criteria about identity not essence, and, hence, our common judgments are shared agreements in what *we* say a thing is versus what that thing is. *Senses of Walden* reiterates this point, “Writing—heroic writing, the writing of a nation’s scripture—must assume the conditions of language as such; re-experience, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language at all and assume responsibility for it” (33). The claim of tradition here takes on something like choosing moulting and habitation, dwelling within a community-constituted tradition—“Our faithfulness to our language repeats our faithfulness to all our shared commitments” (66)—and the purposeful choices necessary to prune over-confidence, especially an overconfidence that will naturally avoid moulting: “What I have to work out is still my salvation, and still in fear and trembling (cf. Philippians 2:12). The crisis is still mine to spend” (44). Here, Cavell speaks of “the idea of morning and of moulting” and these notions name for him a posture of habitation, of the patriot who truly loves and seeks/speaks the nation’s best while doing so knowing full well that such seeking and speaking can only be done engaged with despair and hope.

[Thoreau’s] problem—at once philosophical, religious, literary, and I will argue, political—is to get us to ask the questions, and then to show us that we do not know what we are asking, and then to show us that we have the answer. The fiction is that some unknown people have asked him these prompting questions: Where does the book begin, the bulk of whose pages he wrote in the woods? That is, at what point do we realize the “I” of the

reasons having run out, resolves, “This is simply what I do.” See also *Senses of Walden*, 85–86.

35. *Ibid.*, 31. Emphasis original. See also *Senses of Walden*’s discussion of the “truth of skepticism” in the extended note on 106–7.

first paragraph, the second word of the book, has merged with the “I” the book is about? . . . To get us to ask the questions. That means to fox us into opening our mouths. (47)

For Cavell this brings us closest to our traditions, that is, ourselves, but this intimacy requires courage, a prayer for bravery, because “To maintain nextness to ourselves, we require new, or newly conceived, capacities for constancy and change” (109). This “neighboring of the self” Cavell refers to as “the self’s companionability” (108). In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Cavell relates this dynamic between self, other, and language in terms of perfectionism, the endless process of “absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself.”<sup>36</sup> Working out his most sustained engagement with political theory, Cavell favors an account of democratic life likened to marriage and re-marriage, rather than the chastened account of constitutional democracy received through Rawlsian political liberalism. For Cavell, political engagement is less about negotiating one’s rights and obligations in relation to competing rights and obligations (i.e., justice) but rather the allowances for the self’s growth within a context where one is allowed and called upon to speak for another, and how the self and society (what he calls the good soul and the good city) require and bequeath the other’s possibility.<sup>37</sup> The problem with Rawls’ admirable account of politics is that it fails to take stock of how society endangers the soul, which follows Cavell’s regular themes of estrangement and personhood (what is at issue for Thoreau in *Walden*). So Cavell attempts to work out a politics that rightly situates the goods of self and society, similar to how tradition might be envisaged to the benefit of those inhabiting them. As such, Cavell’s portrayal of politics is a bit more perilous than Rawls’, but that’s largely the point. In speaking of perfectionism, Cavell imagines nothing less than what MacIntyre conveys as a basic rudiment of tradition, “an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture . . .”<sup>38</sup> Participating in a tradition, like participating in a society, then, takes place like marriage as the ongoing call for acknowledgment.<sup>39</sup> The metaphor of marriage Cavell utilizes to represent democratic life helps theology’s uses of tradition better attend to its own wounds, to acknowledge them, since after all, marriage is not primarily about justice (not that it is not about justice) but the ability to register one another’s pain, including the pains suffered in marriage. In other

words, as Cavell says, marriage requires and allows forgiveness. Forgiveness may be the final difference between MacIntyre’s tradition and its Christian expression.

## Christian Tradition

My goal in this essay hasn’t been to argue that good traditions and their liturgies do not form good people, but simply to show how good traditions produce people like Acosta and possess limited ability to see beyond the linguistic possibilities of those productions; by extension I have tried to shed light on why the Christian preoccupation with tradition remains unable (unwilling) to see this. That goodness doesn’t always replicate itself (or that badness sometimes yields goodness) is not a strike against the moral significance of tradition (as if the point is to make traditions more efficient, as if the goal is the replication of persons) but only a feature of humanness, which theology may ride roughshod over in its rush to tradition. Jordan Rowan Fannin makes just this point by offering a Cavellian account of tradition through John Howard Yoder’s “looping back.” Yoder proves especially apropos here because as a pacifist, he requires something like tradition in order to affirm continuity to the church’s peace witness while resisting certain methodological injunctions about tradition. Fannin employs Cavell’s terminology to explicate how for Yoder tradition cannot be conceived monolithically and shows what negotiating faithfulness amongst multiple claims to authority (“tradition”) requires, perceptively concluding that the claim of tradition largely functions as what Cavell calls (as I have already reviewed) criteria:

The question of the authority of tradition, as I take it, can be cast as a question of how and why to name faithfulness and unfaithfulness. This question will encounter the fact of the presence of multiple Christian traditions (small *t*, plural) and may still affirm the search for Christian unity without being led astray by either. . . . The presence of contradictory claims to faithfulness undermines not only the truth of the gospel’s claims but also *real* Christian unity. Therefore, those claims ought to be submitted to scrutiny and found to be either faithful reformulations of the tradition or unfaithful deviations from it. These are matters of both truth and of reconciliation. I take this to be a problem of criteria. What “counts as” faithful reformulations and extensions of our common tradition, and on what grounds do we classify something as a “falling away” from that tradition or as

36. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxvii.

37. See *ibid.*, 24–32.

38. *Ibid.*, 4.

39. *Ibid.*, 105–6.

an unfaithful translation of it (say, syncretism)? In this view, tradition is not a thing but a process—one which Yoder calls “traditioning.” As a verb (at least a gerund) the nature of this tradition[ing] is growth; yet, for Yoder, this is not the growth of a tree—whose origins can be pointed to and clearly marked. It is a vine whose growth is marked by constant interruption and regular pruning, which demands a constant looping back. This image of promoting “new growth” that is closer to its source, and thus its vitality, is reminiscent of Adolf von Harnack’s disdain for accretions and desire for the original spring, but also differs in important ways. Yoder’s is not a search for an essence of Christianity to which we can appeal for our judgments of “faithful” and “unfaithful.” While von Harnack’s appeal is to a kernel, Yoder’s is to a “confession”—an agreement. It is not an appeal to an “it” but to a “we.” It is not an appeal to a foundational truth, but to a process (perhaps to the community of witnesses?) that—importantly—is also always reaching back. We do not have direct access to a set of propositions, but rather, the “heart of our tradition” is not the Christ event itself, but a set of memories of and testimony to that event.<sup>40</sup>

Fannin’s comparison to von Harnack is reminiscent of how ordinary language philosophy seeks to return language from metaphysical to everyday use. In her reading, Yoder sets as the criteria for truthfulness that which is granted by those who speak, the we granted in speech. Nothing lies outside (or inside vis-à-vis von Harnack’s kernel) us that can certify our judgments. This is the force of Cavell’s claim that criteria bespeak agreements of identity (what *we* say a thing is) not essence (what that thing *is*). The temporal image of “looping back” countenances the only other available to us, that is, what we have said in and about the past. Jennings is able to charge Acosta’s colonialism with supersessionism by first retrieving a prior ecclesial judgment about God’s covenant promise to Israel (from which the charge of supersessionism gains intelligibility). It is important to acknowledge that Acosta too had historical options; that he did not figure to use them as Jennings would have liked means he did not understand them useful in the ways Jennings thinks critical. We are forced to admit—this, the “threat” of the truth of skepticism—that it was not incumbent upon Acosta to read church history other than how he did; that he read it as he did, and that such a reading carried it the moral force of the claim to tradition, was also what allowed him to both choose colonialism and be confident in that choice.

40. Fannin, “A Yoderian/Wittgensteinian Possibility for Conversation,” 6–7. Fannin references Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom*, 66–70.

This is what I have called tradition’s tendency for overconfidence. Nor does it follow that a non-supersessionist position would have necessarily precluded Acosta’s colonialism. One can imagine any number of warrants in the tradition that would have resulted in the same historical occurrence (I suspect with Foucault that linguistic accretions gather as matters of accident with greater regularity than genealogies like Jennings’ appreciate), just as one can witness, through Las Casas, a supersessionist repudiation of the same colonialist logic. All that is required is a looping back. And all that is available is a looping back, and the communities of discourse that require and make available looping back. If we can accommodate ourselves to these conditions, we might be able to avoid forgetting that tradition works like this. Fannin encourages Yoder’s confession, and I encourage Cavellian lament. Accommodating ourselves to these conditions means accepting humanness. Cavell characterizes the opposite of this acceptance the denial of the human, which he believes may be the most human (given human attunement in language, its diaphanous certainty and solidity) of human tendencies. The virtues Cavell finds in Thoreau’s tending are ones of manurance, necessary in fields where hope and despair struggle together, which is how I have tried to portray Christian tradition.

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