

Book Reviews

Frederick J. Ruf. *Bewildered Travel: The Sacred Quest for Confusion*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2007. 210 pp. Cloth, \$49.50; paper, \$16.50.

This book might best be described as a personal essay on the nature of the sacred, one that uses experiences of travel as its representative anecdote. In doing so, the book gives the sacred a particular and revisionist definition. Here, the sacred is an experience of disruption. That is, it is in experiences that disrupt and even, in Ruf's preferred term, "rupture" (27) one's understanding of oneself and life that one finds oneself confronting something that is holy. And that holy thing is oneself, but stripped of confidence, understanding, and comprehension. The experience of the sacred is, as Ruf puts it, "like being a child again, in a bewildering world, with almost no clue" (74). Encountering that version of oneself is an encounter with the sacred: "Except ye . . . become as little children" as Matthew enjoins (18:3).

Travel affords opportunity for that kind of encounter with what Ruf considers one's better self because travel, by definition, takes one away from the comfort of home. "Nothing establishes our identity as our own place does," he writes, "with all the acknowledgment of others and all the reinforcements

of belonging.” One leaves the advantages and resources of that identity behind when one travels—especially when one travels to truly alien places. “When I fly to Morocco I am nobody,” Ruf continues. “I am always a Westerner, identified by my clothing and my skin, but I’m a Westerner out of place. I’m homeless” (77). To encounter immediately that discomfort, that loss of identity, and to do so in a place where one has no place, where one does not matter—this, for Ruf, is the beginning of an encounter with the sacred, as he summarizes in his introduction:

Leaving home, stepping into the way that will lead us away, far away, walking among strangers, being stunned, getting lost—these are religious behaviors. William James defines the religious as what enables us to “front life.” It is a nautical metaphor, I believe, one that suggests pointing the craft into the wind, into the storm, into life, not fleeing it but heading right into it. However valuable clear sailing might be, religious value results from going out into the deep seas and the powerful winds and fronting them. (4)

So Ruf, a theologian, writes a book about travel. To help readers understand his perspective, to help them follow his reasoning about what counts as sacred, they might look also at the work of Paul Woodruff on reverence. Woodruff is a student of ancient Greek culture who describes reverence in secular terms—and secular terms are, by the way, what Ruf uses to describe the sacred. That is, both Woodruff and Ruf find something holy in particular kinds of personal responses to day-to-day experience. For Woodruff, reverence is the capacity “to have feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (8). Those are the right feelings to have when one finds oneself confronting something that is well beyond one’s grasp—something one cannot comprehend, cannot encompass, but which one must nonetheless acknowledge. In Woodruff’s terms, “the principal object of reverence is Something that reminds us of human limitations” (65). Confronting that “Something,” one finds oneself humbled. And so humbled, one is open to learning and change. Woodruff continues in terms that can apply to experiences of travel: reverence “gives us the power to make changes toward each other, changes in attitude and ceremony that allow us to go on being at home with new or changing people, or in the absence of loved

ones” (203). Woodruff’s work on reverence defines an emotion, one enacted as an attitude, by which one can and should—he suggests—learn to live. Ruf’s book on “the sacred quest for confusion” describes an attitude toward experience, toward disruptive experiences, that prompts reverence.

Both Ruf and Woodruff can be read as assertions of ethics. Essentially, Ruf’s disruptions and Woodruff’s reverence both prompt attitudes and actions of humility—the kind of humility that renders individuals respectful, tolerant, and teachable. In Ruf’s conception this ethics emerges from a religious experience, though not as one generally understands religion. Conventionally, religion is understood as collective, as absolute and demanding, and as encompassing “the arduous and rare, the supernatural, the transcendent” (9). Ruf’s alternative is none of that. Like William James’ conception of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relations to whatever they may consider this divine” (29), Ruf’s idea of religion is, rather, a matter of highly personal and individual experience. Specifically, in his conception the divine seems to be encompassed in the necessity of asking and asking again basic questions of identity: Who am I? Where am I? Where am I going? These, Ruf notes, are the questions that come to people constantly as they travel. Indeed, people travel, he suggests, to confront those questions. People answer them, their answers fail, and they try to answer them again—and again. That, for him, is the work of religion (11).

In this way the book is about religion. That study is its end. But its means is a reflection upon travel. The subject is a particular kind of travel or a particular attitude toward travel: travel as a deliberate search for opportunities to expose current answers to failure. This kind of travel is disruptive, putting one in a position, repeatedly, where one must do the hard work of reorienting oneself—in terms of identities, contexts, trajectories—after prior orientations have been ruptured and rendered useless by new experiences. For Ruf, this is sacred work.

The stories of travel in this book are both Ruf’s own and those recounted from the writings of others: Matthew Arnold, Paul Bowles, Andre Codrescu, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jack Gilbert, Alphonso Lingis, Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, Henry Miller, Mary Oliver, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman. Some of these travelers reside in literary heritage, while others reside in popular literature. Some are well known, others are obscure. But their stories, as

Ruf recounts them, are all compelling. He has read widely in the literature of travel, all the way from the literary to tourist guides. In all that he has read he finds travelers who try to avoid disruption as well as those who seek it. Either way, travel presents both with overwhelming the ruptures that they may or may not recognize and acknowledge. It is recognition and acknowledgment that value the sort of encounters that break one's confidence and instruct one in hard questions rather than comforting answers.

The book is part of a series titled "Studies in Religion and Culture" in which theology, philosophy, and history interact. At the point of that interaction is Ruf's book. His chapters describe travelers' disruptive encounters with history, with pilgrimage, with adventure, with alien, repellant, and immensely attractive people, and with the process of passage itself. From those descriptions he develops his thesis: "we are fascinated with the quest for higher and higher degrees of strangeness, for the circles farther and farther from home. And we search for bewilderment ourselves. I think we crave it. I call it the love of ruptures" (8). This craving—he calls it a "craving for disorientation" (14)—is for him what is in people that is holy. "The love of ruptures is a way of saying we're more," Ruf writes. "We're more. We're other. We're denizens, too, of the desert and the deep. We can still be even through terrors. Take away the very ground, the very air. I still am" (27). This love, this craving, is the sacred within people, the divine.

The book is an interesting and provocative read—interesting in the wide variety of travel stories he tells and provocative in its insistence that one consider disruption and confusion, risk and discomfort, as opportunities to encounter in oneself something that is greater than what one has encountered there before. That greater thing is a capacity to recognize the reality of one's limits, to become fully aware of exposure and dependence, to experience a desperate need to dislodge oneself from what one knows so that one can, in vulnerability and risk, then grow. There are ethical lessons here and intellectual ones as well as those of what is called secular theology. There are disruptive ideas here about the nature of the sacred.

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Michael Ward. *Planet Narnia. The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. 347 pp. \$29.95.

Michael Ward's book features two epigrams, the second of which is from an essay by C. S. Lewis that proposes that a truly original interpretation of an author's work based on new evidence can only be tested by how many new meanings it brings out in the rest of the work. Thus, Ward dares the reader to treat the new ideas he presents by using Lewis's own literary acid test as a standard, a bold challenge in a book brimful of bold claims.

The book's preface begins with an unusual statement: "It is to be hoped that this book reaffirms the worth of implicit communication; not everything that needs to be said needs to be said outright" (xi). This kind of thesis is argued by a person who either does not communicate well or knows no reasonable way of winning a case. Both make for poor scholarship.

Scholars routinely rely in part on a genetic approach—the reconstruction of authorial intention based partly on utterances made by authors or their contemporaries—when interpreting a literary work. Although scholars would allow that authorial statements are not absolutely binding, all but the most strident postmodernists would also observe that such expressions at the very least throw light on a subject.

But Ward must begin from a position of weakness, an argument based on the near absence of authorial evidence. This barrier forces his rhetorical hand: he must take the position that authorial silence is golden, and rather than meekly taking his place at the end of the long line of Lewis experts—a group that seems to ebb and flow with the film adaptations of the *Chronicles of Narnia*—he trumpets the claims of his first book, announcing that he has "stumbled upon" the secret imaginative key to all seven books of the *Narniad*, discovering, as he informs the reader, "a genuine literary secret"—"a hidden meaning