

# ***Salus Extra Ecclesiam***

PHILLIP POLEFRONE

## **I.**

**S**ome months ago I had a strange dream from which I awoke shaken and, at first, confused. In the dream I was sitting on a couch in an imagined one-story house with my older brother and a woman of about twenty-five. She was beautiful, had dark hair, wore makeup that would have been too much on anybody else—makeup that gave her feline or demonic eyes. She kept allowing her knee to touch, however lightly, against mine. We seemed to be having some light conversation, the contents of which I cannot recall. My brother and I sat very stiffly, but the woman gradually leaned more and more against me. Suddenly she stood up and announced her departure. Then she placed the tips of her fingers on my knee and said, “*You’re* coming with me.” My brother looked at me, his eyes buried beneath his eyebrows. I shrugged, stood, and followed.

She led me out the front door and across the lawn to the edge of a cul-de-sac. We sat on a bench and she began to make aggressive advances, advances I was unable to accept. I shoved her from my lap and she tumbled to the ground, holding herself up and looking hurt.

“What are you doing?” I shouted. “You know I’m seeing someone.”

“You don’t even give a damn,” she told me. I recall realizing that she was right. I remember the momentary shame and fury.

I looked to my right and saw a group of children running across the street in front of their father. The kids came right up to us and began playing on the ground in front of the bench.

I leaned over and asked, “What are you playing?”

A little blond haired boy looked up at me and said, “The game where all the ducks are in a row.”

I nodded. “I love that game,” I said.

They wandered away and their father followed. He looked into my eyes as he passed, and slowly nodded.

## II.

A little over 1600 years ago, the not-yet-Saint Augustine dropped a theological bomb on the Donatists, a schismatic Christian sect. In a letter called “Of Baptism, Against the Donatists,” a letter read by the Donatists themselves as well as every high-up in the Catholic Church, Augustine wrote, “Salus extra Ecclesiam non est”—there’s no salvation outside the church. The Donatists only existed because of a doctrinal disagreement over who was allowed to issue a baptism. According to Augustine, that disagreement had gotten every one of them barred from Heaven (Forget).

I was taught a simplified version of salvation. I was taught that good people go to Heaven and bad people go to Hell. Augustine replaces good and bad with follower and heretic, with-us or against-us. His is an edict that replaces morality with obedience. It says that if you want to find heaven, you just have to follow: that you need not give a damn about the route and that you can’t find it for yourself. As George Orwell put it in a different context in *1984*, “Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think” (53).

## III.

There’s nothing like a list to follow. The Old Testament is full of them: Homeric lists to trace the chosen and sprawling lists of dos and don’ts. Jesus knew the lists, followed them like anybody else. But according to the Gospels, he’s called upon to think. He is cross-examined by the Pharisees and the Sadducees, asked to account for the lists to which he is so faithful. He is asked, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” and he answers:

The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these. (Mark 12:28-31)

The first rule is a condensation of the first three commandments, but Jesus complicates it. He asks for what the Lord never asks for: love. Obedience becomes devotion. The second of Jesus’s commandments is taken from Leviticus (19:18). It demands devotion not just to the Lord but to every iter-

ation of his final and finest creation. It requires that which is required by no other rule in the list. It requires interpretation; it requires choice.

#### IV.

Salvation is the motivation and the reward, its absence the punishment. Salvation is something that can only happen beyond this world. We learn to understand our neighbor well enough to love him so that we can be saved, and the love itself becomes a means to an end.

Or so it is according to the church. Heaven and Hell aren't really thought of—at least not in the way the church thinks of them—until after the death of Jesus. In the Old Testament, God can flood the Earth, but even that doesn't work like the Christian Hell. The Old Testament's characters interact with God lovingly, out of respect for their Creator. Abraham puts Isaac on the chopping block not because he fears a flood, but because he respects and loves the Word of the Lord. Before the Church comes about, there is no punishment or reward, no place for motivation. There's no means-to-an-end way of thinking about loving God. As it was for Abraham, so it was for Jesus. The way Jesus preaches it, loving God and your neighbor is the end itself.

Love has to be learned. It isn't easy to love your neighbor as yourself. To do so you have to abandon an instinctual, survivalist selfishness—a selfishness so pronounced it borders on solipsism.

When I was a kid, my mother was my servant and my brother was my playmate. If they were upset with me, they were my punisher and my enemy. I remember cleaning my room at the age of six and shouting over my Mom's vacuum, "But I don't *like* it!" I may never forget how shocked I was when she turned and shouted back, "And you think *I* do?" It had not occurred to me before then that she disliked things in the same way I did.

Any love before this was impossible. Nothing could be done for anyone's sake but my own—no one could be as myself. This was the starting point; from here I could learn to love.

#### V.

There's a logic in the Italian sonnet that, when I first encountered it, I was surprised to already know. I already knew it because it was a logic I had learned in other contexts, none of them as constructed as poetry.

It is a logic formed by the interaction between two parts. The first part of an Italian sonnet, the octet, is the easy part. It is governed by coherence,

which makes it easy to follow. After the octet, an invisible line usually called the “turn” divides a sonnet. In the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Jon Stallworthy can’t pin down the relationship between the two parts, the octet before the turn and the sestet after. First he decides on “statement” and “counterstatement,” but then he counters himself with alternatives like “observation” and “amplifying conclusion” (2042-43).

The tension between the two parts is more shaking than an academic distillation can reveal. It is not just a “statement” and a “counterstatement.” Everything changes. The pattern of end-rhymes from the octet has fled; quatrains are replaced by tercets, and the tumult in between is like a three-against-four rhythm, moving but hardly comprehensible. The formal logic of the sestet complicates and destabilizes the logic of the octet that precedes it.

The modern Italian sonnet hasn’t kept many of the formal bells and whistles. Sometime after Whitman the strict rhyme and meter must have stopped seeming relevant—prescriptions made for days gone by that no longer begged to be followed. It kept the length, though—fourteen lines. Most important, it kept the defining turn. In the modern Italian sonnet the departure from Stallworthy’s “statement” and “counterstatement” is even more pronounced, the complications even more subtle. The logic of opposition—the shaking up of the easy octet—is even more powerful.

This is the oppositional logic I’ve found in my search for morality. Yes, follow the lists—but sometimes the lists need to be interpreted, and suddenly you’re finding a path of your own. No, *salus extra Ecclesiam non est*, but Jesus and Abraham didn’t have the Church. Love thy neighbor as thyself, but how the hell do you do that? Get your ducks in a row. You’d better know what a straight line looks like.

The kids in my dream, getting their ducks in a row—they had to learn that from somewhere. Playing that game is more complicated than memorizing the rules. Perhaps they learned from their parents, from their father who trailed behind. Their ducks must have been scattered, and their father must have taught them to figure out order. He couldn’t order his kids’ ducks for them. He had to teach them order itself.

## VI.

My father’s car entered the ring of light created by the three police cruisers. The cop watched the car park then looked at me. He didn’t seem to know what he was looking for. Maybe he thought that if I had decided to bolt, now would be the time; maybe it was just his disinterested curiosity as to how I

was holding up. I didn't bolt. I have no idea how I was holding up, or what he saw in my face.

My Cop wasn't the good cop or the bad cop. The other two had worn those roles with gusto. Bad Cop was old and had a fuller head of hair than I thought the police department allowed. He'd insinuated ridiculously that we'd be in and out of prison for the rest of our lives; had called us all fags. Good Cop was young, voluntarily bald, and had a mustache. He'd played the "more disappointed than mad" routine with such a pained expression that it had seemed almost plausible. My Cop was somewhere in the middle. With no defined role he alternated between mediator and sentry. Bad Cop was now smoking a cigarette in the farthest cruiser, looking disinterested in the whole affair. Good Cop was now waiting with Bates and the spray cans on the other side of the little parking lot.

My Cop watched as the driver's-side door of my dad's car opened and he stepped out. I watched for his face to come into the circle of light. When it did, it looked like it always had; contrary to what I had imagined, it was a caricature of neither rage nor sorrow. He quickly closed the space between his car and the police cars and shook My Cop's hand, as if in congratulations, before giving his name. He did not spare me a glance.

My Cop recounted the scene, pointing to the relevant bits of scenery in the distance as he talked. "Saw 'em both on the bridge soon as we put on the spotlight. This one was looking right at us, that one had the spray paint and was spraying his 'tag.' Looks like this one was just a lookout, they both say so, says he hasn't painted anything." My dad nodded. "Time we finally made it over here they were nowhere in sight. Looked for almost an hour till we finally found 'em hidin' in that house there." He pointed at the house that could have been our savior, condemned from a flood a few months earlier, among whose dilapidated boards we had tried to escape, and in which we faced pistols.

"Know why we come here looking at night, sir?" My Cop asked my dad. "People doin' drugs. People shoot up under that bridge all the time, can't tell you how many we find."

My dad turned to me suddenly and for the only time that night. There was a tremble in his face that ran down to his shoes. "You're not doing any of that, are you?" he asked quietly, with the closest thing to terror I've seen in his face before or since. I shook my shaken head no.

"Doesn't look like these ones have anything. But it coulda been bad news, they run into the wrong person back here at night." My Cop looked at me, again disinterested, an objective appraisal. "We're gonna let this one go.

Nothing on his record. Gonna hold on to the other one. His mom's on her way." They shook hands. I reached toward My Cop to shake, instinctively. He looked at me for a second, the same wary appraisal, and slowly shook.

We drove a familiar route home—the same way he used to drive me home from Bates's house when I was fourteen, the same we'd taken to go to the movies since I could remember. I didn't risk a glance his way. Even looking out the window seemed wrong, like unwrapping a gift meant for someone else.

We were almost home a quarter of an hour later. We crested a hill and saw the park of countless times spent throwing the ball around, kite-flying, and bike-riding. Finally, my father spoke without turning.

"You gotta be fuckin' kidding me, Phil."

It was the first time I had heard my father cuss. Without any response, I looked down at my feet for the duration of the ride. In my face I felt a tremble that ran down to my shoes.

## VII.

Just like salvation, the pride of my parents provides at once the motivation and the reward, its absence the punishment. Or so it was when I was a child, so it was when eating an ice cream or being sent to my room were necessary to set my moral compass. As I've grown I've begun to see them more and more as humans. I've watched my father watch his parents get old, and I've realized that I will someday be where he is. Until I saw that we were the same, I couldn't love them like I do now, as neighbors rather than gods. When that new love grew, the need for the fear of punishment or the delight of reward dissolved. The Fifth Commandment says to "honour your father and your mother, so that you may enjoy long life in the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). This is the only commandment with the reward built in, without the implicit repercussions of God's wrath.

I've been lucky. When I stopped seeing them as gods I realized that my father is, objectively, one hell of a man, my mother one hell of a woman. I couldn't pick two more moral beings and have no need to. If this weren't so, as it isn't for others I know, I wouldn't be able to just follow. Honoring the two of them wouldn't be as easy as it is. This complicates things, or would complicate things for others. It makes the Fifth Commandment tougher to obey. It isn't easy to honor the shortcomings of your father while honoring the man himself. I'm glad I don't have to do that—but I still wonder what it

takes to honor them. Pride is a reflexive joy. Perhaps the best and only way to honor them is to make sure that I can be proud of my own reflection.

### VIII.

In my dream the kids get their ducks in a row, just as I continue to do with mine. We're playing the same game. And their father overlooks us all, gives us all his nod.

There is a nag in my mind that reminds me what my father would not have done. To please this nag is motivation enough, for its presence is a punishment. This is the logic of the game, of having one's ducks in a row. The continual shoving off of temptation, if only to get a nod from a strange father, is the point. The satisfaction of my inner morality, if only to sleep undisturbed by dreams from which I awake with a start and a stone in my stomach, is the point.

For me it's the Hell of soiled morals or the Heaven of a sated conscience. There's none of the Church's purgatory, no repenting but making right. When I bring my salvation and my damnation into this world, when my own heart and mind become my tormentors and my saviors, morality itself becomes the end.

### IX.

God's gaze weighs heavy;  
I look up and see none, but none-  
theless burdened the  
heft of it trembles my heart.  
I count myself accountable,  
count each pull downward  
on more hands than I've got,  
each infirm finger for four.

A toe can nudge of its own accord  
at a self-made line, cleft or no in stone.  
The Earth can warm from up-aimed flame,  
can open to stumbling-pits:  
each sin-strewn day gives way  
to thought-tossed, guilt-drawn night.

## X.

When my morals are spoiled I need not worry myself with any Hell but my own. The disgust of my reflection is my tormentor, my pitchfork-bearer and my flame. What I repress while awake will come into its own by night. What comes by night will not leave me by day. In an empty room I'll sweat like a criminal. Having avoided loving others, I will not be able to love myself. I will not feel the pride of my father and mother, having not honored them. I will not be able to enjoy long life in the land which the Lord my God has given me.

## XI.

The woman in my dream, the temptress I shoved from my lap, is named Gloria Morin. As I sat puzzled in the sun of the morning, piecing together the details of my dream, I remembered who she was. She is from Federico Fellini's *8½*. Its antagonist, Guido Anselmi, searches for a moral rescue from a life of sin, the torment of his own conscience, and the ruined love of his wife. His search is interrupted by a Hell of dreams and a Heaven of fantasy. There is one such fantasy in which his philandering is excused.

Guido enters a large open foyer filled with the many beautiful women of the film, his wife and Gloria included. Some of the women joke about being in Guido's harem, and all seem happy to be included. Even his wife Luisa seems happy for the arrangement—Luisa who, outside Guido's fantasies, has become so accustomed to his philandering that she can pick his latest lover out of a pile of actresses' head shots. Luisa sees the admission of his moral failure in a screen test for a film that he has envisioned as a work devoid of lies. Earlier she damns him for his lies, for "not letting others know what's true and what's false." She asks him, "Is it possible that for you it's all the same? *How?*" She asks the question and Guido just leans back in his chair, smiles, and weaves in his mind the imaginary harem where the actual strife of the situation is reduced to a pageant.

The scene ends in song and dance, and the many beautiful women at last sit at a long table for dinner. As Guido's harem begins to eat, he calls their attention for a speech. "Darlings," he announces, "happiness is being able to tell the truth without ever making anybody suffer."

Earlier in the film Guido meets with a Cardinal of the Catholic Church. Through the billows of a steam bath—like a baptistry boiled by the threat of hellfire—Guido tells the Cardinal, "I'm not happy." The Cardinal responds,

“Why should you be? It isn’t your job to be happy.” Then the Cardinal sets him straight, in Latin: “Salus extra Ecclesiam non est.”

## XII.

I heard my oldest friend come down the stairs and didn’t dare stir. It was midnight. I was sitting in his basement, the same basement of my childhood’s action-figure adventures and comic books. Now I was hunched over, my elbows on my thighs, staring across the room at where the floor met the wall beneath a table. I imagine that my face showed nothing.

He leaned against the table, right in front of me. I followed him up to his face, barely pausing on his glass of whiskey and ice. He wasn’t looking at me, at first, but at the floor, and then at the wall to his right. Every once in a while he would do his characteristic single laugh, and I knew he was choosing his words. Finally his head snapped towards me. He gave another single laugh that was reflected in neither his face nor his eyes.

“So what do you have to say?”

“I don’t know, Nathan,” I said, quietly. “I fucked up.” He let out another single laugh.

“Yeah,” he said. “You fucked up. But here’s the thing. That doesn’t make it alright. Nobody does bad shit on purpose. You think bad people know they’re bad people? No one wants to be the bad guy. They have no idea that they are.”

“Nathan—”

“No. Listen.” He started to get louder. “You didn’t think. Sometimes you get away with it. Not this time. Listen. There are only about two people I care about in the world. It’s you two. Now, I like to think you care about us, too, but you’re sure not fucking acting like it.”

He stopped. For a while we were silent again. Finally he spoke. “She’s not fragile, Phil, but you managed to hurt her. Here’s the thing. You only get so many people worth giving a shit about, okay? And when you find those people you have to take care of them. You have to love them better than you love yourself. The reason you fucked up so bad is that you didn’t fucking get that.”

His whiskey was gone now. I watched him, backlit by a lamp on the table. He was staring at me now, about a step from the table. He looked down, gave another single laugh.

“Go if you want,” he said.

After a minute or so of silence I stood up. We were face to face.

“Are you gonna slug me, Nathan?”

He looked surprised, as if it hadn't already occurred to him.

"I haven't decided yet. Maybe."

I walked across the basement. He followed. I picked my way through the dark jumble of the suburban garage and heard him stumbling behind me. I passed through the door to the snow-covered driveway and left it open for him.

After a few steps I turned around. He stood with his legs shoulder-width apart. He had left his glass of whiskey in the basement. I took the three steps necessary to put us face to face again and stopped.

His first punch caught me in the top of the gut. My breath rushed out of me and I doubled over. His second glanced off. I managed a couple steps back, and he watched me gasp for breath.

"Hit me!" he yelled, unconcerned for the damp silence of the street. I turned and began to plod through the snow down the long driveway, but he was suddenly in front of me. He shoved me and again shouted, "Hit me, you piece of shit!"

"No," I said, my voice still soft for lack of breath. "That doesn't even make sense."

"Come on! You know I can't give you a good one unless you hit me back, so fucking hit me!"

"No!" I said, louder now. I walked around him and made for the street. He ran to block me again, and again I walked around. Finally, I was near the end of the driveway. He stepped in front of me one last time. I stopped and looked at him. He socked me in the shoulder—too hard to be friendly, but at least in the shoulder—and made toward the house. I turned to watch him retrace our footsteps. It was snowing again, big flakes that would fill the holes our feet had swept up. He looked over his shoulder before he opened the door to the garage.

"Fuck it," he said. "I love you. Go home."

I laughed once, like him.

"I love you too, man." And I started home.

### XIII.

I wrote that poem when my mind and my heart became Hell. I thought it was the result of reading too much Gerard Manley Hopkins, but to think was to forget the reason I was reading him in the first place. I was reading him for some hint, some shove in the direction of morality. He could not ask what I had done—I did not need to confess to make right. But Hopkins's pious

morals just echoed and crashed against my own soiled ones, magnifying the discord that trembled my heart.

Though my Hell was a punishment, it did not make right. Though Nathan's punches were punishment, they did not make right; though his forgiveness was a gift, it did not indicate that right had been made. There's a stone in my stomach when I think of how I made a poor girl suffer by telling her the truth—the truth that what I had thought was a confession of love had been a grave mistake; that I had told a terrible lie without even knowing it. My reflection is still sordid, and it tells the real story. I know I have not made right.

#### XIV.

*8½* opens with a dream. Guido sits in a car in the middle of a traffic jam. He looks around to see that the people in the other cars are staring right at him. Suddenly Guido's car begins to fill up with smoke. He claws at the window without effect, then looks again, panicked, into the cars around him, finding no help. Guido finally extracts himself from the car, and floats into the sky. He soars among the clouds, a momentary sip of Heaven, but he is soon lassoed around the ankle and pulled from flight. He plummets into the ocean, and a man wearing a cape and a strange headpiece—a hat that seems religious and ritualistic, Romanesque but somehow cult-like—says, “Down, for good!” Guido wakes up in terror.

It is not until Guido finally escapes the glaring Hell of other people that he is allowed to ascend, that he is allowed his salvation. It is not until he is under no obligation to tell the truth, a truth that will surely make somebody suffer, that he can be happy. But the man who pulls him back to Earth is a churchman. There's no mistaking it. The churchman reminds him that fleeing thy neighbor is not the same as loving him. Guido will have to figure it out, to get his ducks in a row. He will have to make a truth that won't hurt anybody, a truth he can tell.

I did not understand *8½* until Gloria looked me in the face and told me I didn't care. It was an ugly truth, one that I told myself—through Gloria—and one that made me suffer. It was a reflexive truth. Its barb was “the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass” (Wilde 3). Gloria told me that I could keep my toe from the line and push her off me—but that the toe was still creeping. Wanting her was enough to damn me to my own personal Hell. Being able to want her was enough to hurt someone who loved me in a way that I have not yet learned to love. Gloria told me that I was still accountable for my trembling heart.

---

## WORKS CITED

- 8½. Dir. Federico Fellini. Perfs. Marcello Mastroianni, Barbara Steele. 1963. Criterion, 2004. DVD.
- Forget, Jacques. "Schism." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. New York: Appleton, 1912. *New Advent*. Web. 22 Apr. 2010.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. New York: Signet, 1981. Print.
- The Oxford Study Bible*. Ed. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.
- Stallworthy, Jon. "Versification." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 5th ed. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: Norton, 2004. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie. New York: Norton, 2007. Print.