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Abstract

Examines a theme of never-ending responsibility in a short Grail fantasy story, a fantasy novel cycle, and an episode of *Babylon 5*.

Additional Keywords

Babylon 5 (television series); Cassut, Michael. "Perpetual Light"; Donaldson, Stephen R. First Chronicles of Thomas Covenant; Straczynski, J. Michael. "Passing Through Gethsemane"

Brothers of Perpetual Responsibility: Monasticism, Memory, and Penance in Cassutt, Donaldson, and Straczynski¹

Kim Coleman Healy

MANY readers will remember Garrison Keillor's fictional parish in Lake Wobegon, "Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility." Parody though this name is, it aptly captures a moral stance shared by ascetics in Michael Cassutt's "Perpetual Light," Stephen R. Donaldson's *First Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, and J. Michael Straczynski's "Passing Through Gethsemane." Cassutt's *Brothers of Perpetual Light* and Donaldson's *Bloodguard*, made semi-immortal by their vows, experience immortality as a bondage of perpetual responsibility; Straczynski's Brother Edward finds that his responsibility for his past sins outlives his personal memory of those sins. Here I will explore the responses of these characters to what Mircea Eliade calls "the terror of history" (139).

In his seminal work *Cosmos and History* (also published as *The Myth of the Eternal Return*) Eliade argues that only in secularized societies is history—a sequence of human acts played out in irreversible, linear time—regarded as more real than the timeless events of myth. In contrast, in societies where religious ritual cyclically reenacts the actions of gods or culture founders, a human act gains validity by imitating a mythic exemplar. Acts that do not imitate mythic originals cannot share in the power of those originals, and thus are seen as meaningless and unreal. According to Eliade, linear memory, with its succession of unrepeatable, ontologically void acts, is felt as an intolerable burden in such societies, and can be endured only by being periodically abolished. Ceremonies of the New Year, of confession and forgiveness, of mythical death and rebirth redissolve the world into chaos and recreate it pristinely in a time ritually assimilated to the original creation. By such means the chain of cause and effect in profane time is broken and the burden of history lifted. When linear time is regarded as profane, history and fallenness are coextensive.

Michael Cassutt's story "Perpetual Light," published in an anthology of Grail fantasy, both invites and thwarts comparison with Eliade's model. The *Perpetual Light*, as an explicit Grail symbol, connects both to the ancient Celtic Cauldron

of Life—a death and rebirth symbol *par excellence*—and to the Passion of Christ, which liberates believers from the sins of their personal histories. The Grail’s life-giving powers, as well as its danger for the impure, derive from its ontological potency: as a source of sacred power, it abolishes profane time for everything it touches. Yet Cassutt’s Light inverts expectations based on traditional Grail myths. Though it can heal wounds instantly and prolong life indefinitely, the life it gives to its votaries is not regenerate eternity, but protracted sequential existence. “We stay the age we are when we enter the service of the Light. It gives us sufficient time to . . . atone” (157), says Brother Stephen, at the apparent age of fifty and the actual age of almost two thousand. His statement, “All of us live by its grace” (157), is mordantly ironic. The Perpetual Light, far from abolishing history, creates a purgatory of history.

Each of Cassutt’s Brothers has come to the Light out of a personal history of fanatic violence. Brother Stephen tells a new postulant, “Once upon a time, my friend, we were all like you. Killers. Fanatics. Assassins. Men who would commit any atrocity in the pursuit of some holy cause” (159). Among them the Brothers represent eight languages and twenty centuries of wars. Brother Stephen once fought in Octavian’s Roman legions; Brother Andrew had been a crusader under King Louis; Brother Cleon a French agent in Algeria. Their monastery could not be more unlike the stereotypical tranquil cloister; its “graffiti-spattered” (149) walls mark out an improbable enclave of eternity in the most lawless section of a nameless inner city. The ongoing terror of modern history impinges on the Order daily and hourly as gunshots and sirens punctuate the prayers.

The Perpetual Light resides in a tabernacle that would ordinarily house the Reserved Sacrament. This juxtaposition underscores the Light’s implicit connection to the Passion of Christ; the Brothers’ atonements four times daily before the Light in its tabernacle are reminiscent of Catholic prayers of reparation before the Sacrament. The Perpetual Light as Grail contains the blood of the mystical body of Christ, which the Brothers have shed in killing fellow human beings during their former violent lives. Whereas the Sacrament symbolizes Christ’s willing acceptance of suffering, which regenerates time for the penitent, the Perpetual Light confronts the Brothers continually with the suffering they have caused and the history they can never escape. Their pain before the Light is physical as well as moral; as Brother Stephen puts it, “If you don’t suffer, you can’t atone” (160). As they chant, “We are those who killed the children. . . . We are those who made

mothers weep” (160), the Brothers, having inflicted the terror of history on others, now have its cost seared into them four times a day for millennia.

Though the Brothers’ vowed life is primarily one of penance, their atonement has a dimension of responsibility as well; as Brother Stephen describes it to his postulant, “Here is where, in a tiny way, we make up for the pain we’ve caused. It’s a noble task. It’s a necessary one. You’ll find a place here” (159). The Brotherhood, like centuries of monastic communities before it, affirms a real though hidden efficacy for “the work of the cell” in the spiritual economy of the world. A Trappist superior in Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* once told the monks of Gethsemani Abbey that world peace depended upon the sincerity of their ascetic efforts.

Garrett, a terrorist who stumbles bleeding into the Perpetual Light chapel after an urban shootout, receives sanctuary within the Order, only to learn that his present predicament and his violent history are not so easily escaped. After the rays of the Light have healed Garrett’s wounds the next day, Brother Stephen warns him that he must depart before evening prayers. Garrett objects:

“Tell me, Brother: is there a back way out of this place?” Brother Stephen shook his head. “So the moment I walk out of here a Zionist assassin will have me in his sights? That’s hardly what I call free. Suppose I want to stay.” He brandished the gun. “Suppose I make you keep me.”

“I hope you don’t think I made these rules,” Brother Stephen said. “The Light itself is very clear: if you remain in its presence for more than a day, you *belong* to it.” (156)

Garrett soon finds that the Light’s rules are as inescapable as the law of gravity; for anyone who belongs to it, separation from its presence brings blinding pain and swift death. When Garrett exchanges clothing with Brother Andrew at gunpoint and takes the Light itself hostage, Brother Andrew accepts his role as decoy with a smile. When Andrew goes out the door in Garrett’s clothes, he vanishes in fiery light before Garrett’s foe Helprin can shoot. Garrett is temporarily overcome by the pain of the Light, having remained in its presence for longer than 24 hours, and acquiesces as Brother Stephen leads him back inside.

Brother Andrew, dying in Garrett’s place, consummates his reparations and at last earns release from his bondage to the Light; the Brothers’ requiem, “And let Perpetual Light shine upon him” (158), is ironic, as the reader hopes Andrew may now have rest from its glare. Garrett’s rest may not come for a thousand years. The Light and the Order take Garrett’s *de facto* vows as binding even though

his only choice was between belonging to the Light and walking into Helprin's guns. Garrett's determination to escape his history locks him into a near-eternity of sequential time; his determination to escape the consequences of his violence commits him to centuries of expiation.

Stephen R. Donaldson's Bloodguard, like the Order of Perpetual Light, receive limited immortality through direct contact with the sacred. Like the Order, the Bloodguard find that this gift entails a burden of perpetual responsibility. Unlike the Order, the Bloodguard are martial ascetics; they vow to use violence in the defense of right rather than to atone for its wrongful use. This Vow has supernatural results, as do the vows of the Order. Donaldson scholar William A. Senior comments, "In the Vow of the Bloodguard is a type of revisitation of the creation myth, a reestablishment of sacred time that includes participants who still live" (120). The Earthpower had responded to their "Vow like the infernal oath upon the river of death which binds even the gods" (Donaldson, "Gilden-Fire" 92) with an eruption of fire sealing their bones against change and decay.

The Vow, like the Light, gives life by connecting its servants with the ontological voltage of sacred time; like the Light, the Vow nevertheless inflicts an extended life sentence of profane time. At the time of the First Chronicles, the senior Bloodguard commanders are as physically ageless and as chronologically old as Brother Stephen, and their brethren-in-arms, like the brethren of the Light, represent all intervening periods of their people's history. Like the brethren of the Light, the Bloodguard can die only in the act of fulfilling their Vow (i.e. in battle defending the Lords). Their linear existence continues unrelieved by even the small daily deaths and rebirths of sleep or orgasm.

When High Lord Kevin, to whom the Vow was first sworn, invokes the Ritual of Desecration, the Land undergoes death and eventual rebirth around the Bloodguard while they remain unchanged, having taken refuge, at Kevin's order, in their native mountains. The Land's cataclysm starkly contrasts to the Bloodguard's continuity. They return to the re nascent Land centuries later, seeking new Lords to whom they can make good their still-binding Vow, and thus become the embodied memory of the Land: the only beings now living who directly remember Kevin's time, both the golden age before the Desecration and the Desecration itself, are the eldest Bloodguard. For them the very landscape is a palimpsest of the history it and they have endured: "The farmland seemed to defy the spectre which haunted it. Korik knew better: he had seen land as fair as this

helpless to withstand fire and trampling and the thick unhealthy drench of blood” (Donaldson, “Gilden-Fire” 96).

The preternatural memory of Korik and his comrades entails preternatural responsibility, not least because of their survivor guilt; had they known Kevin’s intentions, they would not have obeyed the order that saved their lives. They toil under an ineradicable burden of memory for the remainder of their service. The Bloodguard after Kevin live to atone, no less than the Brothers of the Light; they hold themselves perpetually responsible for what Kevin did *to* them in thwarting the intent of their Vow, and for what they feel they could have done to prevent it. For both orders, history is guilt and existence is expiation.

Near the end of *Lord Foul’s Bane*, the mortally wounded First Mark Tuvor refuses to die without the *Haruchai* equivalent of absolution:

Tuvor shuddered; his eyes opened. Covenant looked away from Prothall. Tuvor’s lips moved, but he made no sound.

Mhoram tried to comfort him. “Have no fear. This evil will be overcome—it is in the High Lord’s hands. And your name will be remembered with honor wherever trust is valued.”

But Tuvor’s eyes held Covenant, and he managed to whisper one word, “True?” His whole body strained with supplication, but Covenant did not know whether he asked for a promise or a judgment.

Yet the Unbeliever answered. He could not refuse a Bloodguard, could not deny the appeal of such expensive fidelity. The word stuck in his throat, but he forced it out. “Yes.”

Tuvor shuddered again, and died with a flat groan as if the chord of his Vow had snapped. (Donaldson, *Lord Foul’s Bane* 448)

What Tuvor requires of Covenant is not so much absolution as vindication; only the assurance that he has done *all* that can be done frees him to depart. The Bloodguard version of the old British Navy verdict “most honorably acquitted” is considerably harder to earn, requiring not only all humanly possible efforts, but all superhuman efforts made possible by the Vow. For First Mark Tuvor as for Brother Andrew, even an agonizing death is a consummation of honor and a welcome release from the bondage of serial time.

Both the Bloodguard and the Order of Perpetual Light live outside the normal flow of time, in the agelessness conferred by their respective sacred sources. Both brotherhoods also maintain the unbroken cyclicity of liturgical time. The Brothers pray before the Light four times a day, conjoining the ancient rhythm of the

monastic Daily Office with direct exposure to the supernatural source of their life. The liturgical time of the Bloodguard has two manifestations. In “Gilden-Fire,” we see the Bloodguard consecrating profane time by reciting their Vow silently and constantly throughout their duties (this is their most monastic custom, reminiscent both of the mantras of Hindu and Buddhist ascetics and of the Jesus Prayer of Orthodox Christian monastics). The Bloodguard also ritually reenact events that have acquired mythical importance for them, consonant with Eliade’s model: for example, in preparation for a new mission, Korik and fourteen comrades reconnect to their beginnings by repeating the pre-Vow ritual combat. However, Donaldson’s narration of this time-regenerating rite pointedly juxtaposes it with the burden of memory and responsibility that it does not take away.

Now the Bloodguard knew how to doubt. And now their Vow had revealed an additional demand: to fulfill it, they must preserve the Lords from self-destruction.

Therefore Korik invoked the rites of leadership. He remembered his whole history—the Vow gave no relief from memory—and because of it he acted as he did. He raised hands which knew how to kill against his comrades. (Donaldson, “Gilden-Fire” 93)

The limited immortality and the cyclic rituals of both orders are *necessary* but not *sufficient* to make history tolerable for them. The Brothers of the Light from their inception, and the Bloodguard after Kevin, fend off the terror of history with atonement, in keeping with Eliade’s contention that historical suffering ascribable to sins can be both understood and expiated (96–100). Both orders choose perpetual responsibility as the acceptable price for relief from the terror of history. For the Brothers of the Light, the guilt is real; they make reparation for the violent history that each one of them has made. For the Bloodguard, the guilt is scrupulous, exposing the limitations of their Eliadean strategy for making sense of history. Kevin’s betrayal of their Vow is a historical catastrophe unrelieved by any degree of meaning. The Bloodguard’s world view lacks any categories for dealing with it; throughout both the First and Second Chronicles, *Haruchai* consciences militantly disavow all middle ground: “The Vow is life. Corruption is death. [. . .] We know only life or death—the Vow or Corruption” (Donaldson, *Lord Foul’s Bane* 253). The Bloodguard find guilt preferable to incomprehensibility, and employ a posture of expiation to mitigate the ontological outrage of Kevin’s default. By their conviction that they *could have* prevented his fall and *will* prevent any similar future occurrence, they regain control of their moral world.

Matthew Fike (34) has argued that because the rules of Donaldson’s secondary world prohibit direct divine intervention (the Creator and Foul are separated from

the Land by the Arch of Time), grace is unknown in the Land. Though a general critique of Fike's idea is beyond the scope of this essay, it may fairly be asserted that *Haruchai* culture in the First Chronicles and "Gilden-Fire" appears to lack any concept of grace. The Vow, unlike the vows of the Perpetual Light, did not initially involve expiation. However, it was motivated by *recompense* for the bounty of the Lords and the beauty of Revelstone, and hence by an implied denial of grace: gift equals indebtedness: "The *Haruchai* were fighters, accustomed to wrest what they required: they could not accept gifts without making meet return" (Donaldson, "Gilden-Fire" 92). After Kevin, this denial of grace takes on a dimension of guilt in addition to the original reciprocity: the Bloodguard, even more literally than the brethren of the Light, seek to wash away their perceived sins in their own blood. They are far less objectively culpable for the history they expiate than are the Brethren of the Light; their plight derives cruel irony from the reader's (and Thomas Covenant's) awareness that their only "sin" regarding Kevin was an innocent excess of loyalty.

The Bloodguard's need to atone for what Kevin has done to them ultimately leads them to disaster. When Korik captures the baneful Illearth Stone, it tempts him into believing that with its power he can fight Lord Foul directly, redeeming the Bloodguard honor once and for all. When he and two comrades reach Foul's Creche, Foul takes possession of them and sends them to attack those they have always defended. After killing the corrupted three, First Mark Bannor beholds in them apparent proof of the latent self-accusation that has hung over the Bloodguard since Kevin. The corruption of Korik and his companions invalidates for Bannor the aggregate history of his people's service. Unlike Brother Andrew, who ends his centuries of life in a consummation of atonement, Bannor and his brethren-in-arms abandon their Vow in the conviction that they have never been worthy of it. Their despair swallows two thousand years of service without a trace. With no way of regenerating time, they cannot imagine regaining honor once lost; with no concept of grace, they cannot imagine that the Lords do not echo their self-condemnation. The ending of the Vow is a moral equivalent of mass suicide; unlike Brother Andrew's death, it redeems nothing.

Brother Edward, the main character of J. Michael Straczynski's *Babylon 5* episode "Passing through Gethsemane," has a relationship to memory substantially inverse to that of both the Bloodguard and the Brothers of Perpetual Light. Whereas Donaldson's and Cassutt's orders are left standing with their centuries of memories while the world changes around them, Brother Edward learns that he has lost the

memory of his own history while others retain it. For Brother Edward even more than for Cassutt's and Donaldson's brotherhoods, history is coextensive with guilt.

Brother Edward gives his life in payment for the crimes of another, as Brother Andrew of the Perpetual Light does. But, as Straczynski comments in his notes on the episode, the *other* for whom Brother Edward substitutes is another within himself. Early in the episode, the young monk confides to his superior, Brother Theo, that he fears being guilty of sins he cannot remember. Theo implores Edward to leave memory and forgiveness of his past in the hands of God. Brother Edward cannot leave the matter alone. Voices and visions accuse him of murder, becoming ever more vivid and frequent. Eventually Edward learns from the station's archives that he is actually Charlie, a serial killer, given a new identity after the "death of personality" sentence suppressed his original memories. When Malcolm, a victim's son, and other survivors abduct Brother Edward to torture him to death, he does not resist. He dies remembering his former crimes and wholeheartedly accepting the retaliation visited on him. Brother Edward makes sense of the vengeance he suffers by accepting it as justice for his former sins and by assimilating it to the sufferings of his God—both moral positions, Eliade contends (100–01), by which painful history is made tolerable. Thus Edward proves to himself that in his own Gethsemane he has shown no less courage than his Lord Christ did; without this proof, even Brother Theo's proffered absolution would not have sufficed. Like First Mark Tuvor, Edward dies convinced that he has at last fulfilled his vows; like Brother Andrew of the Perpetual Light, Edward dies as a substitute for another—the legally dead Charlie—who merits death.

"Death of personality," which in Straczynski's future world has replaced capital punishment, is in Eliadean terms a *forced* regeneration of time. It does in fictional neurological "fact" what scapegoat rites and sin offerings have done *symbolically* throughout the ages: it annuls past sins and restores the offender to *tabula rasa*, by dissolving the guilty identity (now in actuality, rather than in ritual) and replacing it with a pristine new identity. Despite its surface dystopian connotations, "death of personality" thus can be seen as a manifestation of *grace*: a death and rebirth that releases an offender from the guilt and consequences of a criminal history, granting a new life in which constructive behavior can prevail. But the "death of personality" sentence regenerates time only for the condemned. The survivors who stalk and ultimately murder Brother Edward do so because they believe that his fresh start represents *too much* grace. History and consequences are not removed from the world by deleting them from an offender's memory, and the survivors

regard the attempt to do so as unjust. In this aspect, Straczynski's tale, like those of Cassutt and Donaldson, reflects an underlying belief that rebooting history is neither morally permissible nor ultimately possible.

After Malcolm proudly takes responsibility for the torture and murder of Brother Edward, security chief Garibaldi sentences him to death of personality. The episode ends with Brother Theo introducing Garibaldi and others to the newest novice of his order: the mindwiped Brother Malcolm. Brother Theo receives him as a novice even though (perhaps *because*) Theo will always know, to his cost, the history that Malcolm has lost. Theo takes the price of Malcolm's regeneration of time upon himself; thus he undertakes a daily and hourly sacrifice as painful as that of the Brothers of the Light, under much less duress. Theo takes responsibility for this burden of memory freely, rather than with the driven self-righteousness of the Bloodguard, and thus gives Brother Malcolm the prospect of a more graced relationship to time than he deserves.

Brother Theo embodies assumptions about history diametrically opposed to those shared by Brother Edward, the Bloodguard, and the Order of Perpetual Light. The Bloodguard enact their linear expiations on a substrate of primordial *Haruchai* culture whose relationship to time is cyclic and "archaic" in Eliade's terms. The Brethren of the Light gradually over centuries, and Brother Edward in a single night of torment, pay off their historical debts by their own efforts; though the context of their monasticism is Christian, their actual world view is a Pelagianism bound to linear time and moral proportionality. Brother Theo, in contrast, evinces a fully Christian relationship to history, as Eliade defines it, convinced that the kingdom of God is already among humans, that faith connects each believer to the sacred time of the reign of God, and that from the moment of repentance one's sinful history is dissolved (see Eliade 129).

Through the mystery of our redemption may almighty God release you from all punishments in this life and in the life to come. May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy. Father, look with compassion on your servant Brother Edward, who has trusted in your promises. Welcome him to your kingdom in peace. By the authority the Apostolic See has given me, I grant you a full pardon and remission of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.²

This absolution, which Theo pronounces over the dying Brother Edward, does sacramentally what the "death of personality" sentence tried and failed to do neurologically. One may assume that Theo would have pronounced a similar

absolution offstage over the new Brother Malcolm when receiving his vows. Theo vouchsafes to Malcolm at his own cost the new beginning denied to the Bloodguard and the Brethren of Perpetual Light.

Theo's acceptance of Brother Malcolm points up the distinction between forgiveness and forgetfulness. Though Malcolm no longer remembers his murder of Edward, Theo and Garibaldi remember it in every detail. Yet Theo's behavior toward Malcolm validates his new identity in secular as well as spiritual reality. In the terms of child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, the abbot ("father") Theo becomes for Malcolm a durable parental object, one who survives destructive actions and accepts subsequent acts of reparation. Theo's acceptance of Malcolm's vows opens a possibility for Malcolm to develop a capacity for concern in the place of guilt, and thus to have the opportunity for a future of true contribution rather than insatiable expiation.

The reparations of the Bloodguard and the Brothers of Perpetual Light are insatiable because the objects of their attachment do not *receive* those reparations. High Lord Kevin is not a durable object. When he does not survive the Desecration, the Bloodguard cannot stop trying to make it up to him; no one but he has the power to declare them most honorably acquitted. They are as unable to dispute their survivor guilt rationally as an orphaned infant would be. The Brothers of the Perpetual Light cannot escape their penance because the Light is never satisfied. They remain in a double bind between their painful attachment to the Light and the fatal pain of separation from it. The Light is a durable object, but it is a retaliatory one, keeping the results of its vowed children's destructiveness always before them undiminished. Only at Brother Andrew's substitutionary death does the Light let him see his reparations being accepted.

Without regeneration of time, guilt accumulates monotonically without hope of relief; without memory, regeneration of time entails injustice to history's victims. Availability of a durable, nonretaliating object who can survive a destructive history and receive reparations afterward makes possible the coexistence of memory and renewal. Object survival makes memory enduring; memory makes renewal morally acceptable. Theo, like the Bloodguard, becomes the guardian of a history that others have lost; unlike them, he holds that history without either denying it or assuming unmerited responsibility for it. Theo's merciful keeping of Brother Malcolm's lost history saves Malcolm from endless penance like that of the Perpetual Light. By accepting fallen history with no compulsion to either abolish

or appease it, Brother Theo arrives at a costly but redemptive answer to the terror of history.

Notes

¹ This work germinated from concepts developed in conversations with Melanee McGill and Matthew D. Healy, whose contributions I gratefully acknowledge.

² Straczynski, as quoted in Abra Miller's Web page *Faith Manages: Religion on Babylon 5*, <<http://members.tripod.com/~AbraRM/b5religion.html>>. I lacked access to a full print copy of the screenplay.

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