

## Glory and the Dovetail

LaFollette Lecture 2023

Derek R. Nelson

Thank you so much for that warm introduction, and for the invitation for this year's lecture. It's an honor to stand on this side of the podium, but it also calls to mind the two LaFollette lectures I attended when I was a student. Both were very good, but I only learned that recently when I re-read them. The first was from Bert Stern, a then-about-to-retire English professor. I didn't listen past the first five minutes because he made me mad, and I had planned ahead and brought a book with me just in case. He compared Wabash to an exile, because he had been forced to accommodate himself to Wabash ways. He said the College "owned him completely" during this long exile. I wasn't aware of any kidnapping in his past, so unless the command that he come to Wabash College was court-ordered I could see no meaningful sense in which he was an exile and not a runaway or just a grouch. So I tuned out. It was a different experience when the late Tom Stokes of the Modern Languages department gave a talk about philosophy and poetry called "Analects of the Heart's Residuum." I vowed to do better as an attendee. I listened intently and took notes. And for a full 50 minutes I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

I'm aiming for something in the middle of those...not so lofty that you're wondering where your feet are, not so familiar you aren't stretched a bit. So we start in the physical, material world of everyday things and move from there. This lecture is called Glory and the Dovetail, but there's only glory in the middle, whereas there will be three, count 'em, three senses in which we're looking at dovetails. If you're hoping for a roadmap at the beginning to follow along, I may have to disappoint you. Part of the point I want to make is that grand theories with stable categories are part of the problem, and relying on sense experience of basic objects is a better way to proceed. So if this feels like three totally different mini-lectures I'll have failed, but if you find yourself connecting and wondering about the three different dovetails, I'll call that a win.

### I. Dovetail as Joint

Here's an example of our first dovetail, or I should say of our dovetail in its first sense. Now, some of you, probably those of you who don't know me very well, are wondering, "Surely Nelson can't talk for 45 minutes about the dovetail." And others of you, probably the ones who know me better, are worried, thinking "Oh my God, Nelson's going to talk about the dovetail for an hour." As my seminary roommate used to say, "Freak not." I promise this won't be too terribly narrow, because I actually mean "dovetail" to stand in metaphorically for a large number of woodworking joints.

The dovetail is one of the most reliable ways of joining wood together. There are two parts to every dovetail joint, pins and tails. Tails fan out, and pins taper in. It's called something like "dovetail" in most languages. In French it's *queue d'aronde*, or sometimes *queue d'pigeonne*, tail of the pigeon, for the pigeon is a kind of dove. In German it's *Schwalbenschwanzverbindung*, a 25 letter beauty that just rolls off the tongue. It's ancient, too. See these funerary boxes from ancient Egypt. This picture is actually taken in the Louvre, because I like it more than the Mona Lisa. Here are other examples of them. The whitewashed chest dates to 1500 BCE. The elaborate coffin is even older at 2000 BCE, and has a single dovetail at the top and bottom of each side.

They're popular joints because they're very strong, fairly simple to make, and quite elegant to look at. Here's another ancient example from a site in modern-day Iran - a carefully hewn dovetail in stone.

Focusing in on the everyday stuff of life like dovetails helps me ponder deeper things in theology. For example, we can learn about freedom from the dovetail. The dovetail is a bit like a box joint, but it's much stronger. Here's a box joint. They're common when you're making, like, boxes. It's harder to cut them than dovetails because you can't correct yourself. Box joints didn't become common until motorized saws made repetitive cuts more reliable and easier to do. They have two degrees of freedom. You could pull the darker wood out away from the other, or you could hold it tight and pull the lighter wood away. But in the dovetail you can't do that. The pin can only slide in or out. The tail is captive. It has only one degree of freedom. Strength is purchased at the expense of some freedom. You don't need treatises on the social contract by Locke or Rousseau to understand that point. You just need to look at the dovetail.

Another abstract theological point made plain by the dovetail is related to hiddenness and revelation. Those are common contrasting terms in a doctrine of God. If you believe there's a God, and spoiler alert I do, than in what sense might God reveal Godself and thus be plain to see? Or in what sense is God inscrutable, hidden away behind all manner of suffering, obscured by confusing contradictions and paradoxes. Dovetails can also be hidden and revealed. Here is an example of something called half-blind dovetails. That means they can be seen only from one side. I often use these when making a drawer front. You want the face of the drawer to be clean and undistracting, so you partially hide the joinery from view.

There are also fully blind dovetails. Usually these hidden dovetails use a miter to sink the corners down to invisible nothingness. You lose a bit of strength but nothing is revealed, all is hidden. There's a related joint called the "impossible" dovetail not because it's impossible, and not because it's hidden. But the way it goes together is hidden, is mysterious. Here's an example of one. It's kind of visually impressive. But then you think, "Wait, how does that work?" The secret is that the pieces are tapered, not straight. It slides together like this.

An even more mysterious hidden dovetail is called the fox wedge. Only the mortise has tapered lines in this approach. The tenon is straight, but has kerfs sawn into it, and slender wedges inserted partway into the kerfs. When you pound the tenon into the mortise the tenon expands as the wedges sink in. The result is a strong joint that can hardly be pulled out, but it's a hard one to pull off. Why bother with it? Well, to take one example, you might be making a log cabin, and you cut away some of the logs for a doorway or window. How do you attach the jamb to the logs? You would be a fool to just screw or nail it, because you're driving into end grain. Wood is like a trillion straws wrapped with rubber bands. If you drive into the end of the stack of straws, the end grain, it will wiggle free in no time. But the fox wedge will last forever in that particular setting. And this is a time when I have to confess that frequently academics say "for example" when they really only can think of one example, as I can here.

You're sensing the versatility of this joint, that can be made any size or angle. Draw a line six inches down from the end of a board you want to join, measure an inch from the corner, and that's the line you cut. That would be a 1 in 6 dovetail. If the pieces are thicker, pick a sharper

angle. Or a more gradual one would be a 1 in 8. Here's a workbench I made with 1 in 4 dovetails. There's no real reason to show you that except that I'm very proud of it and didn't know how else to get it in. I'll leave it on the screen a while for you to admire.

At this point I hope that you now know infinitely more about dovetails than you did when you came in to Salter Hall, and also that you're really wondering how this deals with theology, which is supposedly my area of research. There aren't many good theology jokes, but here's one. A publisher asked an American, a German and a Frenchman to write an introduction to theology. The American took six months and produced a 150 page book called "Introduction to Theology." The German took 3 years and produced a 600 page book called "Prolegomenon to a Propaedeutic on the Conditions for the Possibility of an Introduction to Theology." The Frenchman took ten years and produced a 1000 page book called "The Sex Life of the Elephant." So let me stop being so French about this and tell you where this is going.

I said earlier that I wanted dovetails to be a kind of stand-in for a general principle of joining two pieces of wood together and I meant that. Here's the main point. Building something from wood means attending mainly to the lines of connection and intersection, and that means there's a presence and an absence. A dovetail is lovely example of the presence of wood in one workpiece fitting the absence of wood in its mating piece. A wood joint is a dialectic of presence and absence. And something like this, I want to suggest, is a model for how to think about the continued presence of God in the material world of our experience after the ascension of Jesus. So in the middle section of the lecture I want to explain, or at least suggest, how I think we ought to conceive of the presence of God in the material world. At least since modernity the way the presence of God has been conceptualized has been through problematically *stable* categories, like being vs. non-being, being vs. becoming, the substance metaphysics of Plato or even the process metaphysics of Whitehead. I will be speaking against such things today, in favor of a more downhome approach. The sense experience of actual human bodies counts more than a stable category of being.

This may strike you as a comically grandiose task, especially given the limitations of this occasion, namely how long you'll sit there and how persuasive I can possibly be. But I do want to try, or at least to begin. I think it's absolutely urgent for Christian theology to reconsider the ways in which we think God is in and out of the everyday stuff of life. And partly that's because Christian theology bears some responsibility for latent but potent worldviews that have done harm. By sequestering the presence of God to the mind, like in the Romantic Schleiermacher, or to the spirit, as in the Idealist Hegel, or to a far-off heaven as in most theistic models, the material world can soon be viewed simply as a machine to be controlled, simply as a resource to be used. Our present environmental crises has many causes, but this mindset is one of them.

To oversimplify a vastly complicated story, science, democracy and capitalism - three things I'm for - have improved our collective lot by leaps and bounds since the Reformation made those things possible. There, I said it. But these depend on high levels of control and tend to accelerate further attempts at control. The human being in modernity attempts to be lord of the material world, subjugating it to our manipulation. In the realm of the material things I'm interested in, like construction, furniture and food, this leads to massive concrete buildings and foundations, steel frame assemblies, and vinyl and asphalt exteriors. Modern building doesn't work with

natural products and processes, it works against them, seeks to control, even dominate them. And these happen to be the most fossil-fuel dependent and CO2 emitting ways of arranging our material world.

You won't be surprised to hear me argue that dovetails make this better. What kinds of buildings don't depend so much on fossil fuels, concrete, and unrenewable metals? And are strong enough to last beyond the disposable horizon of our current m.o.? Timber. Consider how different the mentality is in this building. Timber frames that use dovetail joinery have stood in China for nearly 3000 years. China has a challenging climate, as well as loads of earthquakes. Earthquake proofing a building means that you build flexibility, give and take, into the design. These dovetail joints, called dougong, are multiply redundant, and each joint gives just a bit. It can flex, but the ends of the beams they sit on are tapered so it can't come apart. Architects and researchers built a 1:5 scale model of the temple of the centuries-old "Forbidden City," and did seismic tests on it. The terrible Moroccan earthquake this month measured 6.8. The worst ever in recorded history was nearly 1000 times worse in Peru, at 9.6. This simulation went 10 times worse even than that, topping out at over 10 on the Richter scale. The structure was undamaged.

The dovetail approach flies in the face of our dominant contemporary technologies of control, where we fasten, reinforce, bolt, screw, re-bar, etc. I find it enchanting and also exciting to think about imitating the strength of natural things in our ways of building not just drawers and benches but lecture halls like this or even skyscrapers. This is tallest wooden building in the world, Mjøstårnet in Norway. It stands an impressive 86 meters tall, and its laminated beams are dovetailed in place.

## II. Dovetail as *Doxa* (Glory)

Here is our second dovetail. It's a well-known biblical passage, discussed through the ages. I'd like to connect it to the theme of glory, continuing this play of the dialectic of presence and absence.

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

My question is: Why does the Holy Spirit descend in bodily form like a dove? It's a curious question, and the answers that have been given have not been very persuasive. The earliest Christian commentators seemed to have scratched their heads and said, "Well, maybe it's something to do with Noah." Noah twice sent out a dove from his ark. The first time it returned to him with an olive leaf, indicating that plants might be above sea level. He sent it again. When the dove didn't come back, Noah concluded it must have found dry land. Pessimist that I am, I would have concluded the dove drowned. Clement of Alexandria in the second century AD and Origen in the 3rd saw Noah's dove as the start of something redemptive, and it generally involved some water, so that must be why Jesus's baptism in the river has a dove showing up. Most later commentators in the middle ages and beyond simply repeat this vague association. Aristotle observed that male and female doves both sit on eggs and that doves are monogamous, but these ideas were never picked up in Christian circles.

Let me suggest a different approach. Take this scene in Luke 3 at the baptism of Jesus together with its partner. The heavens open twice in the writings of Luke, the evangelist. The first is the baptism of Jesus, and the other is the ascension of Jesus, in Acts 1. (The author of Luke also wrote Acts).

Here is the text of the ascension from Acts 1: Jesus is standing with his disciples having walked and talked with them for six weeks after his resurrection. It's time to go. He says,

“You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now... You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”

Now, I'm arguing that we should understand Acts 1 and Luke 3 as parallels. The heavens open, baptism is mentioned in each, and an event of cosmic significance occurs. It would be *really* convenient for my argument if there were a dove in Acts 1. Like, really convenient. And I admit that it's not in the text. When I started thinking about this lecture, I was sure there was a dove in Acts 1. I read a dozen different ancient versions of the text looking for one. But at least I'm in good company on this point. Here's Rembrandt's famous painting of the Ascension from Acts 1. See that thing at the very top of the opened heavens? Dove tail. Here's a lovely illuminated manuscript painting from 1440 with Christ ascending right toward a dove. More than the bird, in this one, I like the footprints Jesus has left on earth as his body ascends. There's no bird in this Renaissance painting of the Ascension, but again check out the footprints. Christ's body absent but called to mind. Footprints are like dovetails. Perhaps my favorite image is Salvador Dali's painting of the Ascension. Right there at the focal point of where the Ascending Christ is looking is a dove. Above the dove a face weeps. It might be an angel, it might be the one Jesus called his father. It looks like Dali's wife Gala, though. And the face is crying. Grieving.

Grief is as good a segue as any into how I want to think about the presence of God in the material world, and what I think Glory is all about. I've been thinking about the baptism of Jesus, with the voice of God above, a Son below, and a dove between them. I'll repeat that - God above, a Son below, and a dove between them. As we're wondering what it means let me see if I can stimulate your imagination with a related set of images. One of the most common places that doves show up in the ancient world is not in texts at all, but rather sculptures. Specifically, they appear in all manner of relief sculptures on funerary monuments and on the lids and sides of sarcophagi, carved coffins, essentially. Some of the best preserved and most visually interesting are from around the fourth century BCE in Greece, though their history runs before and after that, even into the time Luke was writing, and beyond Greece to Rome and even Persia. Have a look at some examples.

On the left is a relief sculpture on a grave memorial. It shows a father named Philokles giving a dove to his deceased son Dikaios. We don't know very much about them except what can be surmised from the carving itself, which is from Athens around 410 BCE. The inscription merely says that Dikaios died and that his father wished to honor and remember him. The memorial stele on the right, from the city of Vari around 400 BCE depicts an older sister and her younger

brother, both children. Her name was Mnesagora and her brother was Nikochares. Again we don't know much about what happened, but the inscription tells us that they were two "whom the doom of death snatched away." Perhaps they died in the same accident, or from the same disease. Our attention focuses on the dove, I think. The boy is reaching for it, not for his sister, and his not quite being able to grasp it give the scene its tension. If I were the father of these children this image would perhaps bring some comfort in being reminded of whom I had lost, but it is also unsettling, and unsettled.

The Athenian grave stele on the left from about 375 BCE depicts a woman named Chairestrate extending a dove to her son Lysandros. We don't know how Lysandros died, but this sculpture is on his family's grave. A similar scene is shown on the right in this earlier, 5th century BCE grave stele from Piraeus, near Athens. Here we have a man named Euempolos, seated on a chair, extending a dove to his two children. The somewhat older daughter, on the left, stands to the side as her younger brother reaches out to grasp the dove but can't quite reach it.

Here is a heartbreaking example, on the left, of a grandmother holding a dead child. The grandmother's name was Ampharete, and this is her tomb. The epigram reads "It is my daughter's child that I hold here with love, the one whom I held on my lap while in life ... and now (still) hold, dead as I am dead."

A slightly newer and more complex version on the right comes from the mid 4th century BCE in the stele of Archestrate, found at Markopoulo (yes that's its actual name) in Attica. Archestrate is depicted seated, to the right of the stele. With her right hand she seems to be taking a jewel from the pyxis (or trinket box) presented to her by a young woman. Standing next to her feet, her young daughter looks affectionately at her mother, holding a bird in her right hand. This is a bit different than other examples I've shown you because the child has the dove here, but this is the grave stele of the mother, not the daughter.

I don't mean to imply that the form was fixed, or that some versions should be regarded as aberrations and others true exemplars. I'm not even necessarily arguing that the author of the gospel of Luke was thinking of this tradition when writing about the dove descending, even though there would likely have been plenty around for him to see. But I must say since discovering the possibility of this new interpretation of the baptism and ascension of Jesus a while ago I am convinced there's something to it. The Bible has been so closely read for so long that anything truly new said about it is probably wrong. But so far I'm sticking to my guns.

Let's stay associative, rather than causal, in interpreting the text, for now. We have a tradition of a dove separating a parent from a child, in a way that foregrounds tension and drama. The context of these depictions is a grave. You go to a grave to remember. You miss your child, grieve his loss. You want him back, and seek to regain that presence. You can, but only partially. He is called to mind, but in a way that pains as well as comforts.

Read again this passage from Luke 3: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What I am proposing is that we view this text as a kind of grave sculpture. It is not a letter of recommendation from father for son. (Along the lines of “I am well-pleased, so please do listen to him!”) It is not a sending of a helper for the ministry about to begin, though there is plenty of evidence to conceive of the Holy Spirit along such lines. It is the presence of God in Jesus that is simultaneously an absence. It is the calling to mind of a now-lost child. The dovetail joint works only when presence meets absence. This is how God is present in the man Jesus.

Another way of putting this is that I see Jesus as the glory of God. And that introduces our second key term today. “Glory” is how translators render the multi-faceted Greek term “doxa.” First some basics. If you were to simply look up the term in a dictionary of ancient Greek words you’d learn that doxa had to do with appearances. In rhetoric, doxa means opinion or estimation, a guess at what appeared to be true. That term contrasts with *episteme*, which is a firmer knowledge of what is true. In a related sense, then, doxa means reputation. I have never been to China, but I have heard of the glories of the timber-frame dovetails of the Forbidden City. That’s kind of how doxa comes to mean glory. It’s an open-ended word that is difficult to pin down.

Precisely this ambiguity helps explain a remarkable choice made by the translators of the Old Testament into Greek in the Septuagint. The translation in question is the Hebrew word “chavod.” Let me tell you about chavod. Chavod in Hebrew means something like heft, or weightiness. It is an earthy word to refer to something that is substantial, dense and difficult to ignore. It’s strange to think of this as “glory” because doesn’t glory mean “intangible”? Or fleeting? That’s the sense Bruce Springsteen gives it in *Glory Days*. Though it literally means “weight,” chavod and doxa can also be that I recognize your reputation, and thus give metaphorical “weight” to your words. Professor Warner recommended a particular chef’s knife to me. It’s heavy. When I hold it in my hand it feels gloriously significant. When I use it to cook I think of my friend. A few years ago I worked with some students at Beta Theta Pi to build a bench for their fraternity in honor of Evan Hansen who lost his life. I was able to find some lumber that had come from a 200 year old tree felled right on campus. The wood was amazing. It was a holy experience to work it into its shape, to talk about Evan, the deceased, as we did so, and to dedicate it to his memory. Glorious wood. It was almost like Evan was sort of, kind of there, but not quite. Glory is like that. It has an almost-but-not-quiterness to it.

A much more likely candidate to render “kavod” would have been the Greek word “kleos.” This is, for example, Homer’s word for glory. Its root meaning is “news” as in the news being told of a great military victory. If I hear the news about some event, it’s just the facts, ma’am, the yes or no of what happened. But reputation, doxa, implies that I’m being told something about someone, and I have to interpret it, choose whether to believe it. There’s subjectivity there in hearing about the glory of, say, the Wizard of Oz, or the future son-in-law you’re about to meet. It’s an absence-in-presence, or a presence with an absence. Moses repeatedly sees the Glory of the Lord, but never completely or directly. Therefore, doxa, not kleos.

This means that doxa shows the “instability of presence.” There is a temporariness, a fleetingness even of supposedly lasting things. And there is a surprising quality to this, as well. Doxa means that unexpected things can sizzle with glory as the presence of God animates them. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed said, in the year 381, that the holy spirit is worshipped and *glorified*.

Glorified. The Greek word is *συνδοξαζόμενον* (syndoxazomenon). Glory, in the understanding of Gregory of Nyssa and the church fathers whose thought lies behind that creed, thought that God glorified matter, that matter is infused with God's presence. Human experience thereof meant that the matter glorified God, showed the presence of God albeit with an absence.

Consider some biblical examples. In Exodus the theophanies, or appearances of God, are glorious things. Kavod Yahweh, the glory of Yahweh, refers to the burning bush in Exodus 3, and to the pillar of cloud in Exodus 13. Moses suffers from "heavy" mouth and arms (ex. 4:10 and 17:12), Pharaoh's *firmness* of heart (repeated six times) makes Israel's labor *heavy*. (Ex 5:9). Yahweh in response sends *heavy* plagues, so that he may be *glorified* over Pharaoh. The word *chavod* is used in all these cases.

The most fascinating passage on glory in Exodus is chapter 33, where we see what Luther called the *Deus nudus*, the naked deity. There we read,

“<sup>18</sup> Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” <sup>19</sup> And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you... But, you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”<sup>21</sup> And the LORD continued... <sup>22</sup>“while my glory passes by ...I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;<sup>23</sup> then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

Glory is necessarily material - bodied, even - but also there is concealment in the revelation. “Glory” is on a spectrum with real weight on one side and metaphorical weight on the other. In the Old Testament, *Chavod* is never used of idols, not even the weighty Baal statues or the golden calf. The Glory of the Lord is associated with intense, dense reality. Because the density or heft would overwhelm or threaten to crush those who sit in its presence, the glory of the lord is also a sign that suggests or calls to mind, but actually is not, the presence of God.

Now, even within the span of the writings of the New Testament you can see a shift in glory, away from material heft and toward metaphorical grandeur. But the early church brought back the material pole of reference, as well. When Irenaeus of Lyons writes (in a book against the anti-materialist Gnostics, by the way) that “the glory of God is the human being, fully alive,” he is continuing this important tradition.

I've been speaking mostly about the presence of God that contains echoes of an absence. We saw some visual examples of grave markers from the ancient world that lie behind some biblical texts. And physical objects like the tabernacle or a burning bush that display glory to Moses and us. Let's shift just a bit to one other important pairing - the glory of a radiant *face*. I think this lies behind the most important New Testament text about glory - the writing of Paul in 2 Corinthians. That famous text is: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

I will conclude this second dovetail by explaining what I think that verse means. The backstory:



In Exodus 34, Moses has been up on Sinai in the presence of God for quite some time. He has received the law. The law is written on tablets. Chiseled in stone, literally. But when Moses comes down the mountain, his face shone, radiated even. Here's the verse:

“Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face **shone** because he had been talking with God.”

You might not see the glory there, but you should; you can see the corresponding Septuagint text with **doxa** in bold.

Incidentally, Jerome, the famous translator of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin, botched this one. The Hebrew verb in question is *qaran*, meaning shone. But Jerome misread it as *qeren*, which means “horned.” So for a long time people thought Moses had horns, even Michelangelo. This sculpture is in San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, which only gets half a million visitors per year, so at least there aren't too many people who see his mistake.

Anyway, Moses's face radiates glory. God is present and absent in the dovetailed face of Moses. It's too much for the Israelites so Moses puts on a veil so as not to overwhelm them. This is what Paul is referring to in 2 Cor. 3. He says that “all of us, with unveiled faces, see the glory of the Lord, and are changed from one degree of glory to another.” Glory is cascading, for Paul; it's full in God, a bit less full in words about God, namely the gospel, a bit less full in the face of the one who has encountered the gospel, namely many of us.

The main instability in *doxa*, as I have been describing it, is material. But there is another level, too. *Doxa* is also temporal. The presence of God in the stuff of life may wax and wane, ebb and flow. It's related to time, then, as well as matter. *Doxa* as God-present-yet-absent in the *material* world is *visual*, and is always translated Glory. But *doxa* can also mean expectation. It is an openness to the future, a kind of hope, even. In 2 Cor 3:18, Paul is describing the eschatological fulfillment of human beings. Those who live in faith have a kind of hope, an eagerness: Changed from glory into glory, as the hymn goes. The change is from *doxa* as *expectation of the thing* into the *real thing itself*. Hope fulfilled. *Doxa* as expectation becomes *doxa* as presence-yet-absence, and that then becomes presence *simpliciter*. The Eastern Orthodox church has done a better job than most at holding these many senses together, and I have learned so much from their doxology.

Let's press pause on Paul and look at a text from about the same time period, also written in Greek. It's the novel *Callirrhoe*. Callirrhoe is a woman married to Chaeraes. He loves her, but jealous friends convince him she has been unfaithful. Cast out, Callirrhoe ends up being sold as a slave but then re-marries Dionysius, and quickly becomes legendary for her beauty. She eventually moves to the city of Miletus, whose residents were eager to see this near goddess when she gloriously came into town on a chariot.

“Her great fame (*kleos mega*) had spread all over Asia, and already the name of Callirrhoe had come to the attention of the Great King as one excelling even Ariadne and Leda. On this occasion, however, she surpassed all expectation (*tes doxes*). She appeared

dressed in black, her hair loose and her face was radiant: ... In fact not a single one there could withstand her dazzling beauty. Some turned their heads away as though the sun's rays shone into their eyes, and others actually knelt in homage; even children were affected. Mithridates, the governor of Caria, fell speechless to the ground like a man unexpectedly struck by a missile... she alone held every eye in thrall.”

The people of Miletus were anticipating her loveliness but were shocked and practically enslaved by the real thing. Her doxa as glory overwhelms doxa as expectation. It becomes in this non-biblical example a weapon, like the poor governor struck like a javelin-catcher. I repeat: Both doxas are a presence-yet-absence. Doxa as expectation is like hope. I only hope for something I don't have, of whose absence I am aware, often painfully aware, as in my hope for a Minnesota Vikings Super Bowl win before I die. Doxa as beauty or glory is also a presence in absence, but its visual axis seems to allow more presence, a deeper presence, a material presence.

I hope I have at least suggested some ways in which glory thus names a new way of thinking old thoughts. It is God present-yet-absent in the material world. It provides categories of thought beyond the being and non-being of ancient metaphysics, free of the criticisms of onto-theology leveled by Heidegger and his ilk, rescuing God from being banished to heaven as in some Thomistic schemes. It provides a way of understanding God in the ordinary world of our everyday experience, but it doesn't let us get too cozy with it. Glory is unstable, provisional, messy. Just like the world that displays it. And it involves *you*, especially your senses, and your wonder. Unlike the stable metaphysical categories I'm yelling at, if we want to put an “ooooh” in *ousia*, a “sigh” in Sein, a “haunt” in ontology, we should deal with glory.

### III. Dovetail as Consolation

Our third dovetail requires a bit of poetic license, for it actually refers to a short story by one of the most theologically sophisticated authors of the past century. The writer is John Updike, and the story is *Pigeon Feathers*. It tells the story of fourteen-year-old David Kern, a lightly fictionalized version of Updike himself. Young David has troubles as he moves from one small town in Pennsylvania to another. Unpacking some boxes, he picks up a book: volume 2 of H.G. Wells' four-volume work *The Outline of History*. Thumbing through its pages he comes across the atheist Wells' account of Jesus. David is shocked. Wells thought Jesus had been an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo, in a small outpost of the Roman Empire. By an accident impossible to reconstruct, he (written with a small “h”, horrifying the pious lad), survived his own crucifixion and probably died a few weeks later, around the time of the supposed Ascension. Some combination of fools and knaves then founded a religion on the strange event. Updike writes, “quoting” Wells, “The credulous imagination of the times retrospectively assigned miracles and supernatural pretensions to Jesus; a myth grew, and then a church, whose theology at most points was in direct contradiction of the simple, rather communistic teachings of the Galilean.”

Reading this plunges the sensitive, anxious boy into a crisis of faith that quickly becomes an intense fear of his own extinction. Walking in the dark to the outhouse, David was visited by a vision of death. He sees a hole in the ground, hears the shovels pour dirt on his face, and lies upright forever, until no one will remember him.

David keeps his crisis to himself, though he can barely breathe with how hard it is to suppress his dread. Finally at catechism class he musters the courage to ask his Lutheran minister, Reverend Dobson, about death, the soul, and the Resurrection of the body. “Where is this heaven?” he asks. Dobson replies, “It’s not really a ‘where.’” “So what is it?” “Well, David, you might think of Heaven like this: as the way the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him.”

This is, for someone like me, infuriatingly inadequate, made all the more so by the answer’s cuteness. It dodges a serious question, one of the questions truly worth asking, by offering a false consolation that encourages the one in crisis to simply not think too much about the hard stuff. Theology ought to refuse such cold comforts. And that is how I understand its contribution to the humanities, broadly conceived. It forces its students to go all the way to the ends of the lines of thought that both trouble and delight.

Theology has a contested relationship with the humanities. William Placher’s LaFollette lecture, “The Peasant’s Shoes and the Cross,” which I recommend wholeheartedly, was fully on this question of the method one follows in theology, and how that connects to but diverges from the liberal arts. He found the assignment so difficult he described his panic at having been asked to do it.

I think part of what I want to say is that theology requires the testing of limits. It encourages if not orders you to approach mysteries and to confront the uncomfortable things we need to talk about. What we need to talk about are the fundamental things in life. Presence and absence and the grief that comes with it. What we need to talk about are the things that make us wail in agony and beam with joy. In the play *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, the King’s wife Helen has been abducted. He throws himself onto his mattress and sees the indentation where Helen’s body used to lie, and cries out, “Alas for the house... and *the traces of a loving wife.*” My loving wife calls this indentation in a mattress a butt bucket, by the way. The absence calls Helen again to mind. Or take a happier example: Pliny the Younger’s wife Calpurnia loved letters from her husband so much she placed them inside the butt-bucket in their bed whenever she read them (*in vestigio meo colloces*, he said). Any of you who have experienced loss know this feeling well. A note in her handwriting that brings it all back. A car just like he used to drive going past. A photo of the happy family before the tragedy. If any of that speaks to you, you’re on the doorstep of theology.

I’ve been worried by many conversations I’ve had in recent years with multiple people, some students, who have shied away from asking these fundamental questions. That’s partly been because of a perception of self-fragility. Coming out of the pandemic with everything being necessarily tentative they say “Look, we already don’t know who or what you can trust, then why question things like God, authority, purpose. I don’t want to think about that.” There are also countless cultural forces at work that war against deep reflection, including relentless marketing and the availability of entertainment and comfort.

But one thing theology knows is that truth comes into relief better when there’s an absence, a sense of dread, even. Alfred North Whitehead said “religion happens when you recognize that something is not right.” I’m not encouraging anyone to go out and find your existential crisis, and I’m not criticizing anyone for whom a tough wrestling with young David’s pitch black hole in the ground would represent a real threat.

What I am saying is that there is a kind of consolation in store for those who are willing to follow theology all the way to the end of line. And in fact, David's story in "Pigeon Feathers" ends with the kind of consolation I am endorsing. His mother tries to comfort him by saying he should just be content with the amount of life he's given. "But, David, you have the evidence," she says. "Look out the window at the sun; at the fields."

"Mother, good grief. Don't you see"--he rasped away the roughness in his throat--"if when we die there's nothing, all your sun and fields and what not are all, ah, horror? It's just an ocean of horror."

Time passes and he has moments when his dread subsides. He goes to school and likes to be in large groups. "All those sexy, perfumed people, wisecracking, chewing gum, all of them doomed to die, but none of them noticing." (I like this kid.)

The story ends with a moving flourish. Pigeons have infested the barn, and his mother regrets that she must ask him to dispatch some with his Remington .22 rifle, a Christmas gift. The boy agrees. Wishing he didn't have to, he nonetheless shoots half a dozen, while three times that many fly away. And then he has the moment. Burying the pigeons he sees their feathers, their "dove-tail" if you'll permit my license. Updike writes,

"He had never seen a bird this close before. The feathers were more wonderful than dog's hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of the feather, and the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across the bird's body. He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. Yet these birds bred in the millions and were exterminated as pests."

David carefully buries them.

"One broadly banded in slate shades of blue, and on top of it another, mottled all over in rhythms of lilac and gray. The next was almost wholly white, but for a salmon glaze at its throat."

Then came a "slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, and he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever."

It's a lovely scene. Lovely to me at least, because the certainty that David has is not the kind of stable presence of an Answer that will forestall the need to ask more questions. Quite to the contrary, the consolation gives David the courage to continue asking the Question. It is enough of a Yes that he can withstand a lifetime of ambiguous Maybes in the million forms they can take.

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And so we have the dovetail as a joint with intersecting presence and absence. We have the dovetail as the glorious presence of God that includes within it an absence. And we have the dovetail as the consolation that buttresses grief, the solace that gives the strength to face loss. As the author of the fourth gospel says, much more could be written about these things, such that the world could not contain all the books it would require. I have necessarily skipped over a thousand subtleties I would like to explore. But my favorite thing about the Lafollette lecture is that the audience doesn't have a chance to embarrass the speaker by pointing out their crudeness and omissions. Instead it just ends with a Thank You from a humbled speaker grateful for the weighty task to try to speak to the humanities today. So all I can say, in full humility, is Thank You.