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Reviewing *Shadow & Light*

Shadow & Light: Literature and the Life of Faith, Third Edition
 Eds. Darryl Tippens, Jeanne Murray Walker, and Stephen Weathers
 ACU Press: Abilene, Copyright 2013, 558 pages.
 ISBN 0-8911-2070. \$29.90

by

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Teachers of composition and literature at Christian schools often feel the need to find literary anthologies that avoid the faddishness of many designed for freshman composition, some that will confront the students with questions of traditional significance—the meaning of life and faith, the worth of beauty, the validity of questioning and doubt—as well as literature that trains the students in critical reading appropriate to the selections’ historical contexts and genres. The relevance of the readings to contemporary issues, such as creation care and race, needs also to be made apparent to the students.

Darryl Tippens, Jean Murray Walker, and Stephen Weathers have taken these matters as a challenge resulting in their excellent anthology, *Shadow & Light*, now in its third edition. As its title indicates, this work centers on the spiritual quest, a quest that may involve the shadows of mystery, doubt, and struggle, but which can result in the light of a fulfilling spiritual quest. As the editors say in the Preface to the Third Edition, “[t]he works in this volume offer many different approaches to spiritual questing, but they all involve reading.” Reading is emphasized because the editors believe that we are now caught up in a consuming electronic environment, flooded with entertainment and information that is easily accessed, but cannot be easily assessed, much of which is of dubious quality or validity, often sensationalistic and divisive, and almost always distracting—destructive of reflective, meditative, thought.

The readings they present in this work cause students to encounter imaginatively the faith of those who comprise the religious vision of the Western literary tradition—from the lyrics of the Middle Ages to the spiritual questing of contemporary essayists, fiction writers, and poets. The selections are not always, perhaps not even usually, explicitly religious, but, in keeping with an incarnational faith, they show the holiness of ordinary life. Thomas Howard, in his essay “Mimesis and Incarnation,” contrasts the rich realism of the Dutch artist Vermeer to that of contemporary artists who, like the surrealists, seek “on the one hand, increasingly peculiar images, and those [pop artists and naturalists] who on the other, insist flatly on the nothingness but inevitability of what is at hand (hamburgers and rubber tires). Howard, defending Incarnational art that reflects holiness in the ordinary, said of Vermeer’s, “in contrast to the former, Vermeer found luminescence and sublimity in a room corner; against the latter, he found luminescence and sublimity in a room corner.”

The scope of *Shadow & Light* is impressive and well fulfills its purpose. It contains 27 lyric poems from the 14th through the 17th centuries, including five sonnets by Shakespeare, three by Donne, five by Milton; it has classic religious poems by George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and, surprisingly, one by the American Puritan poet, Edward Taylor. But it also highlights significant

contemporary Christian poets: Richard Wilbur, Denise Levertov, W. H. Auden, Geoffrey Hill, Wendell Berry, Walter McDonald, Jeanne Murray Walker, Dana Gioia, Joy Harjo, and Scott Cairns, among others. These poets, no doubt, are new voices to many students, but they represent the strong presence of faith in modern poetry. Similarly, non-fiction prose writers represent the excellence of the English and American prose tradition, from writers such as John Bunyan, Samuel Johnson, John Henry Newman, and Henry David Thoreau, to significant voices of the 20th and 21st centuries—Langston Hughes, Thomas Merton, Flannery O’Connor, Frederick Buechner, and Annie Dillard. Fiction writers range from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Leo Tolstoy to Willa Cather, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Bernard Malamud, Shusako Endo, Flannery O’Connor, Alice Munro, John Updike, and Alice Walker—really among the finest writers of the modern short story, with voices ranging from American and Canada to Russia and Japan.

The scope and quality of these works provide an education to Christian students in the beauty, richness, and complexity of their spiritual and artistic heritage and introduce non-religious students to a sense of what may lie behind their own spiritual longings. Particularly to be admired here is the inclusion of little known or even controversial works. Endo’s tale of martyrdom of 17th century Japanese Christians, as told by a 20th century tourist who sees in their courage and faith an ironic contrast to his own timidity, provides a window to a world far from our own, but a world where persons of faith suffered and persevered, even to death. The narrator’s voice effectively becomes the reader’s voice in this remarkable story. And students learn that this story was so haunting to Endo that he developed it into his brilliant novel *Silence* (1966).

The organization of the book, separating the genres of non-fiction, fiction, and poetry (drama has been dropped from this 3rd edition) may work against its usefulness as a text for a composition class, although alternate thematic schemes for the content are given at the back of the book. A primarily thematic organization would be easier for students to find source ideas for their own compositions. The two readers prepared by editors from Oral Roberts University, *Strategies* for the COMP 102 class and *Encounters* for the junior level COMP 303 class, present closely related works, a mix of essays, stories, and poems, focusing on important issues for contemporary Christian students. We included different viewpoints and different genres—revealing strategies for ideas, emotions, and information to present a broad approach to a subject. For instance, in the section on ecology, the editors began with the seminal essay by Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” followed by answering essays by Wendell Berry, Steven Bouma-Prediger, and Eastern Orthodox scholar Vincent Rossi. These essays were augmented by St. Francis’ psalm “The Canticle of Brother Sun,” Aldo Leopold’s classic essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” and Leslie Marmon Silko’s account of Native-American sense of the land in her essay “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination.” Two haunting poems by W. H. Merwin follow this theme, showing students how poetry can bear on important current issues. While *Shadow & Light* certainly could be used in a composition course, it would be demanding, even with the alternative thematic contents listings, to pull together works that would present a theme, suggest a thesis, accommodate different arguments, and bring the richness of several genres to bear on it.

The most appropriate use this book would be in a course in religion and literature or in a seminar course in Christian literature. The Blanche Seaver Professor of Humanities at Pepperdine University, Paul J. Contino expresses this clearly in a cover comment on the review copy of *Shadow & Light*: “I have used *Shadow & Light* for my course “Religion and Literature”—and intend to do

so again. It richly represents the ways in which gleams of grace can be discerned in poetry and prose over the ages. I know of no anthology like this one, and highly recommend it.

We agree. The readings are of the highest literary quality, they provoke responses—thoughtful responses—to relevant questions of the spiritual quest, and they give students a broad and deep sense of their faith heritage, a sense they can turn to as they consider their current culture and its issues.

References

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Dr. William Epperson earned his B.A. from Eastern New Mexico University (1960) and his M.A. (1963) and Ph.D. (1965) from the University of Kansas. He has continued his literary studies by participating in three NEH Summer Seminars and lecturing in Istanbul, Turkey; Beijing, Kunming, and Chongqing, China; and Pusan, Korea. He spent the academic year 1989-1990 in South Korea, at Pusan National University, on a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship. He can be reached at wepperson@oru.edu.

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