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The Tennessee Highway Death Chant

Letter to the Editor, Monday, August 22, 1979

An editorial in last week's paper made a call to arms to dispel the local youth from the waters of the Hiwassee River. In response, I would like to venture the following remarks.

The article went great lengths to develop an image of the river as corruptor of youth. It is on the banks of the Hiwassee that our young people fornicate and frolic. The low-running brambles, rambling thickets, thorny underbrush and tall swaying cattail hide our youth from the watchful eyes of the responsible adult world. Those passing along on the nearby highway cannot know that this river bank has become a spawning ground for miscreants. Last week's editorial was rather vocal about the sexual misdeeds occurring there, and we readers were, with adept writerly allusion, encouraged to imagine a number of colorful offenses: drinking, drug using, Satan worshipping and so forth. Specific reference

The Tennessee Highway Death Chant will be available in August, 2016

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How to assemble a featherproof mini-book

Keegan Jennings Goodman grew up in the Ozark Mountains, went to college in New York, then art school in Chicago, and now lives in Toronto, where he is working on a dissertation about the French philosopher Georges Bataille. Though reclusive, he has left a deep impression in the arts communities of each of these cities.

The author of the editorial seems to want it both ways. As I have said, he conjures an image of a river that has corrupted the youth, yet he reaches the heights of his powers of articulation when he lays the blame for the river's corruption upon the youth

The force of this phrase, with its expert shift to metaphor, was nearly convincing on first glance. But then I wondered—which is the corrupting element? The youth or the river? Is the river defiled by the children? Or is it the other way around—are the children being somehow defiled by the river?

“Our Jordan,” he wrote, “has become defiled by turning a phrase that has stuck with me ever since: anonymous editorialist perfected such a flourish, hand of the righteously indignant, and last week's recognizable flourishes of the pen that belong to reach ungodly speeds. There are indeed certain and driven by kids with enough foolishness for both was made to cars equipped with enough horsepower

themselves. Perhaps the author imagines a process of mutual defilement by which the presence of one exacerbates the defilement of the other. Perhaps—though I do have my doubts.

We may also take as granted that the author of the editorial knows that the River Jordan has since Biblical times been and continues to be a filthy river. What the author is inclined to call filth but I am inclined to call sediment is common to both the Jordan of scripture and the Hiwassee of our valley and does not therefore constitute a meaningful point of contrast.

Why, then, was the comparison made? I believe the image of the River Jordan was invoked less for the quality of its water than for the quality—and convenience—of its metaphorical thrust, as well as for the hold it has over the good Christian imagination of the readership of this newspaper.

The River Jordan stakes its claim in the believer's

We who are concerned for our youth would be wise to allow them the requisite time for making that trip across the Hiwassee, from the wildness of callow childhood to the civilized regions of responsible adulthood, which, although fraught with hardship, will not be achieved without the proper patience. It took Naman seven dips down into those waters. We would be remiss to have pulled him out after only six.

over into promise. as a baby's, his soul as joyous as one who had crossed into those waters he became clean, his skin as smooth went anyway, obediently, and when he dipped down instead all he was told to do was go take a bath. He

through it we cross from corporeal life to heavenly life. So, too, is our Hiwassee a threshold; to cross it is, perhaps, to cross from youth into adulthood.

And why should we not expect these frolickers to get a little wet in the transition? Why wouldn't they get a little dirt on their clothes, mud on their nightgowns, blood on their boots in the process of crossing such a fateful threshold? Why should we not expect that these adventurers will get lost every once in a while, in the intoxicating revelries of whiskey or rock and roll? Perhaps they will drink into themselves a healthy fear of the Lord. Perhaps they will find their purpose in the arms of a woman, or in the lines of some heartsick country song.

Need I remind my readers that Naman, that old Syrian leper, was instructed to bathe in the River Jordan seven, count them, seven times? He had doubted from the start the power of those waters, and when he received his instructions from heaven, he started to walk away “in rage.” He had expected the thrill and

The comparison, then, of “our own Jordan,” the majestic Hiwassee, to the Biblical Jordan is not so ill-conceived. We have the advantage of being able to walk its banks and verify the coherence of the metaphor, playing witness to its figurative power as a watery threshold. Whatever sanctity to which it River Jordan in our collective imagination.

mind as a solemn symbol of the promise of salvation. We see it at once as an vague token of liminal terrain and a fluvial avatar of hope. It marks the transition from this familiar world, wherein the soul is shackled to its bodily form, to a better world wherein the soul becomes joyously liberated from its material burden. It is inseparably connected with the notion of passing over and with the corresponding realization of the promised land. To cross the River Jordan is to cross from a life of toil to life eternal. To meditate on the meaning of the River Jordan is to meditate on the threshold nature of death, death as a transformative experience rather than as a terminus. This current, I believe, is responsible for the figurative weight of the River Jordan in our collective imagination.

lays claim is not compromised by the sin that occurs upon its banks. No, that sin is the precondition for the cleansing force of the river. But before we call what happens down there sinful, let us pause and actually take a look to see with our own eyes that which some among us are so eager to condemn.

If we were to visit the river bank, say, some late Friday night, we would encounter, first, a number of vehicles parked haphazard just off the shoulder of the highway. From these vehicles—pick-up trucks, sedans and coups passed down from parents to teens and therefore dented, bruised and battered, but also cared for in a way first loves might care for the momentos that remain even when love has long faded—will emanate the abrasive and insistent cadences of rock and roll music, country tunes telling of unsavory characters running from the law, pursuing love and drinking away heartbreak. If we stop and take the scene in, we might catch the faint scent of marijuana smoke and will certainly smell whiskey in the night air. There will be peels of laughter, tough talk, voluble

In short, what we have before us, what has gathered at the river, is a demonstration of youth in all its rough and clumsy dismay. Our Hiwassee seems to me a site for the dramas of our adolescents to play themselves out as they will. The River Jordan is a threshold;

or home, but no more indicative of the need for love, pleasure and beauty as our own. What is the chief difference between an insult adorning a young drunk girl's mouth and an insult hurled from wife to husband? In youth, a curse can strike us with the astonishment of an unexpected ornament; in adulthood, a curse strikes out at us with a venomous tongue. And what is the difference between a promise of love between two intoxicated eighteen year-old kids and a vacant-eyed exchange of love repeated nightly, mechanically between a husband and wife for years? The youth draws near with a promise, while the worn-out spousal couple uses that very same promise to shield themselves from the realization of the unbridgeable distances and irremediable terms of their mutual isolation.

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curses, easy promises—in short, the whole panoply of linguistic tools a youth calls upon in the grip of teenage excitement. If we listen closely, we might also hear splashing in the water, where two young lovers have decided to disrobe and go for a swim. Beyond the purlieu of the illuminating headlights, we might find two kids embracing in the woods, or the noisy steps of a kid in the brush who, having had too much to drink, staggers off to find a place to relieve himself or vomit.

And insofar as this is true, it is all certainly objectionable. But there is a way to temper objection with a little understanding. The magnanimous listener hears more than the sententious gavel, and so too might we address this problem with something other than condemnation. We may, in fact, hear the conflicts, injustices and minor triumphs of our own adult world translated into the language of youth. We might hear in these revelrous voices a more pristine likeness of our own verbal mishaps and indelicacies, distorted, as they are, by the complexities of work