"WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF IT?" EVERYDAY HERMENEUTICS ---- ELLIOTT #2040

Hermes-Mercury got to carry messages from heaven to earth and, in the sense that his name is in the Greek word for what the Romans called interpretation, viz, "herme"neutics, he's still at message-carrying, now between (1) something "out there" and something "in here" that prompts us human beings to make sense of what's "out there," and (2) one message-bearing human being and, (3) through a symbol, usu. words, (4) some receiving-symbol in another human being (the encoding-decoding process). This thinksheet's title speaks of all this as "everyday" because (1) everybody's doing it every day and (2) everybody can understand it even though technicians (linguistic philosophers, structuralists, psycholinguists, deconstructionists, et al) make it all sound forbiddingly byzantine....One premise of this thinksheet is that as we increase our awareness and knowledge of what Hermes is up to, we increase also our freedom, our inner riches, our peace, and our joy. Another is that this skill improvement increases our ability to understand others, to help them understand us and others, and to make better use of--and help others make better use of--the human heritage of literature & artifacts. And finally, the skill is transportable, transposable, extrapolable: eg, becoming a better Bible interpreter (which has been my central professional interest in hermeneutics) makes me also a better interpreter of everthing else, a significant side-benefit of Bible study we ought to use more in persuading to Bible study....Here now are some pitfalls, pratfalls, and propositions on everyday hermeneutics:

1. A common invitative question to you to become an instant hermeneut is "What do you make of it?" It may be a puzzle or what used to be called a "prodigy," ie, something prodigious (from Latin for "omen," "monster"), portentous (bearing the mysterious freight of an oracle), so extraordinary as to be frighteningly mystifying and seemingly inexplicable--eg, a burning bush that isn't burning up (Ex.3, the birth-event of Mosaic religion) or somebody who doesn't stay dead (Easter, the birth-event of Christianity). Something confronts us that defies our everyday categories for netting "meaning," for making "sense." Such "miracles" (for this is one aspect of "miracle") are, if we have eyes (child eyes, of the child of the past within us) to see them.

2. The sense of size is important for hermeneutics. Science docu-television every day offers shocking confrontation with the outlandishly large and the infinitesimally small. Sometimes we feel that something huge has gotten ahold of us (one perception common in the mystical experiencing of God), sometimes we know we've gotten ahold of something huge --as our gross-beloved Viking Hagar here is about to discover. His half-wit companion gives us many laughs by obeying his master's commands literally, as here: in box #2 we see what the servant sees (but we don't) in box #1, so we know there wasn't any point to the servant's handing Hagar the net, either net. They both have a whale of a problem, viz, a whale, and their ordinary categories (nets) are ludicrously useless.

The media were in the same boat as our two cartoon character when the shuttle "Challenger" instantly disintegrated. To make a living, media

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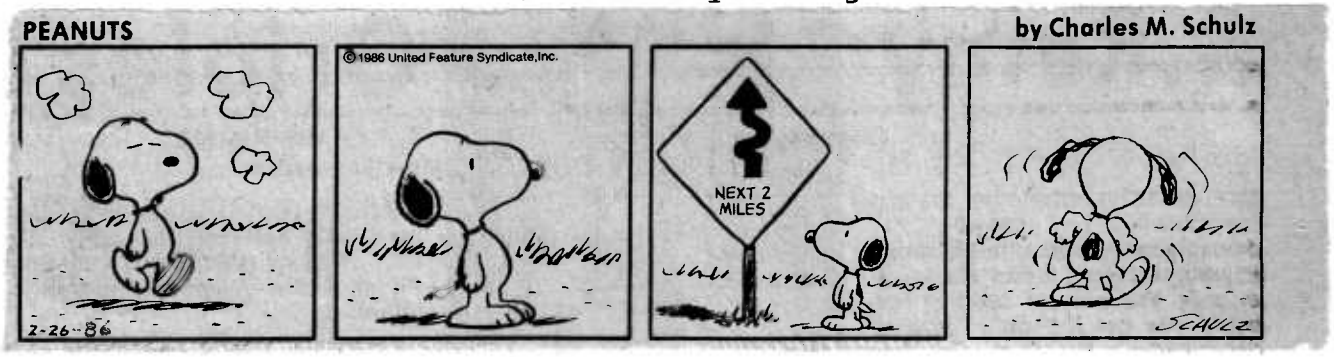
personnel had to keep talking and interviewing and publishing, but it was all so feeble, awkward, inadequate, especially in a culture that's largely lost (except in some departments of some of the arts) the dimension of depth. Next day at the UN I was with Father Luis Dolan, executive of Movement for a Better World (200 centers around the world), and saw on his wall a poster bearing the familiar prayer of Portuguese (or what have you: various attributions!) fishmen: "O Lord, your sea is so big and my boat is so small." I troped it to apply to the Challenger tragedy as our common human tragedy: "O Lord, your sky is so big and our airship is so small."

3. We saw literalism in Hagar's companion, and Snoopy here is an even more laughable case. The cartoon is a pun on the word "way" (though it is also other things): The sign says the way, ie, road, is twisty ahead. Snoopy reads it as that the "way" he should proceed is by doing the shimmy (the name of a 1920s dance, in case you forgot or never heard of it)!



4. Our brains are like a forest, and the more we use them the denser the forest and the more the branches (dendrites) touch each other--the consequent electron-flow rising into consciousness as "connection-making" or "That makes sense!" (Forgive my neurophysiological shorthand; the reality, as we are rapidly coming to know it, is prodigious, awesome, God-praising for those who lean daily toward praising God.) Sometimes, because of ignorance, humans fail to make the profounder connections:

Letters

CCT 3 Oct 85

'Gloria' editorial fulfills prediction

Your Sept. 28 lead editorial astonishes me by its fulfillment of Kierkegaard's prediction a century and a half ago that religion in the West would deteriorate into esthetics. Devotion to God would degenerate into devotion to art.

Variously, we Cape Codders thank God or some goddess or nobody in particular or nothing (i.e., are just plain thankful) that "Gloria" didn't do us in. The media had us revved up for disaster, and we had the pleasure of the old adage that "Most of the things we worry about don't materialize."

But to your curious editorial:

Reaching for an analogous meaning of "gloria," you hit upon painting. As I've been a sometime hobby-painter for a half-century, you could have done worse. Yet, I can't refrain from commenting that your analogy represents a curious cultural aberration.

Not to attend church or synagogue regularly is, please face it, a cultural aberration. I speak of our civilization's culture, the culture of "the West": if none of the editorialist's friends is a regular worshiper in church or synagogue, that whole subculture is aberrant. And wouldn't one expect an editorial to represent the culture rather than some subculture?

To come at this from another angle, why is "gloria" "a word used by artists to mean the representation of a dazzling light bursting forth from the heavens?" Because the lexicon of art derives the word from the lexicon of religion. Churchgoers know that "gloria" is primarily a reference to God, not to light or painting or anything else. We sing "praise" (Latin, "gloria") to the Holy Trinity in the "Gloria Patri" if we are Christians, and Jews have the divine reference also when they use the word "gloria."

The secondary meaning of "gloria" in our culture is, again, not art, but an arrogant human display in defiance of God, whose "glory" is our culture's primary reference. For example, the admonitory formula in papal procession — "Sic transit gloria mundi" "Thus passes the glory of the world" — is an ironic reference to the fact that we strutting humans are no more than ludicrous grasshoppers in comparison with the glory of God, who alone can effect our salvation, peace and joy.

"Gloria," the hurricane, reminded us of our smallness before forces we cannot control. Sad that your editorial missed the implicit profundity.

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