

## *Making and Breaking: Art, Hospitality, and Eucharist*

*Bruce Herman*

*Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College*

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*Good evening.*

*It's an honor and a pleasure to be invited to speak at the Boisi Center. Thanks to Suzanne Hevelone for extending the welcome. In a way, the very fact of her invitation is a partial source of topic for my talk. Inviting artists to speak publicly is always a bit of a risk – after all fine rhetoric is not our specialty. Images are. Music is. And even in the case of poetry, the rhetoric breaks open and spills multivalence—words sometimes so fully broken that we barely grasp their meanings. Art is not straightforward—it is “slant” as Dickinson styled it. And artists of all sorts are (or should be) slant strangers in academe—and yet we are always being invited in to display our strange wares. We are a bit like the *mearcstapa* in Middle English, the outlier and border-stalker who is not quite trustworthy in the china shop—who brings news of difference and foreignness—even monstrousness. But the hospitality of academia is legendary—and in fact it is an academic text that has been a major source of inspiration to me as a painter: *Real Presences* by the essayist and literary critic George Steiner. In that book Steiner spends well over fifty pages discussing intellectual hospitality—the *cortesía* of mental welcome that one must extend to a text or a work of art in order to receive the real presences offered in it. C. S. Lewis also wrote an scholarly book on this topic – *Experiment in Criticism* – in which the Oxford don explores the necessity of “submission” to the text, the willingness to open oneself to being affected or changed by a work of art—not necessarily always for the better.*

*But isn't that the risk of literal hospitality to strangers?*

*One invites them over the threshold of one's place of being and dwelling and risks being changed by the encounter. News from foreign climes. Opinions and ideas that might challenge one's dearest held beliefs—or even one's grasp of reality. When the stranger is invited into one's intimate dwelling there is always the possibility of danger. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews admonishes us, “And do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by so doing some have entertained angels unawares.” And as the poet Rilke*

*says in the first of his Duino Elegies, “Every angel is terrifying.” That’s where I begin this evening. You’ve invited me, a painter, into a prestigious academic house—a center for religion and American public life. I’m not an angel, but if I do my job right as an artist I will bring a bit of trouble, a little danger to the conversation. We can sort it out in the time afterwards where we get to interact a bit.*

*I’ll state my thought plainly up front—but then comes the trouble. Here it is: Art making requires destructive urges and actions as much as it ever calls for creativity—and in fact it is just possible that no good art can be made apart from that destruction. There is a word for this coined by J. R. R. Tolkien: *Eucatastrophe*. It is simply defined as an extraordinary literary trope that allows resolution of a crisis in the narrative—by means of the positive result distilled from that very crisis itself—distinguishable from a *deus ex machina* by the very fact that the *problem itself becomes the solution*. The Cross of Christ is the ultimate “good” catastrophe. The only truly innocent man who ever lived is brutally executed on trumped-up charges by the people he came to serve and save—and that travesty of justice ends up being the very means by which the people are indeed saved, albeit saved from something they were barely even aware of—their own sin and its consequences (not the Roman Empire). Like them, we are short sighted—wanting to be saved from the external enemies and blissfully unaware of the much more deadly inner enemies. But Christ, in the ultimate *Eucatastrophe* defeats the ultimate enemy.*

*Christ defeats death by dying—and not just your average death—his is the most monstrous death, and an utterly unjust death. And here is the *Eucatastrophe*: the only human ever born who didn’t deserve to die, dies in our place—dies an ignominious, terrible death by suffocation and agony on a Roman execution machine. He breaks the machine of death by climbing onto the machine and disabling it from the inside. This the kind of destruction that brings life. It is the good catastrophe, where breaking allows re-making.*

*You’ve all heard of Murphy’s Law: if anything can go wrong, it will. But most don’t realize that Murphy composed no less than twenty-five of these pithy “laws” – the last of them is the very best one by my lights: *if everything has gone well, it would have been better if it hadn’t*. And this is the heart of my talk tonight. The breaking is as important as the making*

*in the birthing of a work of art. And the connection to hospitality can be clarified by looking at a practice that dates from ancient Greece. (SLIDE: tessera hospitalis)*

*The Greek word *symbolon* is the source of our word “symbol” which we use to refer to an image or sign or object or word that contains a certain fullness of meaning—an excess of meaning, if you will. The original meaning in the Greek was connected to a little token—a *tessera hospitalis*—literally a token of welcome. This thumb-sized tile would be presented as a stranger or newcomer was invited as a guest in one’s home. Words were spoken on the occasion such as, “Henceforth you and anyone with whom you share this tile will be welcomed in my place of dwelling.” The tile was then broken in half and the householder would keep one of the pieces and offer the other to the guest. The fitting together of the broken tile was the proof of the trust engendered in the act of welcome.*

*Interesting isn’t it—that an overflowing sense of meaning, a symbol, would have its origin in a broken token that established trust between strangers in the context of extended hospitality? The quick interpretation is obvious: no shared meaning without sacrifice, without breaking something (or Someone). The ritual welcome of the *symbolon* being broken just as the stranger enters is, in a poetic sense, the reversal of the tradition of the scapegoat. As René Girard points out in numerous books, principally his seminal work *The Scapegoat*, there is at the heart of all cultures a need to find a hate symbol to cast our inner contradictions upon. Often it is the stranger, the culturally “other” whose difference is offensive or frightening. When the tribal unity is threatened by rivalry and internecine warring it becomes necessary to blame someone on the outside—to find and sacrifice the scapegoat and magically bring peace back to the tribe. The Nazi Holocaust is a particularly dramatic historic example, but it can actually distract us from the reality that this scapegoating is as common as our current election year ugliness and the xenophobia that is beginning to germinate around immigration. Fear of the stranger.*

*The scapegoat is the opposite of the welcomed stranger. Instead of breaking the tile of welcome when the stranger enters—laying out a sumptuous feast and killing the fatted calf of personal sacrifice to make the guest feel honored—the scapegoat becomes the sacrificial victim that brings peace back to the tribe. Instead of the welcome mat, the guillotine. This*

*principle is so obvious, so simple that it is very difficult to think about, much less articulate. And its connection to art and literature is a tangled and messy one. Its connection to religion is even messier—and even more interesting to me as an artist and provocateur. Yes. Artists are troublemakers. But I did warn you.*

*For clarity's sake let's rehearse this whole thing once more. Intellectual courtesy, *cortesia*, is a requirement for receptivity to a text or work of art. And Lewis is even more forceful in his requirement of submission to the text. You need to let down your guard to the stranger – in this case the text of work of art. You must risk being infected. Changed. There is no other way to receive the meanings of the text. If you refuse to submit and give in to the narrative, to allow yourself to swept along in the story, you will only get the most superficial aspects of that story or any work of art. You must entrust yourself to the artist or storyteller and be overcome by the image or music or poem or story or film. The symbol—that wonderful image of shared trust and meaning—originated, as I said, with a ritual breaking, a *sacrifice* in order to welcome the stranger into one's place of intimate being and dwelling. A truly astonishing example of this is the story of Abraham's mysterious three visitors at the Oaks of Mamre recounted in Genesis 18. This is the story that the writer of Hebrews is referring to in the admonition to offer hospitality to strangers who might end up being angels. (SLIDE: Rublev's *Trinity*)*

*The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.*

*Mysterious isn't it? "The Lord appeared to Abraham." And we are told that it is "three men standing nearby". Abraham and his wife Sarah rush to bake fine cakes and their servant slaughters and prepares a fatted calf to make sacrifice and provide food for the strangers. The Lord—mysteriously present in the three visitors—declares that He will return again at the same time next year and Sarah, barren for a lifetime, will conceive a son in her old age. She laughs at the prospect of pleasure with her hundred-year-old husband and at the proposed miracle of fecundity where there was barrenness. And the child born was to be named Isaac – son of laughter. This miraculous son is promised as the one through whom all*

*the nations of the world will be blessed—and he is same son that Abraham is called to sacrifice on the mount in the land of Moriah. “Take your son, your only son, the son whom you love—to a place in the land of Moriah that I will show you, and sacrifice him to me there.”*

*This extraordinary tale is loaded with all of the central motifs I’m laboring to clarify: costly hospitality, the risky welcome of the stranger, sacrifice and overcoming of the propensity for scapegoating, the Eucatastrophe of the Sacrifice of Isaac as foreshadowing of the Christ and his cross, etc. We know how the story ends. But Abraham was not so lucky. He was in the thick of the story as it unfolded—terrorized by the possibility of being required by God to give up the very person most prized—a son of promise through whom the entire human race was to be blessed. But note that Scripture interprets Scripture, and again the writer of Hebrews says,*

*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.”<sup>6</sup> Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*

*So Abraham was spared having to do the terrible thing of giving up his most precious son of promise—and as you know, a ram was caught in a thicket nearby and was sacrificed in place of Isaac.*

*Those of us who follow Jesus believe that he is the one that was prefigured in Isaac—yet unlike our father Abraham, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was not spared the ordeal, but indeed offered up his son, his only son, the son whom he loved. At the heart of the Gospel is this sacrifice, this breaking and loss. A costly hospitality. And in this case, the welcome is over the threshold of Being itself into the house and the table of God. God is also the holy food we partake. “Take eat, this is my body. Do this in remembrance of me. Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood of the new covenant.” And that covenant is the ultimate form of hospitality—where the costly thing broken is the host himself. What we call the “host” in the Eucharist is God himself, and God is our host at this holy banquet of His suffering.*

*The Eucharist is the ultimate Eucatastrophe. And it is the perfect broken symbol of welcome—where hospitality is the source of the final healing. It is no coincidence that the word hospital and hospitality share a common source. It is the willing risk of inviting the stranger over the threshold that brings healing. I will not try to unpack this completely, but suffice it to say that in our current cultural moment, where conflict over immigration, over the welcome of refugees, over religious otherness is a rising flood—this is a badly needed image: the broken symbol where the risk and trust of the welcomed stranger must be our posture.*

*But where have these considerations gotten us in our reflection on artistic process? How are the meaning-making enterprise of poetry, music, and art related to hospitality and to the costly breaking of the symbol? Well, I think I've begun to answer this in the very framing of the question. If there is no Eucatastrophe, no costly breaking, there is no meaning. And by extension, no art. If the work of art is to serve to bring together multivalent meanings, to serve as a symbol of layers and layers of emotion, memory, hope, fear, joy, anxiety, dreams, nightmares—if the poem or song are to infect us with the imagination of the artist, there must be costliness to the artist's process. If it is all clear sailing, I think we are talking about something other than art.*

*Propaganda maybe. Or illustration or didactic message-art or cheap thrills and sentimentality. But not authentic art. "If it costs me nothing, I will not make sacrifice unto the Lord," the poet King David declared to Araunah the Jebusite who tried to give the king his threshing floor on Mount Moriah for free. Amazingly that threshing floor was none other than the site thousands of years earlier of Abraham's obedient sacrifice of Isaac—and scholars and archeologists now believe it is likely the place just outside historic Jerusalem, the place of the skull—Golgotha—where the ultimate sacrifice took place. The same spot of terrible reckoning, where Abraham must be willing to pay the costly price of obedience—later becomes the place of David's sacrifice and ultimately the place where Christ, the son of David, is executed—cursed and hung upon a tree. The breaking of the original covenant would have necessitated the death of the people of Israel according to the traditions. But a*

*terrible surprise occurred: God dies in their place. God takes the punishment for the broken promises and Himself is broken.*

*But again, what bearing does all this have on the making of a work of art? Rather than attempting a verbal explanation, I will do what artists do—show you by playing a brief film clip of a work in progress that I am currently trying to bring to closure in the studio.*

*A brief description of the genesis of the project first: three years ago I was invited by Richard Hays, Dean of Duke University Divinity School to have an exhibition – a collaboration with my friends, painter Makoto Fujimura and composer Christopher Theofanidis, of our paintings and a musical score based upon T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. (A project, incidentally begun in conversation over a great meal hosted in New York by a generous patron!) Also at a dinner, the night of our performance and reception at Duke, Dean Hays sat next to me as we dined at his table. He leaned over and said, “Bruce—I’ve been following your work and we love having your QU4RTETS paintings here in Duke Chapel. But having looked over much of your work I don’t think you’ve ever painted the Resurrection. You have addressed Golgotha but not the empty tomb. Am I right?” I said, yes, he was right.*

*“Why?”*

*“Well, I don’t think I’ve ever really seen an image of that subject which has been at all convincing.”*

*“Hmm. Well maybe we will commission you to paint the resurrection!”*

*Two years later that is just what Duke Divinity School did – and I’ve been working on a mural sized site-specific painting for a little over eight months now, and will be traveling to Duke at the end of this coming week to begin an artist-in-residency there in order to complete the piece. The film clip I’m about to show reveals the genesis of the project up to the current moment— and it involves a certain studio catastrophe that I hope will end as Murphy’s law indicates.*

*“If all has gone well, it would have been better if it hadn’t.”*

**SHOW FILM CLIP (4 min. 15sec)**

*So you see from this little film, I think, that in the very act of demolition—the crisis point, as it were, of the creation of a work of art may become the very genesis point. The Eucatastrophe is the breaking point where the narrative is about to dissolve into chaos or misery or utter ruination and collapse—and yet at that very moment the Ring of Power must be destroyed, cast into the lake of fire at Mount Doom in the heart of Mordor—and from this ruin of the Ring-bearer himself (now mortally wounded) peace and hope returns to Middle Earth.*

*As Eliot says at the very end of *Four Quartets*,*

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, remembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
**A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)**  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
    And the fire and the rose are one.*

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*I will close with a small number of slides showing the QU4RTETS paintings and then we can have a time of interaction around some of the trouble I've caused this evening.  
Thank you.*