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The Unitarian Universalists: Style and Substance

'The Churches: Where from Here?' Series

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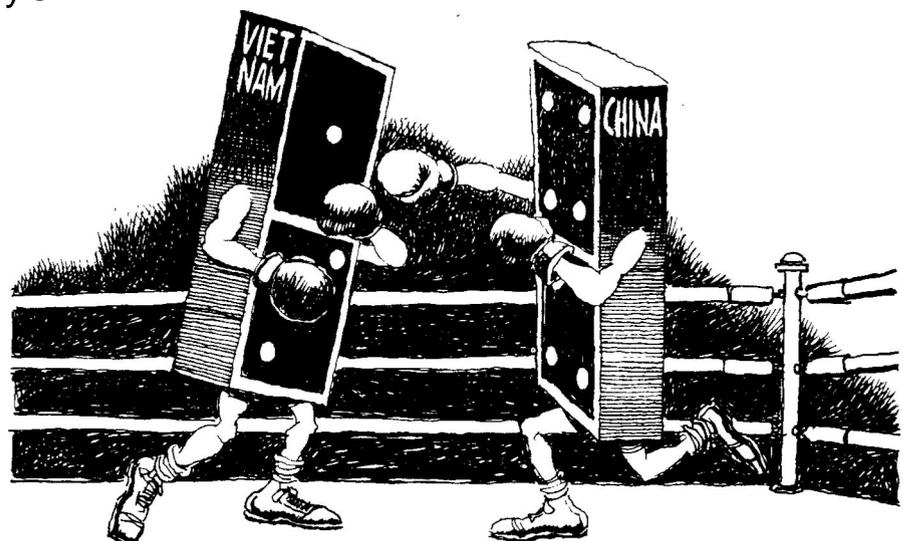
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The Unitarian Universalists: Style and Substance

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ROBERT B. TAPP

+ FOR CHURCH-WATCHERS, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) provides fascination. Formed in 1961 by a merger of Unitarians and Universalists, this relatively new denomination is small (its membership peaked at slightly above 200,000 during the bulge of the '60S); wealthy (43 per cent of its members earn more than \$25,000 a year); and highly educated (42 per cent of them have at least a master's degree).

During the decade of the '60S the UUA suffered a net membership loss of 4.4 per cent as compared to population growth. Much of this loss occurred in New England, where Unitarianism and Universalism had their origin; only in Canada did the growth rate exceed the rate of population increase. UU sermons and pamphlets fondly quote Thomas Jefferson's expectation that his young contemporaries would all be Unitarians before they died - a prophecy that was not to be fulfilled. In many ways the pattern of UU membership resembles that of the large main-line denominations. During 1969-74, for instance, giving to local churches increased 28 per cent while allocations by those same churches to the UUA fell by 32 per cent. These fiscal constraints have sharply cut denominational staff and services.

Stylistic Freedom, Homogenous Substance

The most striking fact about the denomination is that nine out of ten of its members are "converts," having grown up religiously somewhere else. Given the lack of membership growth, it is clear that UUA churches are in some sense "revolving doors." Most of the newcomers have left some kind of liberal Protestantism behind. What we do not know is where those who leave go next. My guess is that some have simply lost the need for communal support for their values. This surmise is based on reasonably solid data that members moved into their present value-belief orientations *before* joining the UUA and that their length of time in those churches does not measurably alter beliefs and values. A somewhat parallel explanation is that parents are most active in churches during their children's school

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years. Before and after that stage in the life cycle, people apparently feel less need for support groups.

In recent years UU spokespersons have described their movement in such phrases as "the fourth faith," "America's real religion" and "religious liberalism." Along with such sectarian labels, however, they have stressed their diversity. In 1975 then-president Robert Nelson West could say: "Some are theists, some nontheists; some consider themselves Christians, others non-Christians." E. M. Wilbur's history of Unitarianism summarizes the movement's thrust as "freedom, reason, toleration." More recently, Sidney Mead has written of "faith in democratic method."

If we are accurately to situate the UUA among America's religions, however, we must distinguish style from substance. The rhetorics I have cited are an important part of Unitarian and Universalist *style*, past and present. There is clearly a pride in being creedless, in having open membership. On the international scene, the UUA forms a major component of the International Association for Religious Freedom, along with European "free Christians," liberal Buddhists and Shintoists from Japan, and liberal Hindus.

We must not assume, however, that religious freedom necessarily generates religious diversity. There is considerable evidence that the UUA's very real stylistic freedom is presently accompanied by a homogenous substance of beliefs and values. Perceptions of diversity are relative, of course, and members are sensitive to nuances that tend to escape outside observers.

A Consensus of Values

Of this present substance, we can speak with some certainty. I conducted a major survey of UUs in 1966 which was partially replicated in 1976. Robert L. Miller surveyed the value orientations of a sizable sample in 1974, and the denominational newspaper conducted a more limited survey in 1978. Certain benchmarks and trends can be noted. In 1966, only 43 per cent of the UUs described their personal religion as "Christian," and this segment had dropped to 26 per cent by 1976. If we turn to the question of nonbelief in personal immortality, the consensus becomes more striking. On value

matters (sexual privatism, nondiscrimination, censorship), consensus is almost complete.

The 1976 survey identified ministers, directors of religious education and laypersons. Detailed analyses showed that there were almost no significant variations in the responses of these three groups. This consensus could be interpreted to reflect powerful socializing forces within UU churches or to indicate that the same kinds of persons are attracted to the pews, pulpits and classrooms of this denomination. I am satisfied that this latter is the case, since length of membership does not produce significant changes in responses.

The solidarity between members and professional leadership, coupled with the high degree of value homogeneity, points toward minimal conflict in goal-setting and goal-achieving. These factors also suggest that the intensive theological strife of earlier decades is over.

What do these UUs want from their local churches? Since this question was included in three successive surveys, the rank orderings afford some answers:

Rankings of emphases	1966	1976	1978
religious education	1	2	2
personal development	2	3	3
fellowship among members	3	1	1
social action	4	5	4
public worship	5	4	5

The continuing stress on the religious education of children makes sense: most of the members are new to this church, and to some extent they want their children to have what they, as children, did not have. But as the UU movement shifts "leftward" religiously, its members will more and more become a new "minority group." Like Quakers or Jews, they will feel strong needs to provide defensive islands for their youngsters.

More striking are the shifting responses regarding personal development, fellowship and social action. While the UUs are obviously part of the larger cultural scene and even to some extent share the ups and downs of the American religious scene, they often appear to march to "a different drummer." Their support for social action (measured by the percentage viewing it as "very important") has remained steady. During the '60s, when many denominations were moving toward social activism (at a high cost in terms of membership and contributions, as it turned out), the UUs were adding (almost prematurely) an emphasis on "personal development" to their activism. As other denominations retreated from activism to a more pietistic inwardness, the UUs were already feeling disenchantment with encounter, sensitivity and human potential movements. Most dramatically, they now seem to be increasing their emphasis on "fellowship," reflecting a new sort of in-group solidarity.



FIFTEENTH IN A SERIES

This kind of descriptive generalization can sometimes conceal as well as reveal. If we are to assess the uniqueness of the UUs, we need to move to more specific data and to an examination of actual experiences.

A Liberal Agenda

Let me try to describe, empirically, the UUNs social conscience. We can use 1977 evaluations of a number of action areas in order to predict denominational agendas. UUs were asked if each of several issues had, over the past five years, become "more" or "less" important or had remained "the same." Ranking highest in the survey were ecology, criminal-justice reform, mental health, freedom of expression, and Third World development. An expanded list would include family planning, resistance to totalitarianism, and women's liberation. This overall agenda would not differ from those of most liberal Protestant or Jewish groups - except in the high level of consensus, and in the fact that the most important religious goal for UUs is "a community for shared values" (rather than theology or personal growth or social change or experiences of transcendence).

These shared values can have only personal impact until they flow through group channels. The polity of the UUA is intensely congregational. In the phrase of the UUNs best-known social ethicist, James Luther Adams, these churches and this denomination are "voluntary associations." Given the absence of family, ethnic and regional ties, the free coming/staying/going of persons becomes even more salient. The central denomination can offer services (religious education and worship materials, the certification of clergy and religious education professionals). But local churches can (and sometimes do) decline the offer. No effective sanctions prevent any local church from calling and ordaining anyone to its ministry.

Denominational power in the most visible sense rests in a well-attended General Assembly that meets annually. The assembly delegates elect a board of trustees, a president (usually a minister), and a moderator (usually a layperson). The assembly can

also mandate policies, but actual expenditures must come from the board. This diffusion of powers can and does lead to unusual problems. Some of these will be evident as we turn to the actual business of the UUA in recent years.

Black and Gay Concerns

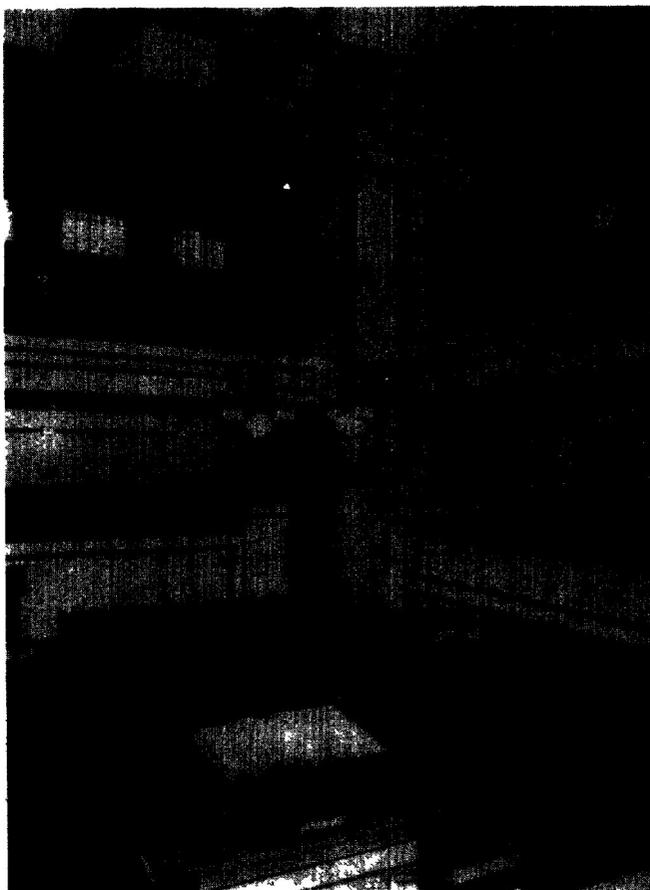
Black affairs. The Unitarians and Universalists have had a good track record in regard to civil rights (although most of their churches would have to be described as "open" rather than "integrated"). About one-third of all UU clergy went to Selma to march with Martin Luther King. This liberal consensus was sorely tested, however, by the emergence of a black caucus which was then challenged by an integrationist caucus. BAC (the Black Affairs Council) went before the 1968 General Assembly with a "black empowerment" program and a demand for \$4 million. BAC termed integration a failure and viewed as "patronizing" any provisions for white representation in the spending of these funds, or any fiscal accountability. BAC was opposed by BAWA (Black and White Action), which also wanted money but wanted an integrated group to spend it for integrating purposes. Here was a classic confrontation that produced the deepest division in decades. Compromise was ruled out by BAC's refusal to participate in any solution that would also fund BAWA.

The delegates voted exclusive funding for BAC - \$1 million to be distributed over four years. It remains impossible to assess the relative causal impacts of populism, white guilt, sharp ideological shifts and covert racism in this action. The board voted the first \$250,000 to BAC, and those churches that disagreed with the assembly action began reducing their denominational contributions. BAWA, since it was not being funded, was free to make independent solicitations (which BAC could no longer do).

Technically, the long-term commitment was moral rather than binding on future assemblies, and raising and disbursing funds was a board function. Faced with shrinking funds, the board recommended one year later that BAGs additional funding be spread over a four-year (instead of three-year) period. This proposal only intensified the divisions, leading to a delegate walkout at the 1969 assembly. The board voted \$200,000 to BAC (which was now selling bonds as an additional support for its programs). In 1970, BAC quit the UUA, the board dropped BAC from the budget, and the assembly recommended voluntary support.

In 1972, a seemingly feasible solution appeared. A fund controlled by a local church gave the board \$250,000 for "racial justice," and the money was allocated to BAC and BAWA.

The next year, however, a split emerged within BAC (to avoid confusion, we have retained this



Unity Temple (Unitarian Universalist) in Oark Park, Illinois, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

single designation to describe several actual groups with overlapping memberships). One side feared the emergence of a separate, non-UU, religious movement. The parties went to court, and eventually the funds went into receivership. By this time, \$630,000 from the UUA and \$250,000 from local churches had been raised. In 1977, a distribution plan for unspent assets (about 60 per cent) was implemented.

One result of this experience was a shift in denominational budgeting. There is now a "basis" budget which supports core staff and services and a "grants" budget for innovative purposes. The former is considerably insulated from assembly mandates. The problem, of course, is that this "rational" solution emerged only in the present inflationary period when any reserve for "grants" becomes highly vulnerable.

Gay concerns. A second area of UU activities relates to gay persons. In some ways this issue resembles that of black affairs. But even "tolerant" persons seem to be only minimally tolerant of their gay neighbors, and UUs are no exception. In 1973 the assembly mandated an Office of Gay Concerns. This action was opposed by the president, and funded by a board vote of only 12-11.

The problem here, we must note, was one of priority rather than of principle. Money problems threatened the UUA's social-action and responsibility

ity commitments; and an assembly mandate, while hard to resist, would probably transform such a fear into reality. There are gay UUs in ministry and seminary, and the moral-theological-principle issue that plagues other denominations simply could not arise within the UUA. The solution here was quicker and less divisive than that achieved with the black issue. There remains a staff position for gay concerns, now incorporated within an Office of Social Responsibility.

Other Agenda Areas

Sexuality. A 1973 multimedia education unit, *About Your Sexuality*, probably still represents the most comprehensive religious education contribution in this field. While the anticipated charges of "pornography" have dwindled, the unit is a landmark in helping young people understand and develop their own styles in sexuality. The UUs' religious marginality lets them view Catholic, Jewish and various Protestant positions as cultural factors rather than as norms; UDs support nonjudgmental terminology ("same-sex," "other-sex").

Marriage/divorce. Eighty per cent of UUs were married in 1966 but only 63-per cent by 1978. This radical shift suggests a very different set of religious needs and functions. While the number of never-married members has remained steady, the widowed have increased and the divorced have increased dramatically. An occasional "divorce ceremony" makes the news, and "singles' clubs" seem to be a standard UU function, but within the present denominational organization there is no way or place to reassess the meaning of this shift within the membership.

Religious education. Beginning in the 1930s, a flood of new curricular materials was produced by Beacon Press. This premerger cooperative venture of Unitarians and Universalists was guided by Sophia Lyon Fahs. While the philosophical spirit stemmed from John Dewey, the results somehow satisfied theists as well as humanists. Jesus' birth, for instance, was presented as an ancient "wonder story" along with similar accounts about Buddha and Lao-tse. The Jewish creation stories were set alongside speculations from India, North America and modern astronomy.

Recent expansions of curricular materials, in addition to the sexuality unit, have moved into situational ethics, cultural anthropology, and a very open exploration of biblical materials and works of religious experiences. Unfortunately we do not have long-term evaluations. In the most narrow sense, these materials, however excellent they might be, do not seem to have produced "church loyalty" in the two generations of young people who have grown up with them. But that judgment may be premature. These materials may well have exposed large numbers of children (and their parents) to the ideas and values of religious liberals. And they have

clearly pioneered directions for other denominations that share some of the UUs' pedagogical and ideological goals.

Women. The Universalists hold the honor of having ordained the first U.S. woman minister (1863). Since then both denominations have had a slightly better record than other churches in terms of women clerics and leaders. But this is not saying much, and certainly not saying enough in the current climate of transformed consciousness. The 1977 assembly mandated a Task Force for Women and Religion which may speed matters.

Publishing. The denomination's Beacon Press has a distinguished record in service to the intellectual community and in controversial publishing (from Paul Blanshard's *American Freedom and Catholic Power* to *The Pentagon Papers*). Beacon's religious, ethical and philosophical nurture has ranged far beyond parochial UU interests. Nevertheless, increasing denominational subsidies have been required, attempts to sell Beacon Press have been made, and its future now seems to depend on a much smaller, more strictly denominational effort.

Hymnody and worship. The definition of worship as "the celebration of life" was coined by Chicago's UU minister Von Ogden Vogt (who also guided the construction of a Gothic UU church freighted with symbolism but devoid of any traditional Christian symbols beyond the cruciform floor plan). Universalists and Unitarians have produced numerous hymnals showing that their problem was with words and ideas rather than singing. Kenneth Patton has been the most prolific UU poet/liturgist/hymn writer in recent years. In the current UU *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" appears with Patton's words "Man is the earth upright and proud." This is certainly not an intended parody, but the theological reversal is clear.

Vincent Silliman, reflecting on the 1963 hymnal in which he played a major role, recently described *It* as the first major liturgical attempt to treat religions as of equal standing and to view freedom as a major religious value. Nevertheless, though a generation has not yet passed, there are moves to update. Some are suggesting a loose-leaf hymnal and book of readings and services which would permit tailoring by local churches.

Lait and Clergy

Fellowships. I have used the term "church" to denote local units, though many of them prefer the less traditional name "society." In addition - and this may be a UU innovation - 40 per cent are called "fellowships," indicating an absence of professional ministerial leadership. Some of these will grow into churches, some are spin-offs from existing churches, and some, despite large budgets and buildings, have no intention of securing regular minis-



First Unitarian Church of Boston.
destroyed by fire during the winter
of 1967-68.

terial leadership. There can be no doubt that the widespread responsibility of laypersons for the full activity of their local groups leavens the UUA in unique ways. Professional ministers have the burden to legitimate themselves by achievements rather than by an ascribed status.

Lay involvement. In comparing the UUA to other denominations, one is struck by the significant roles, paid as well as volunteer, assumed by the laity. This has been the case in religious education, social action, and even theological education. In part this lay leadership reflects the absence of any fixed tradition to be transmitted and defended by "inside" specialists. Liberal religion owes its real growth to the Enlightenment of the 18th century, and the continuers of that movement are found throughout the modern university—not only in theological seminaries. Precisely because the inspirations of modern religious liberalism now come from all quarters, the person in the pulpit is as likely to quote Erich Fromm as Theodore Parker, and more likely to quote either than Augustine or Aquinas. The educated layperson has at least as ready access to and understanding of these new sources as does the minister. This situation could be called one of shared leadership or of intellectual equality between pulpit and pew. The fact remains that it is a salient aspect of the UUA.

Ministry. UU parish ministers are unusually creative and well trained. At the time of merger, in

1961, the UUA spoke of its five theological schools. In the 1975 directory the ministers' school backgrounds included Meadville/Lombard (at the University of Chicago), 17 per cent; Harvard, 15 per cent; Tufts, 13 per cent; Starr King (in Berkeley), 10 per cent; and St. Lawrence, 10 per cent. Since then, both Tufts and St. Lawrence have closed. The figures cited indicate that 35 per cent of the UU ministers trained in schools *not* funded by the UUA (Harvard, to be sure, is also not funded by the UUA, but there are some long-standing historical associations and loyalties). A significant number of this second group not only trained in other schools but transferred from other denominations. Given the perennial waiting list of such would-be transfers and the role of Harvard, the funding of denominational schools has been problematic. Harvard has a better record than the denominational schools in the care and feeding of UU scholars, the other rationale for sectarian seminaries.

The UUA is now considering a controversial report urging the full ordination of a second ministry, the ministry of education. There are many highly competent directors of religious education who feel that their ministry deserves equal recognition and status. Many have not attended seminaries or have taken shorter programs when they did. In the absence of a clear-cut theological tradition, however, it is difficult to argue that this alternate route to ministry is inherently inferior.

Theological Climates and Personalities

The areas just sketched illustrate something of UU substance. At several points I have mentioned the value consensus of these contemporary UUs. To the extent that this theological core can be discovered, the particular items of present and future UUA agendas may reveal more coherence than aPj appears on the surface.

The organizational boundaries of the UUA give some indications of this deep substance. On the "right," a few ministers have joint fellowship with the United Church of Christ. On the "left," ministers flow freely back and forth from Ethical Culture. In some cities and states, the UUs are part of Protestant church councils; elsewhere they are not, by a kind of mutual agreement. "UU Christians" meet and publish a journal, as do the "religious humanists." Two generations back, Unitarians and Universalists spoke of "humanism vs. theism"; in the 19th century it was "free religion" and "liberal Christianity," and before that it was "rational liberalism" vs. "transcendentalism. "

The enduring affirmation, we would suggest, is the postulated linking of "reason" and "ethics." The problem is with the priorities. No wonder the persons most likely to be quoted from UU pulpits are Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Buber and Erich Fromm. This dual focus

on reason and ethics similarly explains the close attention religious liberals have paid to the sciences - physics as a source for better cosmologies, and the biological and social sciences as a source for both ethics and philosophies of history.

The present and future theological contribution of the UUA is the legitimation of a post-Christian religious humanism. The current president, Paul Carnes, embodies this interest. An intellectual with charisma, he has not hesitated to articulate a new religious liberalism.

In a broader sense, the present period reflects the convergence of bureaucratic theology and movement theology. The social forces producing the convergence have been the membership growth and turnover since 1945, increased lay involvement, and (perhaps) the absence of theological giants who could prolong the twilight of waning theological fashions. What we have termed "bureaucratic theology" has dominated much of the UUA's theological education and political organization until recently, giving outsiders the impression that the Movement was simply a very liberal continuation of Protestant impulses. The visibility of this New England-based faction obscured what was actually emerging.

The most coherent statements of this movement theology were being made by Sophia Fahs (as architect of religious education) and Henry Nelson Wieman (whose recognition by the UUs came largely after his retirement from the University of Chicago). The most sensitive contemporary articulator of this converging theology may turn out to be Joseph L. Fisher. An economist and ecologist, he was UUA moderator for 12 turbulent years (and is now a third-term congressman from Virginia).

A more explicit theologian, with UU identification and salience, is James Luther Adams, who has focused on social ethics and the religious role of voluntary associations. Three UU historians have also made a significant re-examination of the liberal past: Sidney Mead, George Williams and Conrad Wright. Since social activism has been a persisting and widespread UU characteristic, selection of representative figures becomes more difficult. Jack Mendelsohn certainly belongs here, as does Homer Jack. As an innovative theological educator, Robert Kimball must be noted.

Most of the persons of national visibility that we have named are academics, and such a listing runs the very risk of contributing to the bureaucratic historicism we have decried. Movement history, on the other hand, is being shaped by those whose activities are more local or denominational. The creative thrusts in preaching, worship, music, education, social action and organization which will determine the UUA's future defy brief description or prognostication by their very variety.

What of the future - if we assume that membership shrinkage has stabilized, that fiscal stringencies have been effected, and that a theological con-

vergence toward a religious humanism has not only occurred but has at last received official recognition? A possible pattern is that of the Quakers - smallness, integrity and influence. But the Friends' ethos and ways are difficult and must be learned - a kind of orthopraxy. 'A pattern of orthodoxy-precise beliefs, precisely enforced - seems even less likely. A third communal pattern could be based on shared values, both explicitly and implicitly religious - an "axiocentrism." This model seems to characterize today's UUs. Many of these shared beliefs and values are by-products of modernity and higher education. To the extent that U.S. culture is now tilting toward conservatism, those who hold such values may come to feel and act like a minority group - which seeks mutual support, recognizable in-group styles, viable defense patterns.

Two factors suggest that growth might recur along these lines. The 1977-78 Gallup Report showed 87 per cent of the U.S. positive toward UUs and only 10 per cent negative. Not surprisingly, 58 per cent had no opinion. The UUs' most successful slogan in their most recent growth period was "Are you a Unitarian Universalist without knowing it?" That query, raised afresh, might well induce some of the positive viewers to become active churchpersons. Whatever happens, UU-watching will remain fascinating. ○

Due Date

+ WHEN I was young
I aimed at laurels.
I would be President,
I'd be Public Hero NO.1,
I'd personally win the World
Series in the last half of the ninth.
And later on I dreamed of being
Pulitzered, Guggenheimed, Nobeled
For being a wizard of the word,
A master builder of the mind,
A psychopompos in new worlds to know.

But soon the due date will arrive
And I shall have to cash in
All my hopes and dreams.
There is no longer time
For blowing bubbles in the air.
And I must carefully cultill'ate
This little plot of land
That's left to me.

What now remain are body and mi~d,
TI¥: wind on the cheek,
The trees bared and leaved,
The sun's upcoming and downgoing,
The heft and cut of words,
The airy solidity of thought,
And our fabled double kingdom
Of life and of death.

SEYMOUR. GuN.