

## *Hiatus of Unbelief*

*Believing Again: Doubt and Faith in a Secular Age* by Roger Lundin

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**T**HOUGH BURIED in an avalanche, Brand continues to be buried by epitaphs. He is the pale, intense, somber priest of Henrik Ibsen's dramatic poem about possessing "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). Few characters from nineteenth-century literature are more ambiguous. His creator called Brand "myself in my best moments"; W.H. Auden condemned him as "an idolater who worships not God, but *his* God"; George Bernard Shaw branded him a villain who "aspiring from height to height of devotion to his ideal, plunges from depth to depth of murderous cruelty"; and Mel Gussow dubbed him "a self-made martyr." More recently, John Northam proposes that Brand is a hero "necessarily flawed but worthy of the deepest respect for his battle against the littleness of the modern world," while, in the most outlandish epitaph, Harold Bloom apotheosizes him as "the Norwegian or Viking Jesus."

Driven by what Robin Young calls his "deeply un-comic attack on latitudinarian Christianity," Brand becomes willing to sacrifice his mother, child, and wife in the execution of his "All or Naught" mission. I tend to agree with Auden's Kierkegaardian reading. Brand, like every other man, is "a conscious being who at every moment must choose of his own free will out of an infinite number of possibilities which he foresees." Wracked with anxiety because his choices have consequences that cannot be guaranteed or undone, the clergyman slowly becomes an idolater when he stops choosing religious faith and starts inventing "an illusion of absolute certainty out of the individual passion of his immediate moods (the Aesthetic) or the universal abstractions of his intellect (the Ethical)."

Aware that the illusion is unsustainable, Brand despairs in words that could describe the spiritual conflict of the nineteenth century:

A stifling weariness of days  
 entombs us in the blank belief  
 that God has torn our destinies,  
 our very names, out of the Book of Life.  
 And yet He is merciful.

In short, Brand is an archetype of the modern man whose *modus vivendi* entangles faith and doubt, which motivates the church dean to say:

Faith's one thing, life's another.  
 Try not to get them mixed.

Six days a week we toil,  
 ‘our duties to fulfil’;  
 the seventh day, we rest;  
 piety soothes the breast.  
 Religion’s like high art,  
 much better kept apart  
 for those who can commune.

*Believing Again* (Eerdmans, 2009)—a superlative work of cultural hermeneutics from the literary critic Roger Lundin—narrates the “modern drama of belief and unbelief” with all the requisite complexity and erudition that the subject deserves, elegance that piques engagement, and unusual gratitude for opportunities of creative witness-bearing in the postmodern milieu. Lundin teaches in the English department of Wheaton College. His colleague in the theology department, Timothy Larsen, recently wrote *Crisis of Doubt*, a book that focuses on Victorian skeptics who converted to Christianity. By contrast, *Believing Again* focuses primarily on nineteenth-century Anglo-American novelists, essayists, and poets who rocked between faith and doubt like storm-tossed boats. The former study subverts the crisis-of-faith narrative while the latter study complicates the secularization narrative.

Opening with the historical setting, Lundin calls attention to the unprecedented and radical upheavals of western culture in the nineteenth century, which he dates “from 1789 and the start of the French Revolution... to 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War.” These upheavals include the historical consciousness that stripped the world of its former enchantment, the romantic imagination that avoided the “hideous business” of life, and the scientific discoveries that paradoxically elevated and humiliated man.

Consider the far-reaching consequences: world history immanentized God; *chronos* subsumed *kairos*; poetic genius acquired saving powers; literature ghettoized itself from science and religion, then declared its triumph over them; art—no longer imitating nature—expressed the “inexhaustible inner domain” of the self; poetry shirked truth for pleasure; science turned “our sights from providential ends to impersonal origins”; and theology, owing to “the crucible of science,” lost confidence to answer, as Auden put it, whether “silence on the cross” spoke of “some total gain or loss.”

Turning from the objective ground of history to the subjective ground of culture, Lundin perceptively analyzes actions of believing, interpreting, and reading to reveal “the emergence of open unbelief as an intellectually viable and socially acceptable option.” Like Jacques Derrida, he deftly overturns the binary opposition between belief and unbelief—a nagging hangover from the Enlightenment—so that *différance* exists between the opposing sides, neither

excluding the other. Lundin's deconstruction is more hopeful than Derrida's version because there is an end to the "free play" between belief and unbelief, an end when God answers the person who cries, "I believe; help my unbelief!" The modern artists he recounts destabilize the binary opposition, seldom giving the upper hand to belief but always reminding us that human beings live, regardless of their heterodoxy, on "the margins of belief."

There was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who expressed indifference to administering the sacraments as pastor of Boston's Second Church, and Henry David Thoreau, who refused to pay a levy for the Congregational Church: they signed off of institutional Christianity but could not erase the trace of its absence. Then there was Herman Melville, whose search for divine favor in the Holy Land left him "bent under the weight of a leaden despair"; Emily Dickinson, whose poetry oscillates between "heroic secularity" and fear of god-forsakenness; and Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose arrest, trial, and mock execution precipitated a crisis of faith that left him uncertain of life beyond the grave but ever steadfast to the promises of Christ. They all understood, in Dickinson's words, "we both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble."

With the ascendancy of philosophical naturalism in the late nineteenth century, other literati on both sides of the Atlantic—from Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, Mark Twain, and F. Scott Fitzgerald to George Eliot, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce—"found themselves bidding adieu to a no-longer forbidding deity." Czeslaw Milosz, a successor to these artists, described his Catholic faith to Pope John Paul II as "one step forward and one step back," enfeebled by the shame he felt among the cultural elite.

Lundin notes that a hallmark of modernity is reductionism. Just as the explanatory power of science diminished literature to "a frivolous, godless occupation," as Milosz conjectured, higher criticism diminished "the Bible to a collection of improbable fictions," as Melville reluctantly concluded, and silent reading diminished the biblical priority on the auditory apprehension of the truth.

Another hallmark of modernity is social constructionism, what Lundin calls the struggle "between the mind's power to *create* the truth and the heart's longing to *discover* it," as illustrated in the examples of art and story.

Aesthetics, as a separate domain, was born when "beauty *as* belief"—captured famously in John Keats's lines, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"—overtook "the beauty *of* belief," that is to say, special revelation. Art severed its ties to Christian dogma and the natural world, locating its origin in the will to power. We alone, Friedrich

Nietzsche declares, “bestowed beauty upon the world—alas! only a very human, all too human beauty.”

Our contemporary obsession with the category of narrative also shows the metaphorical predominance of *created* truth over *discovered* truth. Once we were co-authors of our stories; now we author them *ex nihilo*. Once we were “merely players” on the world stage; now we are actors and audience alike, all events “happening in the grand theater of the mind” as Robert Gross puts it. Once there was a beginning, middle, and end to the cosmic narrative—the four-act drama of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation; now we are, according to Emerson’s analogy, befuddled in the middle of a stairway with steps above and below us, lacking narrative coherence and continuity. The exalted consciousness of the nineteenth century “tethered spirit to nature,” but that union could not survive the bloodshed of the American Civil War, the fad of Darwinism, and the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” *Re-membering* the entire salvation narrative, Lundin submits, dislodges us from the indeterminacy of Holy Saturday: the memory that “we live not in the darkened shadow of Good Friday but on the ground that has been illuminated by the dawn of Easter Sunday.”

Punctuating his treatment of novelists and poets, Lundin invokes a breathtaking number of voices: Charles Taylor on sources of the modern self; Richard Wilbur on the “poetics of testimony” as an alternative to sacramental poetics; Alfred Kazin on authentic American religion; Paul Ricoeur on “the conflict of interpretations”; Mikhail Bakhtin on polyphonic discourse; Colin Gunton on the transition from spatial to temporal schemes of truth; Helmut Thielicke on divine suffering; Hans Urs von Balthasar on “theodramatics”; Erich Auerbach on the representation of reality in biblical narration; George Steiner on the “golden age of reading” and our current “post- or subliterate” climate; Walter Ong on the modern shift from an auditory to visual imagination; Dietrich Bonhoeffer on hearing the call of God in “the solitude of a sensate age”; and Karl Barth on Christology and art—to name just a few.

Against the primacy of seeing over hearing, *Believing Again* bears resemblance to Thomas Tallis’s motet *Spem in alium*. Like the English Renaissance composer who scored his work for forty voices, Lundin involves a huge choir, each voice adding to the overall harmony, so that the distinctive chords of the nineteenth century hauntingly resound in the aural space of the twenty-first-century reader who has forgotten that she is an heir to this music. Just as *Spem in alium* featured the mature style of the composer, *Believing Again* features the mature style of a literary critic who has reached his crescendo after notable performances in *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* and *From Nature to Experience*. This book is a major contribution that supplements the historical and philosophical account in Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* by

sensitively integrating theology and literature while smartly resisting the facile narrative of loss and decline to show convincingly, as Auden wrote: “Every Christian has to make the transition from the child’s ‘We believe still’ to the adult’s ‘I believe again.’ This cannot have been easy at any time, and in our age it is rarely made, it would seem, without a hiatus of unbelief.”

Brand addresses this difference between believing something *still* and believing *again* when he confronts the “hiatus of unbelief” among his slothful parishioners:

Show me the man who has not cast  
spiritual treasure in the dust  
and ashes of a wasted life.  
Jigging to the scrawny fife,  
clown and cripple show their legs,  
dance themselves into the muck  
of blasphemy before the Ark,  
all drained and bitter as the dregs.

Brand recognizes, as Lundin does, that repentance brings the (un)believer home:

It’s reckoning time: ‘Repent! repent!’  
Time for amendment and for cant.  
Hey presto, penitence and prayer!  
Hey presto, ‘Save us from despair!’  
What a sick parade of wretches  
Lurching towards Heaven on crutches,  
maimed in body and in soul,  
besieging mercy’s citadel!  
Yet listen to the voice of God:  
‘Give me now thy precious blood,  
give to me of thy pure spirit.  
Thou art chosen to inherit.  
Be then as a little child:  
be the child within the man;  
flesh and spirit undefiled,  
enter into thy domain.’

—Reviewed by Christopher Benson