Charles S. McCoy:
Orphic Sleuth of the Seminary As School of the Dance

Doug Adams

ABSTRACT Key Words: Charles S. McCoy
These anecdotes and a limerick humorously celebrate the life and work of Charles S. McCoy .

To communicate Charles McCoy's Polanyian contributions to the field of arts and religion, I render thoughts through a limerick; for such a form and the puns which accompany it are high art if one appreciates (as McCoy does) the polyvalency which both language and humor offer. As background to a hearing of that limerick, one may remember the following insights into McCoy's life and scholarship.

1. In "A Federal Paradigm," a section of his book *When Gods Change: Hope for Theology*, McCoy discerns that his covenantal use of Polanyi's epistemology is better exemplified by Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot than by Authur Conon Doyle's Sherlock Holmes:

The contrast between a static and a covenantal view is illustrated in the mystery stories of A. Conan Doyle and those of Agatha Christie. In the stories by Doyle, there is a static world of facts. To solve a mystery, Sherlock Holmes collects a sufficient amount of data to construct the truth about a situation that was puzzling. This is an understanding of history and the world informed by the traditional Western paradigm. In the Christie stories about Hercule Poirot, reality has a more elusive, shifting quality. Data surrounding the mystery or the murder are there, but they take on different meaning and valency in relation to different total perspectives into which they may be absorbed. Whereas for Holmes there is a single true pattern to be discovered by placing fact on fact, for Poirot there are quite different ways in which it is possible to integrate the clues related to the mystery. Agatha Christie leads her readers on by inviting them to dwell in first one and then another integration of particulars into a whole. The resolution at the end of the story provides a surprise as Poirot breaks out to an unexpected integration of data that is more inclusive and artistically satisfying (see especially the fascinating "solution" in *Murder On The Orient Express*) (*When Gods Change*, 185-186).

McCoy has long taught courses in "literature and theology"; and so his writing includes examples from literature and an appreciation of how a solution to a mystery (like a solution to a scientific problem) is "artistically satisfying." When asked how he would want himself remembered through an endowment at the Graduate Theological Union's Center for the Arts, Religion and Education, McCoy responded by specifying "The Charles S. McCoy Fund for Theology and Literature" which honors him and continues his work "in probing the artistic dimensions of faith and the theological depth of literature" through courses, lectures, and publications. Similarly, McCoy directed that the memorial endowment to his wife (Marjorie McCoy, who developed many dramatic presentations) be specified for Arts' programming at Pacific School of Religion where McCoy taught for three decades and is Professor emeritus of Theological Ethics.

2. McCoy has written an article on "the Seminary as School of the Dance"; and he has strongly supported the nonverbal arts as tacit modes of knowing. Once when a dance friend of his was included on a panel discussing the

possibilities of arts in worship, a logical positivist sarcastically asked from the audience, "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" While most of us on the panel recognized that the questioner was using that old question to stigmatize the panel's inquiry as trivial, the dancer on the panel responded, "Is that modern dance or classical ballet?" She went on to explain that modern dance takes much more room per person as it includes falling and rolling on the floor to discover the real consequences of a fall, whereas ballet deriving from the royal court precluded fall and takes far less room per person. With another dancer, Judith Rock, I have explored such differences (percussive vs. sustained, locomotor vs axial, and asymmetrical vs. symmetrical) in "Biblical Criteria in Modern Dance: Modern Dance As Prophetic Form" (for the 1979 International Conference on the Bible and Dance in Jerusalem) now a chapter in *Dance As Religious Studies* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Doug Adams. McCoy brings one together with persons from a wide range of the arts who help newly to inform one's thinking.

3.McCoy is serious but not solemn. He loves to argue and, like Polanyi, can be fascinated by small arguments as well as big ones. During the year I came to know Polanyi at Duke University in 1964, Bill Poteat was constantly vigilant to keep Polanyi working on the mind/body problem when Polanyi was easily drawn to consider many other matters: for example, how a frisbee performed in flight when thrown by students outside the Faculty Apartments where Polanyi lived on campus. Similarly, I remember being puzzled at times when McCoy would launch into a major argument about some small matter in a Pacific School of Religion faculty meeting in my early days on the faculty. Colleague Bob Leslie explained that McCoy was raised in a home where the father expected an argument at every meal; so McCoy feels at home only when he is in an argument! I have learned that while Charles takes each argument seriously, he does not take each argument solemnly. The difference between being serious and being solemn I once learned from reading Russell Baker's column in the New York Times. Baker noted, "A child at play is serious; but a jogger is solemn. Living in New York is serious; but living in Washington D. C. is solemn." An argument with Charles McCoy is serious but not solemn.

4. Insights by C. K Chesterton have delighted both Charles and Marjorie McCoy. Among Chesterton's witty phrases to be remembered are the following: "Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly" and "The best is the enemy of the better." When McCoy was listed as a preacher in the seminary chapel, many students would attend expecting to listen to an excellent sermon; but he would have the congregation break into small groups and discuss an intriguing question as the sermon. In classes too, he was careful to drawout the insights of each of the students and not inhibit them by too great a display of his own brilliance.

5. He believes in the Trinity, at least the one at the end of Wall Street and the one in Berkeley (both churches). While others bash corporate America, McCoy helps a corporation learn to give voice to ethics. He created the Center for Ethics and Social Policy at the Graduate Theological Union.

6. Poems in The Orphic Voice by Elizabeth Sewell explore Polanyian epistemology through the Orphic myth. I add the observation that while both Orpheus and Pan play musical instruments, Pan does so to seduce the sheep and people and lead them into captivity and slaughter; but Orpheus plays and leads the rocks and trees to move more freely. McCoy is more of an Orpheus than a Pan; and he is more of a Poirot than a Holmes. Charles sees through the pretenses of leaders (especially if they are Republicans) and enjoys political humor. To his great amusement, I once told him Henry War Beecher's comment that in the face of our nation's problems, most leaders say they are at their wit's end, without having gone far.

With those thought in mind, I offer this limerick to a most encouraging colleague.

McCoy is a sleuth of a man;
Of Hercule Poirot he's a fan.
Our Charles is not baiting
nor gating nor hating.
He's Orpheus rather than Pan.

He's dreamed of a school of the dance
Where gracefully arts have a chance;
Where students like trees
May move with some ease
at carnivals held in the manse.

McCoy neither Doyles nor spins;
but arguments he often wins.
While leaders all panic
or some become manic,
he dances on heads of the pins.

With Sewell he "undoes the curse
that splits us in" two: "prose and verse"
Creating a Center as ethical mentor
"and shaping finds the universe."