Dr. White's *Voice of the Trumpet*: Part I of a review by Evan Zerhusen

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Whether White has ever written a symphony, I don't know—but if he hasn't, I think this one will do. I say that because, in spite of its size, it really is a big book. And this isn't just a book about +W—it's really two books in one. The one is a book about the trumpet call—the call that goes out to everyone everywhere (and there is a great deal of trumpeting in this book to prove it). The other—and it fits snugly into that first—is a small book about +W. You could probably even say it's three books in one, the third part being Dr. White's (final?) lecture to the world.

But let's take it one at a time.

First, the trumpet.

Some books should be read. This is one that should be heard. There's music galore in it—but there's also a message here. The musical references help convey the reality of the words. The musical bars liven up things and offer unexpected relief. The constant reference to lyrics and notes also show how much music is really a part of everyone's life—unless you're a Shylock—and how listening comes with its own risk/reward: those who listen set themselves in the path of two opposing poles—one up, one down, so White puts it. His book highlights the tension between the siren song and the trumpet; it illustrates how music can impact the mind and heart one way or the other. Just like music can help to make or break a movie (think Psycho without Herrmann), music can help to make or break a man. White's point: too much Sid Vicious will quite likely keep you from the Kyrie.

The title of the book refers to the voice of God—the trumpet blasts are the answers to the questions everyone's asked—Ives asked them—they are not unanswered here.

Second, the bishop.

The subtitle of the book refers to +W's life, described in the first half of the book. Here you see +W's development as somewhat (not totally) self-directed: music sustained him and he sought it out independently of any classroom guidance; next came literature and though he took a Master's in English his big breakthrough in understanding the big questions did not come until he picked up a copy of Vyvyan's Shakespearean Ethic from a library bookshelf in West Africa where he was, again, on his own, pursuing the significant something calling to him. (He still recommends it—and I still disagree with him about its merits—but +W got something from it he needed: a push in the right direction.) As the bishop once told me, "It's okay to wander, but keep a polestar." White indicates that a love of the Best (i.e., the one, the good, the true) served as +W's polestar—the thing that enabled him to receive his calling in life.

Third, White.

As usual there is a great deal of clarity of thought in White's words. He simplifies complex ideas and issues and distills them to their essence. For instance, he reduces the wreck of the Reformation to three irresponsible, "fatuous ideas—[that] life [could be lived] without moment to moment spiritual drama, [that] life [could be] based on satisfaction of personal desire, and [that there is no connection between free will and grace in] life rendering individuals helpless and dependent" (p. 9)—the doctrines of Luther, Henry VIII and Calvin, respectively. These points serve as the main foundation for modern thought over the past 500 years and play a definite part in the plot we're all working through. They represent the constant threat, while the voice of the trumpet

represents the constant reminder that Heaven is not gained by getting a coupon in the mail, by whim or by presumption. White gives a lot of play to the trumpet—little blasts and reminders sprinkled over the whole thing like salt. It's well preserved. It should last a generation at least.

So with this book you not only get the essence of the bishop's life—you also get the essence of White's thought (and, in terms of thinking, White and +W are more or less in agreement). In the way the book's arranged, you see the familiar signs of inspiration and of long gestating ruminations and reflections—of thoughts appearing like stars, unapologetically included because they appeared one night—included because they would be gone as quickly as they came (and why waste a vision just because some might view it as inappropriate or cumbersome?). So, no, this book is not just about the bishop. It is also about White's own way of looking at the world—where we were, where we are, where we are going. It is White looking not just at his friend. It is White looking at the grave and settling down in it and looking up and speaking to us from flat on his back. Whitman loafed and ate a blade of grass. White goes full corpse pose and gives us the news, both good and bad, from the ground, pointing up at the stars—and reminding us that they have numbered all His bones—so don't be shocked when they start numbering yours, too.

But there's more. Fourth, juxtaposition.

Throughout it all is the juxtaposition of the Beatles and the Faith—the former representing a large, musical crap created by youth (idolized, idealized) disconnected from the simple lessons of the old world (namely, that just because it rises to the top of the toilet bowl does not mean it should be fished out and lavished with praise and adoration).

The Beatles play a thematic role in the book—they indicate the problem, the sentimentalizing and undercutting of everything

good. One part of the solution, White points out, is better music. (I'd recommend reading Raymond Chandler every day, too, for some—but check with your doctor to see if Chandler's right for you.) But music is what helped +W. Thus, +W's discovery of Beethoven. Everyone remembers his first discovery of Beethoven. I sat in a car in a parking lot. The radio was tuned to the classical station. Then Beethoven's 7th came on: a voice from the past that cut through the years and distance. "This world is of male energy male pain"—that is how White describes this thing, quoting Berryman. When the bishop discovered Beethoven, he was like all of us discovering that thing that is often so insensibly, inadequately put in words. Maybe the Jews were wise never to name God. The children of light, not so much.

You can tell White delights in making these connections, bringing out old favorites—references to John Berryman (an old teacher of White's and a poet of tragic course—see White's lectures), the constant references to music (White's other love), the endless associations and juxtapositions—it is White's style and not what one would expect to find in a traditional biography. But, again, this is not a traditional biography. This is a grinding up of everything the man has carried inside him for years, stirred together and hardened into this (thing —whatever this is) that can only be made by one who has long spent hours in the kitchen, pouring over recipes, experimenting with ingredients, learning what tastes balance one another, and finally disregarding all convention and producing something distinct that not one of his guests waiting in the other room will have ever tried before. Someone looking for a simple biography of the bishop may be puzzled by what White has served—but it's all there in the title. This is a book that has to be heard. It is about a message that has to be heard. It is about an age that has become so tone deaf, with ears so full of fat, it cannot hear anything at all. I imagine in the future the book will come with a packet of Q-tips and instructions on how to use them.

[To be continued . . .]