

Challenge

Editor's Note in Three Parts

THE BOGAN INDICATOR:

James Bogan pulls off an exhilarating, even an intoxicating effect in the final section of his essay “The Perils of Poetic Film Making,” all true, I swear, and due entirely to his being faced with a powerful challenge—how to secure certain elements that would allow him to complete his film. Bogan, as those who know him will attest, can be irrepensible in work and life. However, he at first suggested to me that perhaps the final section of the “Perils” essay should be cut. It’s kind of goofy, he said, maybe a bit unbelievable. Our staff gasped. We love it; we believe it; we need that part of the story.

That part of the story recalled for me a comment by critic Colin Wilson, during his explication of the intoxicating, perhaps magical effects revealed in Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Odyssey*. “One day I met a great striped tiger in a glen,” says the poem’s Ulysses, “And my heart leapt with joy, so that I shouted ‘Brother!’” Wilson via Kazantzakis suggests that we need external stimuli, the threat of failure, the low-down moment, present in life and literature, to shove us along. “What is important,” Wilson continues, “is that I [meaning ‘we’] should not accept my low condition as normal.”

To not accept my low condition is always an act of intention—an act of the will, as readers will find in Bogan’s essays, and writing here by Mary Hower and others. Each has his or her own way: reconnecting with other people, fumbling forward, taking charge. Over and over, it seems, art puts to the test Kierkegaard’s “principle of limitation,” which Kierkegaard called “the sole saving principle of

the world." Limitation stretches the mind, expands our sensibilities, opens us up. Read on.

HOW WE OVERCAME OUR LOW CONDITION:

Early in 2009, *New Letters* called upon colleagues and writers to help us raise matching funds for a grant from the National Park Service that would ensure the survival, restoration, and future access of 30-years' worth of *New Letters on the Air* audio recordings. We have known for more than a decade that some of the old analogue tapes had badly deteriorated; but the challenge, year after year, of raising the money for restoration always seemed too great. This year we received a promise of \$68,000 through the "Save America's Treasures" program, and we almost lost hope, again, finding ourselves roughly \$22,000 short of the matching requirement.

All of this happened during a time of widespread financial stress, in our state and nation. I wondered at first, as did James Bogan, regarding his essay, if I should not simply reduce the project, cut it back, and not press the point. Others on our staff gasped at my acquiescence. Mainly, Angela Elam, our producer and host for *New Letters on the Air*, believed that our colleagues around the country would respond if we let them in on the opportunity. We should not, she might as well have said, accept our low condition as normal. She was right. A call for help brought an astounding show of support from nationally prominent writers, from our colleagues in the communications studies department at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and from the College, itself. Donations—in the form of cash, of course, but also as good will, partnership, something on the order of *flow*—came into our office for the entire amount needed. Now, every single recording—over 1,000 in number—voices of Gwendolyn Brooks, John Gardner, Joseph Brodsky, Grace Paley, and other writers who shaped 20th-century literature—will be put into multiple formats and set up for wider access to the public. Our satisfaction in knowing that we have met our responsibility to posterity is enhanced greatly by knowing that our colleagues joined us in the effort.

THE CHARGE OF READING:

You will see in this issue tragedy amid that light. We would not deny the world's true events, even if harsh: an art historian going blind, the war, mental depression. Yet literature is, itself, part of the mechanism for lifting us up, even in those tough times. Literature combats indifference, asserts our presence, and "tightens the muscle" of our consciousness, as Colin Wilson puts it.

It was my privilege recently to attend a reading by the poet and eminent scholar of Jewish tales and myths Howard Schwartz, who also happens to have been my teacher as an undergraduate. He somehow has grown to be a much younger man than I am. I love that. An audience member asked him if he agreed with Philip Roth, who evidently said that reading as a widespread activity would die out before long. "Of course not," Howard Schwartz said. What I remember is not so much his reasoning but his faith, unperturbed and immediate, that literary reading has an essential role in the life of the race. He further blessed us all by letting Roth off the hook, as well. "Philip Roth was probably just feeling a little cynical that day," he said.

We all are allowed to feel low once in a while, but, as Howard Schwartz implies, don't hold ourselves, or others, to that position. Dive in here, friends, among these stories and poems. Take heart from the great Danish poet Dan Turèll—Uncle Danny, as I have learned to call him—another irrepressible sort, who, at one great moment, yells out, "Make room for euphoria! / Let the thousand pearls bubble!"

—Robert Stewart