

## Tryst Interviews Claudia Grinnell

*Poetry is always possible because everything else is possible, too.—Claudia Grinnell*

This is Claudia Grinnell's bio in a nutshell, unrevised for several years:

Claudia Grinnell was born and raised in Germany. She now makes her home in Louisiana, where she teaches at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. Her poems have appeared in various print and ezines, most recently in such places as *Exquisite Corpse*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Mudlark*, *Janus Head*, and *Blue Moon Review*. Her first full-length book of poetry, *Conditions Horizontal*, was published by Missing Consonant Press in the Fall of 2001.

It's a modest description of her writing credentials; but, it yields very little about the writer behind the work, or the work, itself. However, here is some interesting data, (most of it culled from the internet):

Claudia has written at least eight fiction pieces (which can be found on her home page, Command Central) and at Able Muse; she has written several essays; her poetry has been published in over a hundred journals not counting print journals; she is/has been the assistant editor for Sundress Publications and *turnrow*. She has been featured in several notable journals including one of my favorites, *Samsara Quarterly*; she has consulted with and translated several poems for other writers; and, she reads and reads tons of articles, poetry journals, reviews.

The question remains, what hasn't Claudia done? Well she says she hasn't been able to fly or make herself disappear or walk on water. But the editors of Sundress Publications beg to differ:

Claudia Grinnell was born and raised in Germany where she lived and raised hell until she was twenty-five. Then the German government had had enough of her antics and kicked her out of the country. . . . Claudia is incredibly smart and can leap tall buildings without even trying. She is wealthy beyond belief, having made a fortune off her teaching position.

**Mia:** Which one of these bios, Claudia, is a more accurate portrayal of you?

**Claudia:** *Take your pick. I've been called worse by better people. But who I am, and where I'm from is unimportant. Bobby swears I'm the White Goddess. And to him, at times, I am. All I know for sure is nothing. And that changes from day to day. Nothing is a slippery bugger. Honest, I can't get a good grip on this answer, or maybe the question itself. Maybe the ideal Claudia could be wealthy and the real one poor and pious. Or the other way 'round. The money would be corrosive, of course. It would quickly lead to love of money.*

*The trouble is that the most harmful desires make the most profound poetry. Nothing kills a poet more quickly than the poison of piety. I have sometimes thought that the ideal life would be to live for six months a year meditating in a monastery in some very remote part of Spain, and to spend the other six months being madly in love with someone with whom I wanted to fling myself into an orgy of dancing*

*that went on until after dawn. Each six months would give depth of meaning to the other, and life would be maddeningly full. And that's something I haven't done.*

**Mia:** In an interview with Jan Carroll of Round Table, when asked, "It's been said all poetry is political, yet Theodore Adorno said 'no poetry after Auschwitz.' Can poetry, today, after September 11, still have relevance?" You answered:

I think it's useless and tainted by hubris to make a statement like that...Hell, the whole of human history is nothing but a bunch of horrible events strung together. "Evil-doers" have always been around, small-scale, nation-scale, world-scale extermination and violence are part and parcel of what we do ... maybe we should have quit writing after we exterminated a whole set of native peoples in the conquest of the "new" world. Or maybe after the Soviet "cleansings." Or maybe after East Timor...Poetry is always possible because everything else is possible, too.

Let me applaud you for your aplomb; especially, the line which I quoted above, "Poetry is always possible because everything else is possible, too." I want to add and reiterate the same question: Can poetry have relevance and how so? Is it possible that we're in a lull that the complaints about "bad" poetry are any worse than any other time period?

**Claudia:** *I want to take this opportunity to repudiate anything and everything I've said before, whether I said it or not. Of course, poetry has relevance. It has relevance to people who think it has. To others, it's a line item in a budget that has to be evaluated in terms of cost / benefit analysis. Some might think poetry can change the world (unacknowledged, of course, because we Poets are so modest) or can make the world happen (some god shitting an ur-syllable, and, presto, bingo, we appear). Hallmark is poetry to some. And many think RAP is it. Don't forget those who enter contests to make the big bucks associated with poetry. The very fact that people actually argue about whether poetry has relevance or not makes it relevant. Besides poets, critics and the public at large have always complained that they are living in a time in which the poetry is bad, or getting worse (it's the grass was greener in the golden age complex, I suspect).*

*I don't see poetry being much worse or much better now than 10, 100 or 500 years ago. We can't say yet what will survive from what we write today. I bet that ninety percent or more of what was written 100 years ago sank into oblivion. It could quite well be that some of what critics today deride as crap-- langpo and the MUCH derided pomo stuff--may quite well surprise us, survive, and be praised. Who knows. It's probably good that we won't find out. For one, I'd hate to lose these extremely entertaining beefs about the quality of poetry today (what else would bloggers and other culture priests exercise themselves about?); and, for two, it keeps the individual poet guessing. Imagine the ego of someone knowing he/she will be famous. It's already nearly impossible being in the same room with most famous poets.*

**Mia:** Is all poetry political and if so in which respect? How about this one: Can poetry be about the politics of the self?

**Claudia:** *All poetry is political because everything is political, especially the self. The body which gives shelter to the self, lives in the city, in the polis. When you have two or more of these bodies, you have a city, and thus the beginning of a narrative.*

*Something begins to happen. Sometimes that something is interesting and demands itself to be remembered. Writing, first employed to keep record of economic interests, extends itself to keep a record of the self. The more ambitious selves write what we call history. There we find the celebration of a positive attitude toward life: the cheerleaders of the life of the mind do twirls and jumps. Particularly interesting are the histories of other people. Because, to our great surprise, they are word for word the same: war, poverty, fear, love. That stuff is interesting. Because no matter how cynical you get (and more about that later), what Carlos Drummond De Andrade wrote holds true: "A time comes when death doesn't help. / A time comes when life is an order. / Just life, with no escapes." In the "good" poetry of the political, i.e. involved world (how can you not be, in this material world, a material girl; after all, Mater = mother) that is something that needs to be encountered.*

*I mean, \*this\* war happened. And I don't mean \*this\* war; I mean \*any\* war. We all lived after that war. The results, the consequences, that were expected (planned) from this war, truly came into existence. Every chance, every moment to plan something, every instant, came thanks to those results. Causes and conditions. That is the order. In this order, the self has a chance to wake from the sleep of the jargon (i.e. history, the question of "authenticity" or relevance), and do something new: it can look away from the screen and look inward. Away from the political. Remember I said only "All poetry is political because everything is political, especially the self." I didn't say that that was a good thing.*

*The act of thinking, and if it is necessary, the act of thinking for nine years against a wall in a stone cave, must take precedence over the what's the matter with matter question. Life-based, culture of life—all that huge smokescreen over the fact that we value life more than thought.*

*The apolitical self, i.e. the self that is, at least momentarily, not part of the whole, enlightens, or delights, in any event, brings light.*

**Mia:** In that same interview, you wrote:

A good poem is one that is not read or praised on Oprah. A good poem is one that is not trotted out as "representative" of o-how-wonderfully-creative-and-resilient-the-human-spirit is.

Okay. So far you've stated what makes a good poem by what it is not: "not read or praised on Oprah," and "not representative of 'o-how-wonderfully-creative-and-resilient-the-human-spirit is.'" Both of these imply your "moving target" theory that a poem is constantly evolving, and therefore cannot be defined so neatly. If I've misunderstood you, can you elaborate more on what you consider is a good poem?

**Claudia:** *Again, I want to take this opportunity to repudiate anything and everything I've said before, whether I said it or not. Memory. Man, I tell you. It does stick around in the worst possible moments.*

*What's a good poem?*

*I really don't know.*

*No. That's not true. I do know.*

*A good poem is one that makes me think thoughts I haven't thought before, or not thought in that order, or not thought to that degree or intensity.*

*I think that is my definition for any type of "good"ness. I'm glad I thought of it.*

**Mia:** Fair enough. I won't hold you accountable for any answers you provide here or elsewhere, provided that you tell me why money and poetry are NOT mutually exclusive? This matters to me because I'd like to see more government funding for the arts and less money allocated to studying the mating habits of arachnids in the Amazon, or any number of pork-barrel-spending programs.

**Claudia:** *I'd like to see more government spending on various "good" projects, projects that don't have to immediately yield profits or votes. But that might not happen. What I meant when I said that money and poetry aren't mutually exclusive I meant that we need to get away from the notion that poetry is somehow "pure" or beyond those worldly concerns. I want poetry to be on par with plumbing. I pay my plumber if he fixes a problem. If a poet delights me, I want to be able to pay him/her. So, I'd like to see community involvement—it's beginning to take root in some areas, and I think the spoken word community had a good influence in that direction—in poetry events. Pass the hat. Pay up. Poets should shamelessly promote themselves, their work. What's wrong with that? McDonald's has an advertising budget of I don't know how many millions. A good burger and a good poem should be able to compete in the marketplace. And for those who would say, oh, but it would commercialize the poetry, make it part of the entertainment industry, I'd say, come on—wake up: you ARE already part of it (Adorno knew it). The only question you have to answer, or reckon with, is this: have you written the best poem you are capable of writing?*

**Mia:** Going back to that interview once more, you speak about euphemisms:

operation infinite freedom, crusade, root out evil, smoke 'em out, collateral damage etc etc--all those pet/pat phrases really serve to make permissible and even embraceable a continual/continuous state of war, destruction, death, disaster. Just like (re)naming a wife beater a "domestic abuser" so does calling civilian death or injury "collateral damage," do great in-justice to language and thereby our sense of reality. . . . When we begin fudging with language, we fudge up our sense of reality, which, essentially should be renamed "operation infinite war."

During the presidential elections, where the politics of fear played a huge role in leading us into an extended war with Iraq, it felt like watching a bad rendition of a Warner Bros cartoon. In your opinion, what is the reality of that situation and how did language play the voter's hand?

**Claudia:** *It's not euphemisms, actually but framing—and that technique is as old as the hills. I mean, nobody, unless he's a psychopath (and even there I have my doubts) will willingly, gladly, and accompanied by marching bands and weeping mothers, go and bash in some other guy's head just for the fuck of it? No. No. No. Someone has to start a rumor that that other guy probably (we're not sure, but, jeez, just LOOK at him) eats babies freshly ripped from their mother's womb. But that's not the worst of it. Oh, no.*

*(we must interrupt this for an important message about vaginal hygiene, the danger of 4 hour erections, and some low carb beverage that apparently makes dewy young things swing their blonde hair from side to side)*

*This guy apparently lies about other stuff too.*

*Unstable.*

*Not trustworthy.*

*Clearly, a candidate for surveillance. (can't be too careful. Disasters loom everywhere. Sharks, too)*

*And then, sooner or later, this guy just becomes unacceptable and gets taken out.*

*Now, take out the t.v. commercials, every war, every where, every time begins like that.*

*This operation works so smoothly, clicks along in our consciousness with the precision of Kabuki theater.*

**Mia:** I've been reading your work many years. It's useless to categorize or describe poetry by genre any more, but the thought occurred to me that your work leans toward the metaphysical: i.e., "characterized by an intellectually challenging style and extended metaphors comparing very dissimilar things."

I also think that your work is witty, wickedly funny and anything but cynical. I find your work to be reality-based which doesn't mean that it's realistic or truthful; I simply mean that it doesn't extend to the idealistic, fantastical beyond belief, and yet it's highly inventive.

Do you honestly believe that your work is cynical? Then, how would you best describe your work?

**Claudia:** *I've heard that cynical thing before. Some time ago, it was used as a label for some thing I wrote, and then every thing I wrote all of a sudden was cynical. A certain section of my readers started reading every thing I write as cynical. I assume that this isn't a good thing, judging by the tone that usually accompanies the use of the word and the various other negative comments bunched in there with the word. And sometimes the poem is simply bad because it is cynical. In symbolic rendition, it would appear as: cynical = bad. I may have made a logic error here, or the reader may have, but there you have it. It does not concern me overly much how some readers label what I write or even what I am. If anyone ever gets to a point where everything he does is in concern of or response to another's ideology, he'll be completely insane or perhaps a saint. I have no desire to be either.*

*No, I don't think how I write is cynical; what I write about often is. At least, that is my perception of it. I find our current times cynical; everyone wants salvation on the cheap, Dr. Phil and Oprah, a few dead, a quick snort of spiritualism, shooting up the good Book, or least portions of it. It's sort of like the Reformation without Martin Luther to keep things real, but a Remodernism with the dudes on American Idol telling you your mom wears combat boots. I mean, come on! The whimpering*

*confessions of middle aged men and women, until the last one standing.  
Excommunication by way of being voted off the island.*

*This whole competitive paradigm?*

*My God, intelligent design? Where's the evidence of THAT? This is the best He could come up with.*

*And you call me cynical?*

**Mia:** You once wrote, "I'm really in this poetry gig to explore what language can do." What can/should language do? And what discipline, the Humanities, the Sciences, Math or Art should it pursue? By this question I mean to say that Math has always been accepted as the purest language of symbols— the one that all mathematicians and science can speak fluently.

**Claudia:** *Yeah, I've always liked that myth. It gives me the warm fuzzies to think that there is this pure conceptual system that transcends the limits of language. Man, this sounds like the rationalist position in the latest space alien movie: "Why don't they just speak English," to which Jodie Foster replies, "Mathematics is the only universal language, Senator."*

*We think that because our puny little brains have taken us this far. We are actually so arrogant to think that math is a pure symbol. Unsullied of what? The touch of mankind? Our...gasp!...orthodoxies, concepts, causes and conditions?*

*What we want, what we need, and what inevitably changes--none of these things are within our control or reason, yet they are with us from the time we are born to the time we die. We cannot, thus, be rid of our **emotions** any more than we can be rid of our reasoning faculties. For some reason, this is still considered an "extreme" position.*

*It is interesting, and undeniable, that Math or the desire to speak fluently and across all dimensions springs from emotional need (to recede from chaos). But that, at least to this point, takes us back to the economics of it all. And look what we've made of that. We can't afford ourselves anymore.*

*Also ironic is the fact that obsession with the whole (or All), the pure idea of all phenomena (all fruits of the garden), leads one to a lopsided emotional state, an antiplatonian fragment (obsession). A system like Math or logic or language is merely the expression of any single obsession. We can justify anything with logic. The Greek rhetoricians did. The writers should do it. That's what language can do.*

**Mia:** Just for fun, I'm going to list nine "trigger" words, separately or in pairs. Write the first word or words/paragraphs that come to your mind: Six, Salt, Soul, Rubicund, Artemis, Rent, Finesse, Casual~ties, Obsession

**Claudia:** Six *tynine*  
Salt *ine*  
Soul *food*  
Rubicund *tough to work into a conversation*  
Artemis *being a goddess of contradictions*  
Rent *not any more*

Finesse *isn't that a shampoo?*

Casualties *if your attack is going too well, you have walked into an ambush*

*Obsession for men, for men, for god, Jesus: Jesus was just some poor guy from the boondocks who believed that he lost his supernatural powers when he came into contact with menstruating women. The guy who founded the new cult that we now call Christianity was a fellow by the name of Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, then eventually as Saint Paul. He hated his physical body, which he saw as the locus of all sin. Nietzsche called him the dysangel (the bringer of bad news, in contrast to the evangel, the bringer of good news). Paul's message was so bizarre that he knew it would make Jesus turn in his grave. That's why he told everybody that Jesus was no longer in his grave but had ascended to heaven. Jesus, you had to get me started?!*

**Mia:** No, really, Jesus didn't have anything to do with the above exercise (smile). I picked words out of the air at random in ten seconds. All I wanted to do was engage in a mental exchange of words with you, no holds barred, no motive, no objective in mind—a *tabula rasa*, so to speak. I simply wanted to see what your answers would divulge. Only after I put together the list did I come up with a few reasons:

1) I was looking for cultural relativism in the loosest sense: any association that could be made via exposure to a certain pop/culture, (demographics even) through branding, assimilation and influence. I found possibilities in soul food, saltine, and finesse. Here's how they paired up:

Soul/food=southern influenced dialect.

Salt/ine=a type of cracker invented in Missouri.

Finesse/shampoo, (branding). I was looking for verb association.

2) I wanted to see if six would be read as a number or would it hold some kind of superstitious meaning as in numerology. I have to say, *six/tynine* was pretty clever. It threw me off several times: *tynine* isn't a word I've ever used in any conversation, but *sixty-nine*...

3) That leaves:

Rubicund=a throwaway because it was a dictionary word that sounded good  
Artemis=I was looking for literary influence: "Artemis Fowl" but *goddess of contradictions* sounds good to me

Rent=tough one. I was looking for a verb as in, to rip.

Casual~ties=the one that most interested me. I was wondering if you would pick this up as a noun plural, "casualties" or as two words, "Casual Ties."

4) Then, Obsession. I thought you would say perfume.

Surprise, surprise. This should teach me, or anyone, not to project, have expectations or impressions about one's language. Cognitive theories abound.

After all is said and done, what did you get out of this exercise, if anything?

**Claudia:** *Chalk it up to reader response! Well, see, on obsession I started with perfume –you know, Obsession for Men—and then this whole free-association thing kicked in, and before you/I knew it, Jesus arrived on the scene. What I got out of it is that I apparently react badly to emotionally loaded words like obsession. I mean, think of it: we name a perfume obsession. Probably one of the worst kinds of emotional traits a person could have. And then we design an ad campaign around it. And we sell that stuff by the gallon. Amazing, no?*

**Mia:** At what age did you learn English? Was the transition an easy one from German to English?

**Claudia:** *Thanks to the rigorous tracking of German students from age six, at age 10, I entered the Gymnasium, and began learning English.*

*At first, according to my then English teacher, Mrs. Brown, I was a horrible student, with an almost incomprehensible pronunciation and nonexistent grammar skills. That state lasted about six years. My poor desperate parents employed tutors, and finally, it was decided that I might never master the language to any passable (in the grade sense) degree. Then I had the good sense of falling in love with an American Adonis who worked at the local pool. Dennis (and I know [bobby](#) [Bobby] will want to know much more) was all I needed to jumpstart my latent English skills, and that year I had an “A” in English on my report card and an irrepressible desire to live in the USA.*

*Although another eight years passed and Dennis wasn’t the reason for the move, I did move here, only to make a monstrous discovery: people in Louisiana were unable to understand me, and I was unable to understand them. What they had labeled as “English” in an obviously altered state in no way resembled what I had so labored so many years to “get.” And then it took me another good number of years to “get” American. It continues to be a source of great joy to me to “get” a language and to have the privilege to express myself in it and to play with it and have other people engaged in that game as well.*

**Mia:** Do you consider yourself more of an aural or a visual poet? I read your poems and I tend to think you’re very, very much visually-oriented.

**Claudia:** *If you mean by visual, reading in the widest sense, yes. I read voraciously. Not just text, but signs, houses, faces, grass, coke labels, eyebrows, lightbulbs. Everybody, of course, does that. After reading, I get tempted to translate what I read into another text, another medium. And one of the more interesting questions I’m sometimes trying to entertain is McLuhan’s last, from Laws of Media: When fully utilized or pushed to its extreme, what will the medium reverse into? In other words, where can I push the envelope, knowing that I am in one?*

**Mia:** Actually I wasn’t alluding to reading or the act of observing, or even the topography of words/line breaks on a page. It’s one thing to take in ‘images’ visually and aurally, but it’s another to see how those images float into the writer’s consciousness and ultimately end up in the reader’s visual field. You’ve used sounds, mnemonic devices, and repetition in your poems, but those kinds of poems don’t stay with me: The ideas get lost in the sonics, rather than solidifying into images—tangible “things” I can push against. I’m sure it’s a failing on my part as a listener. However, let me make one thing clear, your work is not just about visual imagery; there’s attitude, voice, thought and a host of other things going on with your writing.



But in your book, *Conditions Horizontal*, most of the poems are visualized. Ideas are given identities. In the poem, "The Fortune Teller," the future is a toothless, small and mean woman kept in captivity. Death is an executioner in, "The End is in Sight".

I knew when everybody left  
My executioner would come back...  
he showed me his orders  
I felt the seal: it was too dark  
to read but I trusted him,  
didn't try to please or plead  
didn't tell him, *I am*  
*innocent*. He would have laughed,  
would have filled the room  
with blood.

Then in the poem, "Conditions Vertical, Conditions Horizontal," a pregnant woman is the owner of a complete house:

I was the owner  
of one  
complete house--  
then slow infestation  
needing  
heartbeats, blood, oxygen  
pressing  
for more space. Certain foods  
were out of the question,  
categorical  
denial of fried bacon.  
It feeds  
on me.

A baby doesn't get any more visual than those lines. Why does the poem stay with me? Because a word like, "infestation" isn't a word I would "normally" associate with a baby. Termites, parasites? Maybe. Your visual imageries are often so phantasmagoric, that they become indelible in my mind.

A line such as, *shall we their fond pageant see* (from Shakespeare), in your poem, "The Collapse of the Wave Function," let's face it, is not as riveting as, *motherfuckincunteatingsnotsuckingbastard*. But even at that, your images are what really push the envelope:

Cupid lets another one fly, misses Monsieur Duchamp's heart  
by a bicycle wheel, but creates a useful hole at the top of his cranium,  
a window of opportunity, so to speak...a young woman with unnaturally red  
hair whose tongue probes Monsieur Duchamp's hole. An odd scene, surely,  
and a passing mother speeds up, dragging her boy by his lengthening arm.

And I'm not saying that I am drawn to these images because they are grotesque to me. I'm drawn to them because these images form lives, real or imagined, dreamed or disparate. The poem, "Even Now, This Wanting" you describe the lives on the pages as weighing the possibilities, and this is what I do as a reader of your poems:

I thumb through the fiction, the lives on the pages. I weigh the possibilities:  
a romance (so much lifelessness, as if after an earthquake, as if people do not yet dare to move), a book of poems (people and words, here too, standing pushed against the margins,  
the walls, quiet), a biography (a singular life: recalled, but the condition in which it appears is beyond dead because death is being denied by picture, by image, by tiptapping across the letters of a keyboard).

As for McLuhan's question: *When fully utilized or pushed to its extreme, what will the medium reverse into? Who is to say that the medium will ever be fully utilized or pushed to its extreme unless one believes in the pendulum theory?*

**Claudia:** *Before I go into that answer, I must admit that I find McLuhan to be a brilliant analyst of media...I know, I know, much derided, and as an academic, I won't probably be able to publish a paper that mentions his name, but if you read his stuff, and I mean, read ALL of his stuff, you can't help (well, I can't help) but think that he knew the hole we were digging ourselves into.*

*The medium will never be pushed to a final extreme. These are merely stops on a way, a path that is being discovered as we are writing it or mediating it. But that does not mean, we can't push, prod or rattle the envelope.*

*Wittgenstein in Zettel: "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information."*

**Mia:** How do you feel about this overview by Theodore Dalrymple in his article, "The Specters Haunting Dresden" (City Journal: Winter 2005):

Collective pride is denied the Germans because, if pride is taken in the achievements of one's national ancestors, it follows that shame for what they have done must also be accepted. And the shame of German history is greater than any cultural achievement, not because that achievement fails to balance the shame, but because it is more recent than any achievement, and furthermore was committed by a generation either still living or still existent well within living memory.

**Claudia:** *I want to get to the issue of shame first: it's not useful as an individual learning tool. Shame will not teach better behavior. It might extinct one particular behavior, but not with what I would consider the learner's insight.*

*A correct understanding of guilt, however, would be desperately needed. We ARE all guilty. If you are alive at a certain time in history, you are guilty for whatever happens. There is no exit. Or something similar to what Cioran said: You'll always kill yourself too late." To which to add Parker "might as well live."*

*Now that you do, and now that you are guilty, what and whose orders will you fulfill?*

*In between all that, what is gets created or imagined as each day arrives. I wouldn't want it any other way.*

*Other than that, Dalyrmples is unfortunately 20 years behind the times, a very unfortunate place to be for a historian. The Zeitgeist in Germany changed, and if he hasn't noticed, he must be living in his own private Germany. A new generation of Germans has grown up who are quite able to feel collective pride. It will now be very interesting to see what they make of it and whose orders they follow.*

**Mia:** How long have you been practicing Buddhism and how does (or does it) reconcile with your being a lapsed Catholic?

The reason I have a problem with Pope Benedict XVI's newly-minted phrase, "the dictatorship of relativism" is not because of where he's from, or what he's done in the past. Like you said, everyone is guilty and it's not that clear to me to what extent his involvement was with the Nazi party. I think the word, "dictatorship" is rather harsh. Are we really dictated by relativism, so that we prescribe to whatever interpretation of the Bible is most convenient to us—for instance?

I think I've pretty much exhausted everything I wanted to discuss, and probably exhausted you. Thank you, Claudia.

**Claudia:** Thank you, Mia, this has been a stimulating and "good" (as by my newly adopted definition) discussion.

*I've been a practicing Buddhist for about 13 years now. The fact that I am a lapsed catholic (and I stole that phrase from one of Hemingway's characters) and the Buddhist practice go together nicely. Buddhism does not make onerous requests of its converts or adherents. I find its practice helpful, consistent with my belief system (that wasn't the case with Catholicism as some point I began to question an orthodoxy that puts a creator god at its center, which creator god then gives authority and legitimacy to authorities, i.e. kings, queens, dictators of every stripe. In other words, this creator god perfumes the creation of the civilization we live in to a degree that authority is pre-assumed, right down to the familial level: Father is always right!), and eminently practical in terms of providing a context and philosophy for everyday living. For example, in general I have found that I can alter my feelings about things by an act of willfully looking at it in a different light. It seems to me that about 95% of Buddhist practice (I might be rounding up a bit) consists in willing oneself to look at things from a different perspective. The other 5% is going with the perspective that gives one the most inner peace and makes one the most harmonious with other sentient beings.*

*So much for the Buddhist stuff.*

*The catholic church, like most doctrinaire organizations, believes in absolutes, must believe in it. For the pope and people like him nothing is worse than relativism. His newly minted phrase "dictatorship of relativism" is on par with pronouncements on "secular humanism." Relativism is the big bugaboo of the moment. Uhhh, you are being relative. My god. How awful—like those unwed welfare mothers and the UN or taking prayer out of schools.*

*Anyhow, so the church—shorthand for any organization that needs, for one reason or another—to have absolutes (good, evil are the usual ones). Those are written then in capital letters pontificated upon.*

*Much of the railing against postmodernism is based on this (mis)perceived relativism. Well, gee, those people don't believe in good or bad. How can we trust them? And what about that clitoral stuff they do in Africa? Do you think that's relative, too?*

*I mean, I've had those discussions.*

*First, nobody says there is no bad or no good. It's actually pretty simple: the criterion in deciding whether one is wrong or is acting badly is whether or not oneself or someone else experiences suffering as a result of it. Implicit in what I have said is that deciding what is right and wrong in one's beliefs is essentially subjective rather than objective. The test of rightness is not correspondence to facts but an assessment of how one feels internally.*

*Nietzsche famously said something along the lines of most people being able to handle only a certain amount of reality before they resort to comforting fantasies. I assume that the belief in absolutes is one of those fantasies. It's just too bad that so many wars have to be fought over them.*

*Let me be even clearer: Good and Evil do not exist as absolutes. They exist in the good and evil acts we perform. They are not a priori anything or anyone. They come into existence with us and they leave existence with us. I can't speak (and won't) for other life forms. They have their own troubles. But I'm fairly certain I'm not related to them.*