

The New Criterion

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Nothing sacred

On Andres Serrano's jacket art for the reissue of Richmond Lattimore's translation of the New Testament.

Is there any aspect of our cultural life that will remain unsullied by the filth of the so-called avant-garde? We say "so-called" because it has been clear for some time that what masquerades as the artistic avant-garde today is mostly an insidious form of moral insurrection that poaches on the prestige of art in order to carry out with impunity its raids on custom, decency, and standards of taste.

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The large-scale results of this assault are too obvious and too numerous to require comment. We have all of us to some extent become inured to a culture where viciousness and depravity are simply taken for granted, like some hideous wallpaper that we have

lived with for years. It still happens, however, that some particularly rebarbative incident or phenomenon will break in upon our moral anesthesia and, at least momentarily, shatter our insensitivity. Curiously, it is often something offhand and, in itself, quite insignificant that has this power of moral reveille.

So it was recently when a new edition of Richmond Lattimore's translation of the New Testament came to our notice. Mr. Lattimore, who died in his late seventies in 1984, was best known for his stark, sinewy translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Late in his life, he also published translations of the Gospels and the Book of Revelation and, a few years later, the Acts and Letters of the Apostles. These have now been brought together and published as a single volume by Northpoint Press, a division of the distinguished publishing house Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

What caught our attention was the jacket that Farrar, Straus decided to supply for the book. Designed by Chip Kidd, one of the trendiest and most talented designers in the book trade today, the jacket features an excruciatingly gruesome photograph of part of a man's face. Slightly

larger than life-size, the detail shows a man's left eye—open but unseeing—and part of his cheek; an angry glaze of filth—dried blood or worse—encrusts the visage. Clearly, this revolting photograph is meant to depict Jesus.

The tastelessness of embellishing Richmond Lattimore's deeply felt translations of scripture with this ghastly image would have been sufficiently outrageous no matter who the photographer was. When it turns out that the photographer was in fact Andres Serrano, then jacket design is not merely outrageous but also an act of calculated insult and effrontery. Serrano, of course, was catapulted to inglorious celebrity in the late 1980s with his photograph "Piss Christ," which depicts a plastic crucifix suspended in the photographer's urine. The startlingly blasphemous character of that image earned Mr. Serrano the censure of many; but it also earned him the wild approbation of the cultural and moral insurrectionists, who promptly canonized him as a patron saint. The photograph that Mr. Kidd chose to adorn the Farrar, Straus New Testament is called "The Morgue (Hacked to Death II)." It is perhaps even more repulsive than Mr. Serrano's experiments with bodily fluids. No doubt for Mr. Kidd the picture was meant as a kind of statement; for Farrar, Straus it is a shameful collusion with decadence. Richmond Lattimore, God rest him, must be rolling in his grave.

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