

An Incarnation Narration

Colleagues,

In the early 1950s Norman Dietz and I were seminary classmates in St. Louis. It was a five-year program. About halfway through those five years I wound up as editor of the theological journal published by the Seminary Student Association, THE SEMINARIAN. So far as I know, nobody had yet invented the term “narrative theology” in those days, but Dietz was doing it—also when he should have been working on Greek and Hebrew Bible texts. We published the first version of “Old Ymir” as the lead article in the SEMINARIAN Christmas issue, December 1953.

Dietz has been all over the map with his prose and his performances in the 50 years since then. Though just as old as I am, he’s still at it. “Retirement” never got into his dictionary. He’s also continued to putz and polish Old Ymir in the years since OY’s debut. Since we were in cahoots with Ymir’s birthing, he keeps me posted, and not long ago he sent me the latest tweaking of the text. I asked his permission to pass it on to the Crossings crowd. He said yes. With jubilation cum nostalgia I send it out as today’s ThTh posting.

For direct contact with Norman, GO to his web site <http://homepage.mac.com/normandietz> There you’ll learn what all he’s been up to, lo, this half-century—and what he’s still doing. There you can also divine how you might tease him to come to your place to do more of the same for you and your folks “live.” As Immanuel Kant should have said: “There’s nothing like Dietz-an-sich.”

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

OLD YMIR'S CLAY POT

A Fable by Norman Dietz

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"OLD YMIR'S CLAY POT" is a fable about creation, destruction, and reconciliation; it is about fear and anger and forgiveness and new life. Its central images, the potter and the pot, are to be found elsewhere, of course, used in similar ways, and the name of the potter, "Ymir" – pronounced EE-meer, by the way, with the accent firmly on the first syllable – is taken from Norse mythology (Ymir was the giant, slain by the gods, out of whose dead body those estimable beings created the world). Everything else in the story, however, is purely of my own invention – the earliest, sketchy version of it dating back over 50 years now, to the summer of 1952.

– Norman, December 2006

Once long ago, when the sky hung heavy with snow, and the thick, drawn clouds of dawn seemed to roll in great swells down from the mountains and out over the sea – on a morning just like that, icy and silent – old Ymir the Potter came into town.

He had skin like wrinkled leather and a thick gray beard as tough as wire. He was a head taller than any man alive and older and wiser than God himself. And though he'd probably have laughed if you'd told him, he was about to create a masterpiece.

He twisted a huge iron key in a lock choked with rust, pushed open a battered wooden door, and stepped inside a gray, stone-walled hut full of shadows and corners and years at the end of a street just three hundred-eighty-one snow-hidden paving

blocks from the sea.

The cold wind rushed in behind him, and old Ymir quickly slammed the door, rattling the shelves of the small, wintry room.

Then he opened his shop.

Elbowing through the thick leather drapery that hung in the doorway, he squeaked into the workshop.

It was a sullen, ill-lit little room in the rear, full of creaking, complaining old floorboards and scarcely quite large enough to contain the vast amount of dust and moldy smell that filled it, much less the assorted odds and ends of the potter's trade that it held besides: a rickety wheel, caked hard with old bits of clay; a large tan brick kiln, cold as death; and a table, a chair and a bed – all very thoroughly webbed and entangled by time and the spiders and dust. Old Ymir put down his pack in the center of the room and got to work. He scraped clean the potter's wheel, lighted the kiln, and cleared all the shelves and the tables and chairs of their cobwebs and dust. He swept up the floor, went off after fuel, gathered the clay, and chased all the mice from the bed. Then he hung out a sign – “Ymir, Master Maker of Pots” – rubbed his hands and began.

Day after day, old Ymir's wheel spun madly. Day after day, he molded the soft, fine clay, fashioning it as it spun. And soon the kiln, warming and cheering the hard-working potter from morning till evening, was brim full of all sorts of glowing big bowls and deep crocks and small pots, all baking inside its red belly to a fine hard glazed surface as smooth to the touch as the wax of a newly dipped taper.

And the potter was smiling because he enjoyed his work so.

One evening there were finished pots everywhere, and in the yellow light of a taper the shelves were full of a most wonderful variety of shapes and shadows and lines and circles, of pots and pots and pots. From the very lowest shelves near the floor to the topmost shelves near the ceiling, they stood row on row on long row: some out on the counter and under it, some on the floor near the back of the room, and the workshop in the rear was chock-full from front to back so that old Ymir scarcely had place to sleep – enough cups and bowls and plates to feed the whole world, it seemed.

There were slender vases, beautiful to behold, for flowers. There were bowls for mixing bread dough, huge pots for ashes from the fires, rows of dishes and cups and saucers and plates, square ones and round ones, tall ones and tiny ones, big pots and short pots and fat pots and squat pots – the most wonderful pots in this whole wicked world.

And as old Ymir stood back wiping his hands and resting against the counter in the front of the shop, he looked at his handiwork and smiled again because the pots were good and he liked them.

“You are very pretty pots,” he said, complimenting them.

And they all thanked him and said, “We are glad you have made us so fine.”

Then he patted a fat, cheerful bowl on the belly, cheered a tall, lonely vase with a long sober face, put out the taper and walked to the front of the shop. He looked out through the window into the snowy street beyond it. He stood there a long time, and his smile dissolved in thought.

There was a broad, smooth patch of ice before the shop.

On the topmost shelf a plate rolled over carelessly in its sleep and almost fell off.

Next morning old Ymir put up a sign, a giant red sign with white letters over the door, that read: "Open Today." And he stood behind the counter, smiling and waiting for customers. Impatiently he tapped his fingers on the top of the counter, but he stood there all morning and no one came, no one even tried the door, and his smile soon went away.

About noon three or four women with frost-pinked noses and cheeks, their breath hanging in small clouds before them, did peer in at the front window, looking at the shelves full of pots – and the potter, who smiled at them – but they only shrugged their shoulders and went on.

And later in the afternoon, when a small humpbacked man, hidden to his nose in a mountain of red wool, hobbled in, he closed the door behind him, stood suddenly rigid in his peculiar bent-over position, and looked slowly around the room, much disturbed and amazed.

After a blank moment or two he grabbed awkwardly at the latch, saying, "Pardon, sir. I thought this was the butcher's shop. I must have made a mistake," and went out, shaking his head and glancing at the sign as he went. "Potter!" he said. "Humnf! What next!" And he closed the door.

But that was all. No one else came. Nobody bought because nobody knew just how fine a potter old Ymir really was.

When he closed up for the night and walked slowly back toward the workshop, where his bed was, old Ymir saw that all the pots on the shelves were sad and some of them were crying. And he thought perhaps he might forget the whole idea.

"What good are pots?" he said, "when no one buys?"

"Yes," said a crotchety brown crock in a corner. "What good is all your work when no one knows?"

And they all tried to sleep.

But later that night, as he lay on his bed, the warm redness of the open kiln lit up the room, and on the wall above old Ymir there grew, as big as a tree, the black shadow of the potter's wheel standing idle on the other side of the room in front of the kiln.

It grew and grew before his eyes until it seemed that it engulfed the whole room, and he pounded his fist on the mattress and cried aloud, "I'll do it!" And he sat bolt upright in his bed. "I'll do it!" And getting out of bed, he lit a taper and went into the shop. "It will require all my strength, all my strength."

He walked across the room and stood in the posture of a public speaker before the crowded gallery of shelves. "It will be my finest work, my very finest work, a showpiece of so rare a beauty and so fine a form that in its greatness and simplicity it will reach out and touch the hearts even of busy, barren men preoccupied with worry and with work and children at their play, of old men stroking beards and women baking bread and proud kings rich with scents of wine and war – of all people everywhere, this clay, this bit of crockery, for this small fleck of earth, this dab of dust, shall be – " and he paused, looking from bowl to bowl and pot to pot, "my masterpiece!"

Then he nodded slightly to the cheers of all the pots and bowls and dishes and, the applause still ringing in his ears, abed again, slept well.

But all night long the shelves in the little shop vibrated with the chatter of the cups and crocks and plates as they argued and speculated about just what the little masterpiece would be.

Next morning old Ymir was up before dawn. He walked to the fields and dug from the cold hard ground the finest clay he could find, then, returning, he placed it on the wheel and began to shape a bowl.

He worked long and hard – no one in town saw him all that day, for he never went out, he did not eat – making his new creation beautiful, useful, dainty, and strong: shaping and molding it, standing back and inspecting it, despairing and destroying and discarding and beginning again.

All day long and far into the night he labored, and then until dawn, and then through the next day, until finally, about sundown, it was finished, and the old potter sighed and smiled and went to bed.

He slept fitfully that night, tossing and turning in the darkness, and awoke next morning without rest, to fret and pace in large impatient circles through the days that followed, while the new clay cured and dried, and then, when the intolerable wait was over, with the first faint light of morning on that day of days, he hurried over to the kiln and took out the bowl.

Proudly he placed it on the counter, and all over the shop all the other pots and bowls and plates and crocks and cups said, “Oh!” and “Ah!” and “My how beautiful!” because it was a masterpiece.

Then no one said anything, but old Ymir was smiling.

"Hello," said the little pot finally, for it could see the potter's pleasure.

"Hello," smiled old Ymir. "Do you know what you are?"

The pot thought it over – that is never an easy question.

"Well, I am a pot, that I know."

"Yes," said old Ymir, "and much more. You are a masterpiece, a masterpiece of such unique creation and preeminent design that, but allow one little breath of life, however crude and vulgar, merely to glimpse you from afar upon my counter, and all life with sense of sight and sound will rush from all the earth to see you, and they will trust my skill because of you, because I have made you, and they will buy from the excellent stock of my shelves."

"Oh, I am glad to be so wonderfully made. I shall be very glad to help you. And, to think, all the people will admire me!"

"You can do everything. You are all things for all people."

"All things?"

"All things, I say, for in one glance all people will see in you all my best qualities and craftsmanship, my artistry and ability. They will fall in love with all I stand for when they look at you."

"Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great potter."

"Thank you."

"But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?"

"Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great

potter." "Thank you." "But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?" "Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great potter." "Thank you." "But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?"

"Many things. A few people will come in looking for a vase, delicate and fine, to hold flowers, and then you will have to hold flowers for them."

"I shall like that very much."

"Good. There will also be ladies who are looking for a bowl in which to mix the dough for their loaves and cakes – big, round and smooth."

"That shall be all right – if it is nice moist sweetsmelling dough that's put in me."

"Hmm. And some will want a strong sturdy pot to hold the refuse from the kitchen and the hearth."

"I shall not like that smell. I do not think I want very much to do that."

"It will be your work."

"Still I will not like it. I am far too fine a masterpiece to be used for such smelly work, don't you think?"

"It is part of your fineness to do it."

"I like flower-holding better."

"I have made you to do both. Each is a noble service."

"Nevertheless I shall balk at garbage."

"No, you shall not. I have made you and I tell you. People

shall use you for their pipe ashes and old tobacco and the ashes from the hearth and garbage, and you shall not balk."

"I am no crock for refuse."

"You are all things for all people."

"All things indeed!"

"Yes! And they will sometimes even clear their throats and spit in you."

"And spit?"

"They will."

"I will not stand for that!"

"You shall! Flowers and spittle, both are alike. They are fashioned for a purpose, just like you, and you must hold them both: it is your work."

"I will not do such filth!"

"You shall! For I know what is right."

"But you do not know what is right for me. Flowers are right for me, not spittle."

"I promise you flowers, but there must be spittle too: I serve all needs; you show people how. And finally when your work is finished, I will put you high on the topmost shelf, out of reach of all the common people of the town, only to hold the most perfect of roses and lilacs and lilies all the year long."

"The price is too high. No flowers if there must be spittle. And if you insist on threatening me with spittle, I will not even hold flowers for you when you let me. I shall refuse to do

anything.”

“Have you no respect for your maker?”

“No, I’m a beautiful vase, and I am beginning to think that it may even be that I have made myself.”

“You are a misbehaving child!”

“I do not care.”

“You are rebellious!”

“I have feelings.”

“And, by heaven, you shall feel them, too, I promise you, if you’re not careful! I tolerate no pride and no rebellion. If you do not carry out my will, I’ll punish you.”

“I don’t believe you’d try.”

“I shall! I’ll smash you into bits with this hammer and strew you on the icy street before my shop, and people will tread on you and trample you into the hard cold ground, and the carts on the street and the animals will grind you slowly into dust. You shall be punished!”

“If you threaten me, I shall never do anything for you. I shall jump right off the counter and break myself when the very first customer walks in and asks to see your wares. And I will hurt you that way, because you will not sell any pots or bowls, because the people will not see me, and no one will ever know.”

Well. Old Ymir would have slapped the little pot then and there, but at that moment the door opened, and the little humpbacked man from some days back came in again and wondered did old Ymir know just where was the butcher’s shop because –

And then he saw it, suddenly saw it, saw the masterpiece sitting on the counter where old Ymir had put it. Awed and overwhelmed by the simple beauty of the little pot, he came closer to get a better look.

The potter smiled good morning.

The little pot tried to jump as it had warned the potter it would. It wanted to break itself into a million bits just to see the look on old Ymir's face. But then it remembered that if it broke itself into a million bits, it wouldn't be able to see the look on old Ymir's face, and though it looked at the floor and closed its eyes, it couldn't bring itself to do it, it no longer had the courage. And angered with its own weakness, bursting with shame and frustration, it could do nothing but close tightly its eyes and ears and sit.

And it did.

It couldn't hear, and it couldn't see, but, before long, it felt flowers being placed into it and sensed the slow vibrations of the humpback's approving voice. But even the flowers had become distasteful to it, and it swore it heard the little customer clearing his throat and preparing to spit.

Confused, afraid, angry (afraid to jump, afraid to sit, afraid to hold the flowers, and – oh, horror! – afraid not to) in the jumble of its swirling emotions it shook so that it faltered clumsily and dropped the flowers. And they spilled all over the counter.

The little man was laughing with glee when the little pot opened its ears at last, and it could hear him hobble out of the shop and slam the door, still coughing and choking and spitting – and laughing! – as he walked down the cold street.

When the pot opened its eyes, it saw only the hot angry stare of the potter's huge eyes.

"Well!" the pot said, shrugging and feigning nonchalance. "How can you expect me to hold flowers for you when I must always be afraid someone will spit in me?"

"You are a wicked pot!" shouted old Ymir, and it seemed to the other pots that there were flames in the old potter's mouth and eyes. "You are a wicked pot! I will destroy your wickedness with the morning!"

And old Ymir went to bed.

The shelves and shelves of pots and bowls all cried themselves to sleep. Then the night watchman walked by once on the street.

The little pot stood alone in the night, shivering – afraid of the morning, afraid of the punishment, afraid of the hammer and the feet and the cold and the carts and the street. The pot stared longingly down at the flowers strewn about it on the counter and wished to hold them high so that old Ymir might have mercy, but all the pot could do was sob big wet sobs full of big wet tears that rolled down its side and fell like dew on the colored petals. Because old Ymir hadn't made the pot with any arms, so there wasn't any way for it to pick up the flowers.

Then it happened. During the night somehow, suddenly perhaps – with the speed of starlight, say, or love – it happened.

New clay began in some mysterious way to leap up onto the wheel, the wheel to spin, slowly at first and then quite dizzily, and unseen hands to work, shaping and molding to its perfect form a deed of altogether unforeseen magnificence, a

work of unutterable love, a wonder in the night, to be remembered ever afterward as the miracle of the clay – a simple pot, one more, a bowl, a dab of dust, a bit of earthenware, yet much, much more: one last great triumph from the master potter's wheel, one final favored showpiece for the timid trade, one final sample, one preeminent example more, useful and fine, of wizardry and skill and master craftsmanship, exactly like the first in every way, a perfect double for the little pot that had talked back, all moist and new now on the spinning potter's wheel, a masterpiece, a work of wonder and of genius, newborn in the night.

And when the coals deep in the kiln began to glow, as though it were the breath of old Ymir himself that breathed on them – and not that merely of some old and tattered bellows puffing – suddenly again, in some unnatural way, in one split second, or quite likely even less, the new pot seemed both in and out of its hot belly and already cool, baked hard and beautiful and smooth there in the cold, dark night. And as it stood atop the bench, it looked, seemed to the staring dark to be, like him, the master potter, old Ymir himself, his work, his soul, his being, yet – a pot.

Quickly the new little pot rolled to the front of the shop, where the little pot that had talked back still stood, frightened and shivering, among the flowers it had refused to hold and could not pick up.

"Hello," said the miraculous new creation, hidden in shadow at the edge of the counter.

"Go away," said the little pot that had talked back. "I have troubles enough without you standing there staring at me."

"I'm not staring at you. I've come to rescue you."

"That's what you say. No one will rescue me. You've come to stare and laugh at me."

"I haven't. I've come to save you."

"Well, what are you waiting for then? "

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pick up these silly flowers."

"Pick up the flowers?"

"And put them in my mouth so I can hold them. Is that so much to ask?"

"No. Of course not."

"Well, then do it. Don't just stand there staring, stupid, do it!"

But the new pot seemed unable to move.

"I don't think I can," it said at last.

"I knew you wouldn't."

"I would if I could, but I don't think I can."

"You won't."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

The new pot hung its head and edged into the moonlight. "I'm like you," it said softly. "I'm just like you. I have no arms."

"Some rescuer you are – a silly little pot with no arms just like me!"

"There must be something I can do."

"Yes, you can go away. That's what you can do."

"I want to rescue you."

"You can't rescue me."

"Please let me try."

"You can't, don't you see? You can't rescue anyone – you have no arms. Rescuers must be special. They must have arms and legs. They must be able to work wonders. You're no rescuer, you're common clay."

"But I can stand beside you in the darkness, all the same."

"Just go away."

"It's comforting sometimes to have a friend nearby in the darkness."

"I said go away."

"I'll stand beside you in the darkness until morning comes."

"What good will that do? That won't pick these silly flowers up. When morning comes, that horrid potter's hammer will come crashing down on top of me and smash me into bits. What good will standing there beside me do then?"

"It will give you courage."

"I don't need courage, I need flowers in my mouth!"

"I love you," said the newborn masterpiece.

*"I don't love you," said the little pot that had talked back.
"I don't love anyone. I hate you all. And I want to be alone,*

do you hear? I want to be alone!"

But the new pot did not move or answer, so the little pot that had talked back threw itself with all its might against the miraculous new creation. They collided with a fearful crack, then tumbled in a tangle toward the counter's edge and disappeared there in the darkness.

The emptiness beyond rang with a frightened cry.

Perhaps they shattered on the floor below a moment afterward. The other bowls and dishes on the shelves all held their breath and listened for the crash.

No sound was heard though. Nothing occurred. Not a clock tick, not a word disturbed the silence of the night. Outside, clouds covered the stars. Wind blew. Snow fell. The world turned white.

Then the clouds drew apart, and the moon broke through.

And there in the moonlight, surrounded by flowers, in the very spot where the little pot that had talked back had been, stood the miraculous new creation, waiting for old Ymir and the morning.

In another patch of moonlight, near a window, lay the hammer.

Before long, the first cold streaks of dawn appeared, and, with them, the potter, anxious to have done with his sorrowful business as quickly as possible, his wrath at the wickedness of clay welling up inside him and spreading like a poison through his arms and fingers.

He seized his hammer with the fury of fire, and seeing a pot in the midst of the fallen flowers where the little pot that had

talked back had been, brought it down like a thunderclap upon the newborn masterpiece, and shattered it, into a million tiny bits of colored pot that flew about through the air with a cry of pain and landed in a shower of clay on the floor at its feet.

The other bowls and dishes on the shelves could only stare and shiver and cowered in corners where they could, and an oppressive silence settled upon the room. There was no noise but the heavy breathing of old Ymir as he stood, head bowed, behind his counter, his hammer in his hand, its iron head still resting where it had thundered down.

And for a moment in the half light, in the first dark dawning of the day, the hand that held the hammer seemed not flesh at all, but clay, the hand less of a potter than of frightened, wayward clay.

The red sun rose above the mountains, shone for a moment, then disappeared among the clouds. Old Ymir fetched a frayed broom from a corner and with heavy, rasping strokes swept the broken bits of pot out through the door.

They landed with a clatter on the icy street before it.

A heavy cart soon rumbled by, its wheels humping and bumping over the snow-clad cobblestones with a crunching, grinding noise.

It wasn't until later in the day, when the potter was cleaning out the dark shelves under his counter and whisking away the cobwebs crisscrossing them, that he discovered, hidden away among the dust and crying quietly to itself, the little pot that had talked back, cowering and afraid, washing the shelf with its tears. In its mouth it was holding tightly a single

flower that had somehow got there since the morning – a beautiful pure white rose.

“Will you punish me too now?” asked the pot of old Ymir. “I have been very horrible.”

“No,” said the potter. “I have destroyed your wickedness.”

And the little pot just stared. It didn’t quite know what to make of it all.

“Don’t be afraid,” said old Ymir. “My anger has gone.”

And he smiled.

Then the little pot smiled, too. It seemed as if the potter might have known all along, that all this might have been in his plan right from the beginning. “All right,” it said. And that night the people who walked past old Ymir’s shop – and into it: business was heavy – noticed that an unusual thing had happened: the ground before the shop was glowing with a strange and marvelous light right where he’d thrown down the broken pieces of pot. In fact, upon closer inspection, they discovered that the light was coming from all the little bits of clay themselves that lay upon it. Day and night the strange light continued, day after day, night after night, always the same, and then suddenly, one night, in a twinkling, it was gone, and no one ever saw anything exactly like it again.

But people couldn’t help wondering what had happened.

They are wondering to this very day.

END