2-1-1974

Dialogue

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Somebody's been living in our house / poetry seminar / the rat keeps coming / Burr / poems, art, photography / and a solution to the mess

dialogue

FEBRUARY 1974
When It’s Good, It’s Very Good...

With the month of January behind us, the Interim may appear to be a dead issue; however, these first few weeks of the second semester are the vital ones as far as next year’s Interim is concerned. Now is the time when the Faculty Interim Committee begins its most crucial work, appraising the Interim just completed and making arrangements for changes in the Interim curriculum for next year. This is also the time when students are requested to help plot their own education by suggesting innovations in the Interim program.

From comments made at-large about this and previous years’ Interims, it would seem that students and professors greet the Interim with a wider range of feelings than they greet the conventional terms of the 4-1-4 curriculum. Like the little girl with a curl in the middle of her forehead, when the Interim is good, it is very, very good, and when it is bad, it is boring (our apologies to Mother Goose). In the preface to Christian Liberal Arts Education (CLAE, the “little black book” which has become a staple in the CPOL course), President William Spoelhof claimed in 1970, “The Interim has proved to be phenomenally successful.” Indeed it has, and with the addition of the ambitious Interim All-Campus Activities Committee, the 1974 Interim may be regarded as the most successful yet. However, there is hidden grumbling here and there—students not getting the courses they wanted, teachers not getting the students they wanted. In some corners there is no grumbling at all, and that is even worse. Students in those corners are all too happy chewing their cud in class for an hour or two a day while earning full-time wages the rest of the week.

Dialogue has no thesis to advance now about the Interim other than this: there is a wide spectrum of opinion about the success of the Interim experiment, and those whose continuing job it is to monitor the health of the Interim would be well served if somehow popular feelings about it could be brought into better focus. The Interim is only one part of a major plan for this college’s curriculum which is still being tested, a plan which is peculiar to and vital to the life of Calvin College. We think that students are almost as greatly affected by the structure of the curriculum at Calvin as teachers are and that they should feel responsibility commensurate with their stake in it.

For the sake of the Faculty Interim Committee and the Student Senate committee which assists the Faculty, we would like to promote public discussion of the Interim at all levels. Therefore, Dialogue will open the pages of its next issue to any kind of reactions: letters, essays, photography, voluminous philosophical treatises, suggestions for new courses, anything. We have a box in the Student Senate Office which gets bored stiff waiting to be stuffed.

rvm
To the editor

Barbara Reinsma begins her review of Margaret Atwood's collection of poems *Power Politics* (*Dialogue, December, 1973*) with an historical assertion which must seem a bit startling—at least to those less familiar than Ms Reinsma with the psychosocial history of womankind during the previous decade. "Women," she says, "have been waiting for the last ten years for the book that would say it all.... That book would bring about a short, clean, and very sweet revolution."

The details of Reinsma's historical-prophetic vision describe an ideological coup to be brought about by a book of feminist poetry, a coup which would strictly redefine the parameters of acceptable literary opinion and expression, with no back-talk permitted. The remainder of the review is devoted to an attack on Atwood for not having written that particular book.

A disturbing question raised by the review is this: has Reinsma given serious consideration to the implications of the "ideological" standard of aesthetic judgment she employs here? Atwood's own human sensitivities are regarded as wholly subordinate to the polemical purposes which the reviewer wants her poetry to serve. Reinsma deplores lines and passages which indicate weakness or resignation; she considers it irrelevant whether Atwood actually does experience these emotions occasionally and communicates them honestly and sensitively. Reinsma approves lines and passages that express emotional brutality in the hard language of physical or chemical violence, and makes these the criteria by which the rest of the poetry is judged.

Her critique brings to my mind a passage from Illya Ehrenburg's novel of Stalinist Russia, *The Spring*. She describes a "socialist-realist" art critic condemning a painter's portrait of a melancholy girl, on the grounds that the picture failed to project an image of happy and "liberated" Soviet womanhood. In this case, most of us regard it as an obvious presumption for a critic to impose an ideological program on an artist, and I am sure Reinsma would agree. Neither of us has much liking either, I would wager, for the ideology implicit in Merle Meeter's "Christian" aesthetic standards for literary criticism; nor, as Reinsma indicates quite forcefully a few pages later in the same issue, does she approve the retailoring of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* to fit the provincial proprieties of the Christian Reformed community.

But how does her treatment of Atwood's poetry differ in principle from these abuses?

If Atwood's poetry does in fact betray at significant points a failure of nerve or a loss of integrity or depth (by the critic's standards), then it is certainly valid to point that out—as long as the critic's standards themselves are honestly acknowledged. But surely there are other interesting and valuable things to say about her poems, many of which are largely independent of programs and ideologies. Revolutionary dogmatism, like provincial moralism, is no substitute for aesthetic judgment.

David Timmer
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Hercules—is he a rat or a man? VanderMey wrote it—there was no rejecting it, even if the rest of us had wanted to, which, of course, we didn't. Who is the mysterious little sharpie in the white go-go boots? Answer on page 379.

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Gore Vidal seems to have been around almost as long as corn flakes; and when he's not at home laughing over old times at school with Bill "the Builder" Buckley, apparently he's out there in the real world, writing books. This time he may have put one over on us, and Dykstra tries to do the same. Does he or doesn't he?

ART STUFF
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A journal of Calvin College art and opinion. Published monthly by the Calvin College Communications Board. Address correspondence to Dialogue, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49506. Copyright, 1973 by the Calvin College Communications Board.
a congenial visit
with GRSBM, our educational cousin

by Joel Carpenter

Each year there are fewer and fewer students who remember Franklin campus. Knollcrest is the only Calvin College most students have ever known. Even those who have been here for three or four years know Franklin only as the place where the Education kids used to go in the pre-dawn hours on the 1946 blue-and-white GMC buses or the place where the Film Council showed a few movies or the place on the old postcards that the bookstore used to give away because it was not Calvin College anymore.

I wrote this article because, except in the memories of the alumni and the Grand Rapids people that knew Franklin as Calvin College, and the reminiscences of the professors who taught there, Franklin is not Calvin College anymore. It is the Grand Rapids School of the Bible and Music, better known by its acronym GRSBM (pronounced Griz-Boom). This article is not an account of the process by which Franklin became GRSBM or of the special place Franklin still holds with some of the Calvin family, for these stories have already been told. Rather, it seems appropriate to inform the people at Knollcrest what GRSBM is as an educational institution, as a body of people, and as a new resident of the former Calvin College, once removed.

GRSBM is a different type of school than Calvin College. It is a Bible institute rather than a liberal arts college, entailing a different purpose for existence, a different curriculum, and a substantially different type of student body.

GRSBM, founded in 1946, is in the business of training Christians for what is known as "full-time Christian service," defined usually as church-related work. Out of GRSBM come pastors, Christian education directors, Christian youth directors, ministers of music, aviators, missionaries, evangelists and workers in a variety of positions in Christian organizations.

As a secondary purpose, GRSBM functions as a short-term (usually one year) training center for those students who would like a solid Scriptural and doctrinal background before embarking upon another direction in preparing for a career.

GRSBM is, in the words of its catalog,

...a specialized institution for intensive study in the Bible and for practical experience in soul-winning. The word of God is the primary basis for the curriculum, and only such subjects as will equip the student for effectively giving forth the message of Jesus Christ are included.

This may strike one who is immersed in the Reformed tradition as a loaded statement, for we who live with the niceties of a world-life view that claims the lordship of Jesus Christ over all aspects of learning have a different idea of what it means to be equipped to give forth the message of Jesus Christ. This subject will be pursued later in this article.

As might be predicted from the statement of purpose, GRSBM's curriculum is limited to certain fields. The school operates departments in Biblical Studies, Theology and Apologetics, Christian Education, Language, Missions and History, Sacred and Applied Music, Practical Studies, and Missionary Aviation. The majors offered are a pastor major, a missionary major, a general Bible major, a Christian education major, a minister of music major, and a missionary aviation major.

The main term of study at GRSBM is a three-year course, completing 102 semester hours of credit. However, the Basic Christian Training Year, the student’s first year at GRSBM, is used by many who also plan to transfer to a four-year college. Credits from GRSBM, which is not an accredited degree-granting institution, will usually transfer fully to another Christian school or partially to state institutions. GRSBM also offers an additional two-year, graduate-type curriculum in advanced Biblical studies.
A unique feature of the GRSBM curriculum is the inclusion of four one-week lectures on different books of the Bible by visiting speakers, for which the student receives one hour of credit. For example, while visiting GRSBM, I sat in on a lecture on the book of Daniel.

The GRSBM family, which has grown to around 600 souls since the move to Franklin, gave the general impression of being made of congenial, committed people. There was no problem in asking and receiving permission to visit lectures, classes—even lunch—or just to “hang out” and try to get a feeling for the place. Students and administrators were more than willing to volunteer information, informal guided tours, or just conversation.

It seemed that everyone I confronted knew that I was an unusual presence on campus, for they often greeted me with “Are you new here?” or “Are you registering for courses today?” GRSBM has a firm code of “guidelines” for personal appearance, to which I was not conforming. GRSBM maintains a dress code for both men and women, barring slacks for women and blue jeans for men on campus. Men are advised on length of hair (short), as are women on the length of skirts (long). There are various dating, late hours, and marriage regulations (although not necessarily in that order), as well as the usual academic, disciplinary, and dormitory rules.

While many Calvin students would most probably find these rules too stringent for their taste, the GRSBM student typically comes from either a fundamentalist background or from a background of recent conversion, in which case the school assumes a responsibility for laying down a framework of discipline for his life. In either case, students generally accept the disciplinary framework at GRSBM with cheerfulness. Some might debate the justification for this code as a valid Christian cultural expression, but that is not the purpose intended here. The emphasis at GRSBM seems not to be a sort of legalism but rather the desire to live a Godly, Spirit-filled life.

The hospitality of the members of the GRSBM family is genuine. There is very little in the way GRSBM-ers treat an outsider of the guardedness or defensiveness that is often endemic to the fundamentalist mentality. Perhaps it is the confidence that comes from being on one’s own turf. However, if one were to try to capture one predominant mood for the campus, it would be a gentle, underlying militancy. People do not come to GRSBM so much to find a vocation as to prepare for one; they do not come so much to seek truth as to arm themselves with it in doing battle in the Lord’s Army. That is what is meant when GRSBM-ers are characterized as “committed.” It seems that the standard phrase at GRSBM is “The Lord has called me to do______” These people are at GRSBM to pick up the tools for their trade or the weapons for their battle.

One could make superficial allusions to their army-green school buses and Doberman watchdogs, but the feeling of militancy at GRSBM is much deeper than that. It involves Bible teachers stopping in the midst of their exegesis to give fatherly advice to the fledglings under them about living the Christian life in pitched battle with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. It involves the whole disciplinary system as a sense of being “in training” to keep in top shape to “fight the good fight.” It also involves an assigned task of Christian service in a local church to get practical experience at serving Christ in the world. Most of all, one would see as a guiding force at GRSBM the all-pervading sense of antithesis between the redeemed and the world.

Another aspect of the existence of GRSBM at Franklin is the effect of the school’s presence upon the community. Concern for the welfare of the community was one of the complaints of many people over Calvin’s moving out to the suburbs. This same concern was a partial reason for Calvin’s choosiness in selling Franklin. The Wealthy-Ethel-Fuller-Franklin area is one in transition. Many people have been alarmed at the rate at which the “whites move out as the blacks move in” syndrome has advanced in the area, and have banded together to form the WEFF (Wealthy-Ethel-Fuller-Franklin) Organization to provide community services such as a crime prevention patrol in an effort to establish a responsible community in which whites and blacks can live together in cooperation to prevent the disintegration of the area as a decent place to live.

One could observe that GRSBM has a favorable effect on the community. The mere occupation of Franklin is a deterrent to vandalism in the area. In addition, GRSBM has done some beautiful remodeling and refurbishing at Franklin, which Calvin had allowed to go to seed. This further enhances the prospects for community self-pride. Students and instructors have moved into the community and, according to Dean A Ohlman, GRSBM Dean of Student Affairs, the school has tried to encourage and cooperate with WEFF. GRSBM has cooperating security arrangements with WEFF, has lent use of GRSBM facilities to WEFF for meetings, and has even given a goodwill concert. Another comment has also been made by an individual who resides in the area that it is good to hear Franklin’s chimes speak out on the hour again.

Joe Orlebeke of the Calvin Development Office, who coinhabited Franklin with GRSBM for nearly two years before moving his office to Knollcrest, re-
fleeted this general feeling of good will between GRSBM and those with whom it comes in contact by citing first the generally agreeable, friendly, Christian atmosphere he found there and, secondly, the property improvements as two big marks in favor of GRSBM's occupancy. Orlebeke remembers Calvin as it was fifty years ago and feels that the committed spirit of the GRSBM student body is somewhat similar to that of Calvin when it was primarily turning out young people as ministers and Christian school teachers.

There is a fundamental difference between what is going on at GRSBM and at Calvin, even the Calvin of fifty years ago. This difference is found in their respective interpretations of the antithesis between Christians and the world and of the proper context for the Christian living in the world.

GRSBM holds to a radical sense of the antithetical nature of the Christian experience. This viewpoint can be seen as a consequence of fundamentalism's beginnings as a reaction to the modernistic aberrations of orthodox Christianity. Fundamentalists reacted to the modernists' leaning toward a secularism which denied any absolute standards and played down the transcendent nature of God. The fundamentalists failed to recognize the falsehood of the modernists' dichotemizing God's creation into realms of "sacred" and "secular," and when the modernists chose to emphasize involvement in those things termed "secular," the fundamentalists reacted by retreating into those areas they considered "sacred," such as Biblical scholarship, "Christian Education" (meaning Sunday School), "sacred" music, and evangelism. Consequently, the concept of Christian witness in much of conservative evangelicalism has been limited to only
these areas. Hence, the term "full-time Christian service" began to be used to denote those occupations which fell into the "sacred" realm.

In order to prepare people for "full-time Christian service," then, fundamentalists began the task of education. The natural product of this is what has come to be known as the Bible Institute, which, of course, taught "sacred" courses only. GRSBM seems to follow this pattern in its aims and purposes as stated earlier in this article:

The word of God is the primary basis for the curriculum, and only such subjects as will equip the student for effectively giving forth the message of Jesus Christ are included.

Contrast that to the world-life outlook of historic orthodox Christianity. The reformers realized the need to see God as revealing himself in all of his creation. Besides the historic propositional revelation of God in Scripture, the Christian finds that God has revealed himself in the flow of history. God has revealed himself in nature. He is revealed in man himself, the image-bearer of God. Therefore, Orthodox Christian faith cannot draw lines and dichotomize knowledge into realms of sacred and secular. Christians must not see only the need for "sacred" studies and vocations while leaving the "secular" realm to the "world," for historic Christianity ought to motivate the believer to investigate all fields of human knowledge. The Lord has commanded us, through the apostle Paul, that "... whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (I Cor 10:31)."

It is not right, then, for a Christian to have the attitude that doing the "secular" things, whether in learning or in vocation, is not of the same priority as doing the "sacred." Effectively giving forth the message of Jesus Christ means, in the words of Francis Schaeffer, living a life that in its totality demonstrates the existence of a God who is there and has spoken to mankind. This is no more fully done as a pastor or missionary than as an accountant or truck driver.

This viewpoint raises some important questions for the Christian concerning education. What kinds of education should we espouse? Should we build only liberal arts colleges or should we try to build a Christian university or Christian technical schools? The most important question concerning the subject matter of this article is the place (if there is a place) for the Bible institute. Dean Ohlman of GRSBM suggested that this was perhaps a central question for one who is doing an article on GRSBM to consider, and it was a very astute suggestion.

For one to say that there is no room in Christian education for a school for specialized training in Biblical studies and practical experience in soul-winning is just as serious an offense as saying there is no room for teaching, say, a major in the French language and literature or offering a Christian technical school such as Le Tourneau College. In other words, a school does not have to offer a broad education in order to be called Christian in the historic orthodox sense. It would be easy for a Christian school doing liberal arts to think itself superior to a specialized school because the latter was not engaged in a study of all fields of knowledge. Even the most complete Christian school cannot claim an all-inclusive curriculum. What a Christian school ought to do, however, is to affirm Christ's lordship in all realms of knowledge and proceed from there to specialize if it wishes to, not because it sees its own specialization as an end-all for Christian learning but to provide a good understanding of God's revelation in a special area for those who feel it is their
calling to pursue it there. This should be the aim of a Bible institute, a Christian liberal arts college, or a seminary. This should be the aim of GRSBM, of Calvin College, or of Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary. All have their calling to excellence in the study of God's creation.

To the Christian brothers at GRSBM, it must be said that there is deep appreciation for their positive Christian influence on the community. Calvin's financial fathers were very wise in selling Franklin to these brothers in the faith even though it was a bit of a financial sacrifice. It seems that this move was a providential one—for Calvin, for the Franklin area community, and especially for GRSBM. One must be appreciative of the dynamic impact of the outpouring of trained Christian workers from GRSBM. One must appreciate the commitment and willingness to serve Christ exhibited by the GRSBM family. One would hope that the unique mission of GRSBM would not be tarnished in any way by the insistence that specialized training for "full-time Christian service" is the only, or even the best, way of "effectively giving forth the message of Jesus Christ."
One measure of a poet is his prepared reading on stage. But another, also important, is his performance in a give-and-take situation with an active audience. Facing the expectant crowd of writing buffs in the Commons Board Room on January 11 at 4:00 pm was such an occasion for visiting poet Gwendolyn Brooks, and she responded with a warmth, humor, and kindness which demonstrated why she can be so well-loved by black and white people alike. The following is a transcript of that seminar. We "carved the turkey," so to speak, removing portions of the tape recording which were indistinct or irrelevant. We found, with some amusement but with even more alarm, that college people don’t always... well, one, gets the impression that they... you know... some aren’t very clear... that is, questions... you know what I mean? We also found that people do indeed speak in italics at times and with some very fancy vocal inflections. Thus, the following amended version will represent in one sense an improvement on the original script and in another an inadequate approximation. Nevertheless, we trust that Miss Brooks’ warmth and charm will shine through even in print.

Miss Brooks: I think it would be fine to be informal. I came here with a vision in mind of us all just sitting around on the floor, sort of, exchanging ideas, fighting with each other, if necessary. But we’ll do the best we can in these stiff chairs of yours.

Selected Stanzas

Let’s ask questions, and I’ll try to furnish intelligent answers. What would you like to know?

I also plan to read some of the poetry of those terrific young black people to you, which will illustrate their ideas about their environment and their place in it.

Q: Well, if it takes a kick to get things started, I had a question about your voice. That’s obviously a very big part of your reading. I wondered if the voice you hear when you’re writing your poetry, inside, is the same one you read with from the podium?

Miss Brooks: That’s an interesting question. And I try to read my own poems the way I felt when I wrote them. So I would say it comes as close as possible, yeah. (Pause) Never been asked that before.

Q: When you are writing a poem, do the rhythms sometimes occur to you before the subject, say, or come before the images?

Miss Brooks: No. The subject, the theme, the idea, the feeling seems to dictate the rhythm and, of course, the images.

Q: What can a poem do in communication that no other medium can do, in your mind, or isn’t that a valid question?

Miss Brooks: Certainly it is. And I would say that a poem can say much in very little space. It’s concentrated. Its concentration makes it more readily available than... the novel. Of course, there are some very long poems, but even those are concentrated. If they said everything, they would be much longer than a novel on the same subject.
would be. Much attention to memorableness. I think that a poem, if it's very good, will ring in the memory longer than the effects of a novel will or a very good book of nonfiction. That's the way I feel about it.

Q: If the thing is concentration, why do you stay away from the sonnet, as you seemed to imply this morning? I mean, why stay away from a fixed form that has concentration built into it? I guess I'm asking you to say something more about why you think these times are good times for tattered ends and freedom.

Miss Brooks: Uhm. Well, after most of you left, those of you who were there this morning, we did talk about the sonnet a little. And I was saying that it didn't seem to me that this is a sonnet time. The sonnet is a very strict form. It's regulated, it's severe. There must be a certain rhyme scheme for the Shakespearean sonnet, a different rhyme scheme for the Petrarchan, and it must be written in iambic pentameter. Now we don't seem to have all those "musts" in our daily lives. It seems to me that life today is ab-so-lutely wild. Absolutely wild. I've had quarrels on this score, though. Some people have told me—poets, who love the sonnet form—"Well, isn't it good to put all that raggedness and wildness in a little, tight, beribboned space. To try to make some order of things." Well, that's their reaction to the problem. But mine is just to subscribe to the wild temper of the time and to try to devise new ways of using free verse—the free verse form. And I said earlier that sometimes rhyme creeps into that. It does.

Q: A lot of what you already said today about poetry—even the general term "distillation"—implies that you are not just writing prose. You're distilling it. So that's a certain amount of stricture. So how do you determine how far you go with regulations?

Miss Brooks: "Distilling" seems to me to be different from arranging, which is what you do when you're working with a prescribed form like the sonnet or the villanelle. To "distill" means for myself to take the nugget from the whole, to... Yes, that's what I mean. And that seems to me different from working with a form. I was thinking of distilling experience—life experience. And when you're doing that, you don't put everything in.

(We summarize the intent of the following question:)

Q: How do you answer people who feel that life is so chaotic and atomized that it cannot be distilled—that there wouldn't be a nugget?

Miss Brooks: There wouldn't be a nugget? Let's think of it in this way. You are in love. And you decide you want to write about this experience. Are you a poet yourself?

Q: No.
Miss Brooks: That seemed to be a poet’s question. You wouldn’t put down everything that happened to you in that love experience. You wouldn’t say, “On each day I went to see her. I put on my shirt and my tie and I brushed my hair.” Some of that can be left to the imagination of the reader. You would try to get to the very heart—or nugget—of that experience, that pain, that agony, that triumph, that joy. And that is what you would give your reader. He really wouldn’t care—or maybe he might—but at least you wouldn’t bother to tell him just exactly what you had for dinner with this girl. You wouldn’t say, “We had McCormick’s coarse ground pepper.” You would seize upon some item of the meal if you wanted to refer to the meal that you shared—if it seemed significant—that would be representative somehow of the feeling that you two enjoyed. That is what I mean by distilling experience. You don’t put the whole thing on the paper. You choose what seems most appropriate, most representative, most immediate, most . . . capsulable. (Pause.) Anybody else want to join in this fight over here?

Q: How do you decide when the poem is distilled enough?

Miss Brooks: Distilled enough. That’s interesting.

Q: What’s the quality of being very distilled? Does it hit you hard or does it put you to sleep or what?

Miss Brooks: It’s something that you work at as you write the poem. You try to ask yourself, “What is the real importance here? What is the real meaning for myself first?” And that is what I try to get on the paper. May I say that I believe in revising as much as is necessary. Maybe you never really finish a poem. You have to stop somewhere, though. And my standard is: after a poem has been published, I’m through with it. There has been—of course, you can go on writing one poem for the rest of your life—there has been an exception that I think many of you might find interesting, however. I wrote a poem called “An Aspect of Love: Alive in the Ice and Fire.” And I just adored the way it began. It began: “It is the morning of our love.” It seemed to me to be a sweet, beautiful, tender, gentle opening for a poem, a love poem. And after it had been published, a young friend of mine called in high excitement and said, “Say, you know the first line of that poem of yours, etc, etc. I saw it in Rod McKuen’s book Listen to the Warm. (Laughter—at Rod’s expense.) And sure enough, he had begun a poem: “It is the morning of our love.” So in subsequent publications I took that line out and I began the poem with the second line: “In a package of minutes there is this week.” And may I suggest to all of you young poets, if a line just seems to float into your mind, perhaps seems to have a certain inevitability, question it because maybe it likewise floated into somebody else’s mind.

Q: Do you think the word “magic” could be substituted for “poetry” in the sense that magic is evocative, creating new experience or a new state of mind or a new . . . something that gives you imagination, rather than just recording or “distilling” something out of experience?

Miss Brooks: As one who loves poetry and has long loved poetry, I wouldn’t struggle with you too furiously over that word. I often feel myself—may I see my autobiography. I like to quote something in this area. I said in a little department called “Marginalia”: “So much is involved in the writing of poetry, and sometimes, although I don’t want to suggest that it is a magic carpet, it seems we really do have to go into a bit of trance—self-cast trance—because ‘brainwork’ seems unable to do it all, to do the whole job. A self-cast trance is possible when you are importantly excited about an idea or a surmise or emotion.” So I don’t think we’re too far apart.

Q: Could you give us some idea of what you do in a writing course?

Miss Brooks: Some of them have been poetry writ-
ing courses, some have been creative writing courses which involved poetry writing and short story writing and novella writing. Others have been 20th century poetry and short stories. And even freshman English. Conveniently, I have all this written down in this autobiography. Let me tell you something about what I used to do in class. Well, I tell about my first class at Columbia College in Chicago. . . . I said, “In my new little professor’s blue suit, I entered my first classroom. Twenty-one young souls were sitting there, awaiting the knowledge, the magic, the definitions I was bringing them surely. I felt the need to spin automatically around and leave within the minute of my arrival. But I stayed and discovered that it was possible to enjoy this thing that I had not done before. . . . But this class was exciting because there I was free to experiment. The president there allowed me to do anything I wanted to do.” Is that true of you teachers here? (Uproarious laughter.) “He said, ‘Do anything you want with the class. Take it outdoors, take it to a restaurant, run it in a restaurant, a coffee shop, anything.’ Any teacher of creative writing is asked, ‘Can you teach people to write?’ How can you teach people to write poetry? A teacher cannot create a poet. But a teacher can explain the ‘wonders’ of iambic pentameter, can explain how the Shakespearean sonnet differs from the Petrarchan. More important, a teacher can oblige the writing student to write.” In all poetry
workshops of mine the principal requirement has been the writing of a book of twenty poems, ten of them in prescribed forms, the rest in any... One sonnet had to be a Shakespearean sonnet, one had to be a Petrarchan. Everybody had to write a ballad. And there was always a study preceding the writing. I would bring records to class—I believe that that’s a very effective device. The other ten poems could be written in any form that the students chose, and they usually chose the haiku, which they thought was an easy poem to write. It is not; it’s very difficult. But they liked it because it had only three lines. Or they would write in free verse. In creative writing workshops, there was a fiction requirement also. It consisted variously of a number of short stories or a novella or the beginning of a novel... [My class] featured much reading of poetry, new and old, poetry recording, writing within music—here you write a poem and let the music move your fingers in its behalf. I had panel discussions, which often ended in loud screams. And once a fight was threatened. Debates, book reviews as opposed to book reports, and revision groups. Here I had the students write a poem and then trade their poems with their neighbors in class for signed criticism. And they began
I have a little more sympathy for teachers and critics when they began to do it at each other's work and found all kinds of things wrong.

Q: Do you ever find yourself with literary paralysis—or any of your students? If so, what do you do about it?

Miss Brooks: Well, the answers have to be different. With myself, I can say that I found out that the 'literary block'—which is what most writers call it—does pass. It is a frightening thing when it is new to you, and you feel, “Oh, the springs are dry. I'll never be able to write again.” Now, if you had a number of them, you'd realize that you will be able to write again. What I do during those dry times is to do a good deal of reading. You know, there are all those books that you need to read, and you don't have time to read—that's the time to read them. And all of a sudden you'll find yourself—

Q: What do you think accounts for them in the first place?

Miss Brooks: I don't know. I don't suppose there's any real answer to that. If it's a case of a person who does a great deal of writing, it might just be mental and emotional exhaustion—temporary exhaustion. For students in a class, though, there
isn’t time to wait for those springs to fill up again. So I ... talk with the student; we have special conferences, and I’d ask him or her what is important at that time to him or her, what’s going on in their life, what means most to you, what has you churning inside. And often it may have been a case of the student feeling that what is very important material isn’t important enough to put on paper. And I’ve often been able to convince him otherwise. I’d say, “Say! My goodness, there you’ve got some really exciting material. Write a poem about that. Just start anywhere. Even if it’s a silly line, a silly paragraph. Don’t worry about it. Get it down on paper. Then go back and toil over it.”

Q: ... Very often, the literal level [of a poem] is very well done, but there seems to be a suggestion of a second level—and the poet will tell you whether it’s deliberate or not—only the second level doesn’t go all the way. It only works halfway through the poem. Should you work with it on that second level or should you let the poem rest with a very good first literal level?

**Lorraine**

Lorraine was a girl I once knew  
She grew up like all girls do  
She jump rope like all girls do  
But she die like no girl I knew  
She took a turn while we took a step  
She took fantasy instead of reality  
Once while in Pain she called my name  
I turn my back I could not bear her shame  
That same night she die  
She tried to fly in a narcotic sky  
Now I stand above your grave  
Upon my lips are many prayers  
But what are prayers to the dead?  
They hit the air and become dust  
Lorraine  
On this day above your grave  
I say I will not turn my back on  
Those who bear your shame  
Never again will they utter my name in vain  
Lorraine

**Summer Cold**

Sometimes I feel the summer cold  
When I see a junkie walking alone  
I feel deaths cold breath  
As he passes by  
But what death be to the dead  
just the summer cold  
for ones who walk alone  
for death be your companion  
no company gives he  
but each day you look more like him  
It’s there in your icy stare  
and it waits for all  
who walks alone  
in the summer cold  
But fear not death  
For it be not final  
Mind that destroy body  
Can find no peace  
The hell you have  
Your soul will inherit  
Misery will not end  
When death calls  
It will surely just begone  
For all those  
Who walk alone  
In the summer cold

**John Artis**
Hercules the Reprobate

by Randall VanderMey

Where Hercules came from I don't know, and where he is headed I am even less certain. He's a city rat, born without parents and raised on TV dinners and Kool-aid.

Three months ago I wouldn't have told you anything about Hercules. I've found, after five years of his company, that to talk about him is to run him down, and I wouldn't have done that to him because he and I were still nominally friends. He insisted that I never talk to anybody about him because, he said, "I know that people would take me wrong." As if he were an unpublished book whose commercial success would be spoiled by bad advanced publicity. Who could possibly take him wrong? Someone could assess him as a thin-lipped, loose-jointed, balding, twenty-one year old reprobate with big ideas and half an index finger on his left hand, and I would call that an accurate profile.

Well, obviously, I'm talking freely about him now. I haven't protected him with my friendship for three months, ever since his "love affair" with Elaine gave me an excuse to escape. But he'd...
be terribly upset if he knew we were talking about him behind his back; so if I tell you some things I remember about him, don’t you tell anybody else. I may have lost hope for him, but I still feel a strange, amazed respect.

When I first said “Hercules,” did you think of a huge muscular guy with a club, a lionskin, and about ten wives? That’s natural. Everybody makes that mistake if they hear the name before they meet the man. When I met Hercules, it was the other way around. I had already drawn all my conclusions, and then I heard the name. I laughed.

One time I asked him about his name.

“My parents wanted a boy,” he said with a scowl.

Looking him up and down I said, “Well . . . ?”

“No,” he said, correcting himself. “They wanted a man.”

I was silent in tribute to his irony.

“Men are the things that shovel coal and clean out stables.” He looked down. “My father was a steelworker. My grandfather had a farm.”

I had drawn my conclusions about him rapidly—at our first meeting to be exact. We were in the park on a windy March day at about suppertime. He was bundled up in the corner of a tall cement seat when my Frisbee landed next to him on the bench and knocked shut the book in his lap. He looked up quickly and saw me coming toward him. Picking up the Frisbee from the ground at his feet where it had fallen, he tried to throw it back to me, but he held it wrong and it went fluttering away and spun through the grass like a mad squirrel while I dived after it. I caught up with it and came back to him. Of course, I apologized for disturbing whatever he was doing. Leaning over, I saw that he had been writing. Later I came back to apologize some more and to find out what he was writing about. Here, when he invited me to sit down, I got a better look at him—his cordy wrists, his thin neck, his tiny chin, his cauliflower mouth, his beagle eyes and ears, his bald head. I noticed how as he talked he put his heel on the bench and buried his chin in his knee and how when he gestured with his hands, as he frequently did, he looked as if he were trying to keep something from spilling. I sat back with a mixture of fascination and repulsion, twirling my Frisbee on my finger.

He wasn’t ready to read from his notebook right away. He preferred instead to talk about liter-
ature in general, speaking with great fondness about the greats with whom he was familiar—Shakespeare, naturally, and Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost and Robert Louis Stevenson. Several times he mentioned William Buckley, although I can’t remember how often or in what connection. After awhile, having exhausted his knowledge of the greats or perhaps his patience with the exile of the subject from himself, he turned the discussion to other matters, namely, his own thoughts. I remember best how he described a certain feeling that he had sometimes, something that affected him when he was doing the dull duties of staying alive: making sandwiches, flushing toilets, going to bed. He felt, he said, as if somebody were writing about him. Matter-of-factly, he said that there were times when he was sure he was the main character in somebody’s novel. What a pity, he said, that literature had once made the human experience seem like a continual heroic dogfight between heroes, beasts, and thwarted lovers, but that now some so-called “man of letters” had nothing better to do than to describe the way he parted his hair or threw a Frisbee. Little as I understood his point, when Hercules said that, I knew for sure that he was either a genius or a creep.

The time came, when he had talked about everything else, that he realized that I still wanted to hear what he had been writing; he brought it up himself.

“Well, I suppose you want to hear my poetry,” he said.

“Oh, it’s poetry?” I said. “I’d love to.”

“Well, I don’t know,” he said. He was playing a game, but I enjoyed it for the moment. Finally, he picked up his notebook and leafed through it carefully as if the pages were dollar bills. Then he set it down.

“You might not understand,” he said, seriously enough to cause me to be serious.

Come on,” I soothed, “I’d love to hear it.” With that assurance, he raised his book again and began to read, starting slowly and softly but eventually raising the book in both hands and reading in a voice which suggested to me that he imagined women swooning about his boudoir. Not being much of a poet myself, I didn’t understand much of what he read. It was about rocks, birds, blood, and trees, and several kinds of flowers. I remember lines like “Sabred sunlight splits the rocks/in a blood dance of birth and death,” but I think I paid more attention to the way his hand settled on the book like a duck making a landing and how his eyes turreted and frowned. I became quite uncomfortable listening to what I thought was strange poetry read by a strange man, not really paying attention and knowing that to give an honest reaction to it would be rude. Finally, when he shut the book quietly and stared reverently into space, my mind was in a minor
panic over what to say. To my distress, he turned to me with a perfectly expectant look on his face. Naive, I thought, for him to appeal for my approval. He raised his eyebrows, childishly. He may have noticed the worried look on my face for I caught a slight knitting of his eyebrows. Suddenly, I felt as if the pigeons, the trees, even the bronze monuments in the park were all turning to me with perfectly expectant looks on their faces and saying, “Well? Did you like it? Did you like it? Did you like it?” I bunched up my face in my most ambiguous look, knowing that if he cared, he could see me smiling; otherwise, he would see me squinting. Unconsciously, my hand rose to my head and scratched. The only thing I could say was, “Hmmm.” He saw the squint. “You look as if you’d tripped over a skunk,” he whispered with a spreading look of horror on his face. I scratched all the harder, relaxing my nose. Quietly, he gathered his book in folded arms and rose from the seat, turning away from me and walking quickly in the direction of the monuments. Alone on the bench, I felt as if I had tripped over a child in the dark. “Rats,” I said to myself, “now I’ve hurt him.” On an impulse, I leaped up and

Winter, 1973

ease into winter
with a crack & a silence
realize the intensity
of a season in which one
must build or hibernate

storing through autumn
the essentials       apples nuts firewood bread
                      whiskey ammunition

holding everything about you in balance
as one holds a baby’s head

cells retreat
blood slows
lungs soften
with the snow     everyone trying to get out the cold
                           or simply away

in winter be an Indian
gloved hands pointing towards warmth
the blankets of every color
the buffalo & dogs
the dried venison smoking across the plains
against the cold against the cold
                                 with a rage beyond rage
                                 the wolves howl
                                 on the western slopes
                                 & shake down into winter
                                 with a growl & thick bright fur

David den Boer
chased him—"Say, hold on." I caught him, and we stood face to face, both waiting for me to say something to make it all better.

I said, "You know, I don't even know your name yet." He puzzled me by staring straight through me, as if wondering at this new malice.

"Hercules," he said at a snail's pace.

And that was when I laughed. Uncontrollably. Wildly. The pain was too much to bear. — But don't think that I even so much as broke my expression. I talked on as if he had said "John" or "Harold," owing him too much after the first thrust to twist the dagger any further.

I tried to pacify him—his face looked almost tearful—by turning my criticism against myself, confessing to be nothing of a critic, confessing how I was always unwittingly stepping on people's toes, how I'd like to make it up to him if I could, how I would like to hear more poetry if I could. Inside myself, the conversation went differently. I kept saying to myself, "Let me escape this web. He draws me on as Hercules the artist and traps me as Hercules the worm. I am not the hurting type. So why did I hurt him. Unless he drew me on..."

Propitiously, I gave him my phone number. A mistake, since he later used it. With my phone number written above his latest poem, at last he seemed placated. He gave me a suspiciously broad smile, and we parted, leaving the park in opposite directions; I ground my heel into pigeonshit as I walked.

I have spent five years dressing that wound. The word "Yes" was my bandage. Hercules called often with suggestions that we go to the park to talk or to museums or for walks along the lake. He always brought his poetry along to read, and I endured it, partly in search of the artist in him and partly to apologize for ever having called him a worm.

I became his patron in broader areas of life as well. I saw him through twelve jobs in five years, writing letters of recommenda-
During the first two years, he gobbled up and spit out jobs left and right—as a gas station pump jockey, a bakery doughnut filler, a launderer, and a roofer. On his fifth job as a punch press operator, he lost his left index finger, as I told you before. He was overjoyed at the insurance settlement, but from then on he was spooked by what he called "violent" jobs. When the insurance money ran out, he became a caddy until the women of the country club found out his age and boycotted him. He came away from that job with a profound dislike for rich, middle-aged women. He lost his next job as a garbage collector because of an allergy to bananas and took up work as a night watchman for a contraceptives manufacturer. The trauma of being bitten by the watchdog propelled him into what he claimed was a "safe" job—attendant, grass cutter, and general handyman in a children's park. But three months later, he was out of that, too, claiming that his poetry had become infested with images of peat moss, weeds, and broken bottles.

By this time, I was looking around quietly but frantically for a polite method of escape from this human millstone. I had tried other methods of coping with him. For the length of one year I had tried to convince myself that my friendship with him was something more than a philopter-
Rover (a translation from the Cat)\textsuperscript{a}

The cat is in charge here.

How a cat?

Desperately at first.

but now becoming his own idiom

he transplants everyone's happiness.

This increases until the full moon.

He leaves off reading Homer.

Time is for rewards, he shouts.

\textsuperscript{a} I tried to be word for word faithful to the Cat while still conveying the poetic sense. This was impossible so I picked up a Cat-English dictionary and chose words at random.

\textsuperscript{b} Cats often have churches with spiders the vicars. Hey Diddle Diddle.

Sordidity

Here at the poetry workshop we are able.
We have seven gold poems each on the average.
You come in.
You take a number.
You want us to fit a poem for your soul.
We measure your soul.
Sordidity; animal hero, one subplot.
How about this we say,
a football player, halfback,
lines the girls against the wall,
charges them with a whoop.
"That is not what I meant at all," you cry.
We remeasure your soul,
passion; subplot two, salvation.
"Oh take me to a new place," she cries.
"Let us live beneath the snow," he says.
Two children each a plot unto themselves move in and out fuzzing their mouths.
You thank us and pay us the best money,
you leave smiling, poem under your arm.

Hubert Van Tol
Standing in the lost subzero
the moon startles Alabaster
in a frigid wash of its
ditto light,

Alabaster eyes bounce from his pallid shadow
to the luminous globe hanging
But old Luna has to squint
through a choppy haze of high-altitude snow
which hangs and drifts
in the wild beyond
like some intermittent catzcradle
being flexed between the clouds

no doubt a valid
meteorological
phenomenon
it seems
now
somewhat mystical

In the frozen desolation
Even the Alabaster sigh is not warm
It is steam to frost
and to the ground

He leers back through the frozen fog

The moon is as good a friend to Alabaster as any
On his way back somewhere
Alabaster steps on his sigh

Tim Straayer

ologist’s fascination with a new mutant species. But I failed. I came to admit at last that the same old injury was drawing me to him and encasing me, the same old debt plus others like it which through lack of caution I had incurred over the years.

I decided to stab my way out the way I had come in, and if fireworks should accompany the event, well, I thought, let them come and cauterize the wound.

Meanwhile, Hercules had found a steady lawn job and lost it because of some uncharacteristic behavior. Usually, he was fired for plain incompetence or dawdling, or, as one employer said, “irreconcilable idiosyncrasies”; but this time, absentmness was at fault. He had let the grass go to seed and the flowers to weed for more than month when he returned to find a ten-year-old boy doing his work.

I didn’t immediately ask what he had been doing during that stretch of a month, but clues began to surface in his poetry that he had found a new pastime. On our frequent walks through the park I began to hear poems addressed to some girl “Elaine.” His poems took on an obscure, repressed, sensual quality. Hercules read them with great care. I knew the signs. Once I had hoped that Hercules might fall in love so that some bubble-headed girl incapable of harm might push me right out of Hercules’ life and affections. But as years had started to gather around him like soot and his hair began to fall away, I had lost hope and begun to contemplate a more calamitous separation. Now I rejoiced that this old possibility was opening up for me again. I decided to fan whatever little spark it was that flamed in Her-
So I broke the subject to him one day while we were walking among the pigeons in the park. To my disappointment, I found that he had not seen this girl Elaine, whoever she was, even once during the month that had cost him his lawn job but had dallied away his days in the park, swooning and writing love sonnets, although he didn't know the right rhyme scheme. My optimism clouded at this information, yet not so much that he might perceive it, especially in his state of rapturous disintegration, I kept fanning.

How had he met Elaine, I wanted to know. He came back with a tale of coquetry and mad pursuit. He had been working in the park two jobs ago, he said, cutting grass, picking up papers, and pushing a broom. Well, over by the monkey bars he had pushed his broom along under some brown benches in a waiting area for mothers. Head down, he had swept right into a pair of knee-high white boots. He asked the girl in them if she would please raise her feet for a minute while he swept under her. She did, and that's when it happened. Interested—genuinely interested—in a girl for the first time that he could ever remember, he swept the asphalt very clean underneath her feet, and then he stopped, turned around, and leaned on his broom. Looking at her, he said, "Pardon me. Could I ask you your name?" Then, Hercules said, she gave him a "playful eye." I could picture it.

"Elaine," she had said.

Hercules had just stood there then with a smile on his face—probably the same smile he used on me after he had read poetry to me the first time. It was the only one I had ever seen on him. Poor Elaine.

"Buzz off, creep," she had said and had got up and walked out of the park, watched all the way by Hercules.

"Then I knew," Hercules said. "Then I knew she was playing hard-to-get. I was so happy. See, I knew she was the one. This has never happened to me before." At this point my hopes for a gentle separation from him took the form of little men who lay on their backs in my brain, wailing and tearing their hair.

My one hope was to help Hercules find Elaine.

But other matters soon took precedence, prime among them a new job for Hercules. Together we found him a job at a parking lot where he opened and closed the exit gate from a little booth. He had stopped mooning about the park during working hours, and for several days had worked diligently without distraction when a six-year old boy, so small he could hardly see through the coin slot in the window, came along and asked Hercules what he was doing. But when he left, he reached up and deposited a banana skin right in the coin tray. Hercules looked down at it in horror, already feeling the congestion starting in his sinuses. Making some unintelligible noise, he grasped the exit gate from a little booth and with a moan of terror started spitting fire, all but ready to break down the exit gate from the inside. His apologies to them did not spare him from a torrent of verbal abuse; nor did his apologies to the manager keep him from being fired; nor did his apologies to me ease my lust for escape. I was just about fed up. When he lost his next job as a paperboy by landing one on a German shepherd, the only reason I didn't sign him off right on the spot was that the lacerations on his ankle moved me to such genuine pity.

Then one day everything came together. Hercules and I were walking through downtown across from the park at closing time, 5:30 in the afternoon. We had just been locked out of a store by a fat woman who shouted German obscenities at us when we rattled the door, and I was thinking of delicate ways to tell Hercules goodbye.

We headed up the street again, and suddenly Hercules stopped. "Elaine," he whispered. "What?"

Not a word. Then it struck me.

"Great!" I shouted and flung my arm around his shoulder, laughing with delight at the prospect of playing Cupid. Sure enough, three blocks ahead of us I saw a pair of white go-go boots step down from a curb.

But Hercules at my side was making some unintelligible noise, and suddenly he squirmed like a minnow out from under my grasp, pushed me—one might say violently—against a store window and with a moan of terror started to dash off through the heavy late afternoon traffic.

What else could I do but follow? I saw his figure bobbing across six lanes of traffic, madly
lashing between taxis and buses
and stepping at last on the far
curb, which bounded our famil­
lar 1 park. I was more fortunate to
have a traffic light change in my
favor, so I strode away broadly
in pursuit. He had found a
bronze statue near the street, a
young Greek-looking fellow, to
which he had wormed his way up
close so as not to be seen from
the street. He was clinging to a
bronze leg.

Acutely embarrassed, I looked
back at Elaine and saw that she
was approaching the spot where
we had been a moment before.
She appeared to be staring our
way—not unusual, as half the
pedestrians on the block were
doing the same. I waved at her
lightly and made a feeble gesture
toward Hercules, whereupon I
heard him croak, “No!” with
heartfelt terror.

I doubt whether she even saw
Hercules clinging to the statue.
She drew herself together as if to
say, “Wise guy,” and with a look
of scorn, she passed on to the
next block. I watched her white
boots flash for three blocks be­
fore they disappeared · down
some subway steps.

A very, very long silence fol­
lowed between Hercules and me.
But at last I broke it by saying to
him very calmly, “That’s it, Her­
cules. From here on, I think it
would be best if you didn’t call
me anymore.” And then I added,
“I don’t want to see you again
until you’ve got Elaine,” because
I thought that that would be a
very long time.

He said nothing but kept hang­
ing on to the statue. And I had
nothing more to add, so I turned
and walked, with, I admit, more
than a slight spring in my step,
through a claque of pigeons to­
ward a bus waiting nearby.

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poem; early winter ’71

I tramped all day
over fences and fields
old brown hat
low on my brow.
the dogs ran joyously
through weeds and corn.

I stopped in a long-sown field,
considered the harvested hulks
that winter had put to sleep.

I have often wondered
where you are
in my wanderings through
my self.

Your image was formed
so long ago, almost
in another time.
Many forms have come,
tried for awhile
to live up
to you,
and gone.

Right now,
your place is unfilled
again,
the latest shadow
put to flight
by winter.
like all the rest
who left for one
reason
or another.

I do not mind too deeply,
we must all wander alone
before we find a home
to wander from again.

But what
has become of you,
in all my attempts
to make an image real.
Have you been
twisted out of shape, or
into form
something you were not
created to be.

Someday someone
will move in,
tidy up the place
a bit,
and get a little fire
going in the heart.

It will be good then, too,
to tramp home in evening
over the last hill,
the dogs anxious
at my heels for home,
to lift my hat
a moment,
wipe my brow,
before I warm
my heart a bit,
and to wander together
for a time.

C J Strikwerda
Using the facts, making a fiction


Thanks to my interim course I now know that Honoré de Balzac was largely responsible for the development of the historical novel in France. He was not the originator of the form, though—he was heavily influenced by the earlier work of the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott. Both men tried to *popularize history*. The attempt seems to demonstrate a conception of the authors' responsibility to act as a commentator in society—to use their unusually sharp perceptions to provide society with a true picture of itself. The idea that artists have social responsibility is of course not confined to expression in the historical novel. But the attempt by the historical novelist to depict society as it supposedly is suggests that his social consciousness is a primary motivating force in his work.

All of this information is extraneous except as background for the observation that *Burr* is written with a social consciousness. It is an historical novel set in a period a century and a half prior to its publication and yet written with one of Vidal's eyes on the present. The American heritage holds a peculiar status as the foundation for many of America's assumptions about itself. Vidal apparently realizes that an examination of the period of our political germination can be an effective instrument for probing the roots of our political assumptions.

Vidal knew none of the founding fathers personally, but he has gone out of his way to assemble a mass of historical detail. This includes personal data about Burr and other public figures from Washington to VanBuren as well as detailed descriptions of myriad political intrigues, social settings, and weather conditions.

However interesting Vidal's historical constructions may be in themselves (they are not entirely his), they serve collectively as elements of a work which is primarily literary rather than historical. The line between well-written

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women, Woman

women are placid, meek
but this woman
is not
she is fire
she is a bursting
a shattering of senses
not lost in sweetness;
not in need of someone
to hold her upright, supporting

but still in need
of holding
in need of one
to absorb the absolute violence
of her passion,
one to understand
the rage of her gentleness

M Edmund
history and well-researched fiction may be narrow in some places, but not here. The novel maintains an aura of historical verisimilitude, but the sense of objectivity provided by that aura is essentially deceitful. Writing historical novels is an even more subjective process than writing history. Vidal cites the essential difference in his afterword—in writing an historical novel one reserves "the right not only to rearrange events but, most important, to attribute motive—something the conscientious historian or biographer ought never do." He does not add, except implicitly, that the latter gentlemen do not attribute motive because it is essentially unascertainable. Thus Burr as an historical examination is buried under so many levels of fact, reasonable assumption, interpretation, character assassination, and elements of dramatic necessity that no matter however meticulous, or careless, Vidal may have been with his facts, Burr is neither a history nor a biography.

As a literary work Burr leaves an impression of uniform randomness, as if Vidal knew more or less what information was necessary but wasn't sure exactly where to put it, so he just shuffled it around on note cards until it sounded pretty good. This effect is partly attributable to the device Vidal uses to present Burr from both the third-person and first-person perspectives. He has Burr dictate his memoirs to the narrator, his young protege Charlie Schuyler. Charlie in turn revises the memoirs and works them into the fabric of notes he originally intends to use for his biography of the "colonel," as he calls Burr. The "plot," a vague plan by Charlie to discover Burr's secret relationship to Martin VanBuren and use it to discredit VanBuren in his race for the presidency, is ludicrously thin, repeatedly avalanched by a continuing series of events and anecdotes whose relation is sometimes chronological, sometimes topical, and sometimes stream of consciousness. The conclusion is based on little more than the verity that even the old colonel has to die eventually, and then no one is left for Charlie to take notes on.

Whatever structure the novel has is built around Burr. Unfortunately, the central character is often reduced to the status of a literary device. His characterization, though detailed, remains superficial. This superficiality is largely the result of Burr's inscrutability, itself one of the important facets of his character. Unfortunately the format enforces the inscrutability rather than circumventing it. Charlie remains until the end too naive to penetrate it. Thus our inability to discover just what makes Burr tick feeds the suspicion that Vidal really hasn't told us.

Rather than focusing on the colonel, Vidal uses his central character as a prism to separate and describe the elements around him. Burr himself has been eclipsed as a power within the young republic by such scandals as his duel with Alexander Hamilton, founder of Paterson, New Jersey. Burr's comments on Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and others are largely responsible for the historical flavor of the novel and are its chief point of interest.

In a sense, Burr seems based more on the present than on the past, in spite of its historical flavor. Vidal was quoted as saying on some plug-a-book talk show that he psyched himself up to write Burr by watching Watergate hearings. Whether or not he injected it as methodically as all that, a post-Watergate conception of political amorality certainly seems to have pervaded his conception of early national politics. It is as if Vidal, rising above the masses who gnash their teeth at the decline of political decency in our Christian nation, sees a necessity of explaining in a convoluted way that things are not so much worse than they were before because they were that bad before. This sort of political realism is not shaking the earth, but it does deserve to be filed away with the status of a valid observation.

**Interior Study**

Norman Matheis
A) - Nixon's Pooch 'Checkers' Grabs a Bone
B) - Finger of Fate Turns on Watergate Tapes
C) - Sam Ervin's Eyebrow Twitches When He Hears Tape Recordings
D) - Scales of Justice Tip, Awaking Courthouse Mouse
E) - Mouse Jumps from Scales, Frightening Rosemary Woods
F) - Judge Sirica Pounds Gavel for Order