3-1-1980

Dialogue

Staff and writers of Dialogue

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/dialogue

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.calvin.edu/dialogue/71

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Calvin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dialogue by an authorized administrator of Calvin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dbm9@calvin.edu.
dialogue

A journal of Calvin College art and commentary published monthly by the Calvin College Communications Board. Address correspondence to Dialogue, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506. Copyright 1980 by the Calvin College Communications Board.

The book stops here.

ILLUSTRATORS: Catherine Poutsma, David Bouwjes, Ruth van Boak
Contents

FEATURES

When All’s Said And Done: An Editorial/Essay
David Baker .................................................. 4
Towards A Faithful Poetics
Nicholas Wolterstorff ........................................ 7
Iser the Exegete
Barbara Carvill ................................................. 10
A Critics’ Colloquium
David Baker .................................................... 12
Words and Works: Writer’s Guild
Laura Smit ....................................................... 16
Ricoeurian Hermeneutics
Clarence Walhout ............................................. 19
Thoughts of A Distracted Reader
Theo De Bruyn ................................................ 24
Careful Symmetry
Paul Baker ...................................................... 26

POETRY

I,II,City On the Hill
Stephen Pruett ................................................ 23

FICTION

Night Reminiscence
Herbert Vander Zwaal ..................................... 29

Editor
David Baker

Associate Editors
Len Diepeveen
Michael Hakkenberg
Joan Huysers
Mary Lucasse
Jane Plantinga
Ruth Van Baak
Judy Van Gorp

Faculty Mentor
Kenneth Kuiper

Faculty Associate Editors
Barbara Carvill
Timothy Van Laar
Stanley Wiersma
Editor's Note: This essay is dedicated to the Dunham household.

I. Editorial: Part A

Prof. Nicholas Wolterstorff recently suggested two categories into which we might put our studies: those which transform and liberate society, and those which "humanize" it by perpetuating cultural institutions. The first is "revolutionary," we may extrapolate to say dynamic, progressive, concerned with the exigencies of the historical moment, very much in the world (though not of it); the second seems static, reactionary, arcane, hardly in the world at all. And, in the latter category, Prof. Wolterstorff firmly places the discipline to which this issue of Dialogue is devoted; poetics.

"In an educational program appropriate to the second, one will spend a great deal of time developing physics, sociology, literary theory..." I am sure Chimes readers intuitively sensed the rightness of Prof. Wolterstorff's classification, and, no doubt, some Dialogue readers are wishing the editor had kept something like the Wolterstorffian scheme more in mind when choosing this theme. As one puzzled scholar wondered when solicited for a contribution, "Poetics? What's that?"

At Calvin, the feeling runs deep that English studies-as a body of texts, as a tone of tradition, as an object, as a discipline-"is inextricably rooted in praxis. As a Palestinian American, he has unremittingly contended for Arab rights. His latest "angry" polemic, The Question of Palestine, follows closely upon Orientalism, in which he "accused members of the entire field of Western 'Oriental studies' of a blinkered portrayal of Oriental (read Arab) people as changeless, exotic and helplessly inferior-ripe candidates for improvement at the hands of superior Western colonizers." If we are looking for a literary theorist who "inserts" himself into historical, social reality, we have found him in Edward Said.

II. Said vs. Contemporary Criticism

Edward Said (sa' ed) "teaches theory and philosophy of criticism and modern comparative literature at Columbia University," he is a theorist of stature. An issue of Diacritics has been devoted to him; he appears, it seems, in every latest theoretical anthology. He is, quite obviously, proficient and knowledgeable in poetics; yet—his scholarly work is inextricably rooted in praxis. As a Palestinian American, he has unremittingly contended for Arab rights. His latest "angry" polemic, The Question of Palestine, follows closely upon Orientalism, in which he "accused members of the entire field of Western 'Oriental studies' of a blinkered portrayal of Oriental (read Arab) people as changeless, exotic and helplessly inferior-ripe candidates for improvement at the hands of superior Western colonizers." If we are looking for a literary theorist who "inserts" himself into historical, social reality, we have found him in Edward Said.

If solidarity were expected within the critical community, the distance Said puts between himself and the school presently in ascendance, structuralism, would have to be regarded as a sacrifice, but, in the current fragmented state of the discipline, this is hardly the case. Critics are expected to contend, to develop their own thinking largely by negating that of others. As Said notes, criticism may "appear perforce eccentric, even determinedly so. But this will-to-ecentricity, I think, is a major project of contemporary critical discourse." Consequently, Said's critique of structuralism marks him not so much as a critic "in exile," but a legitimate contender. To understand Said, then, we will have to know what it is he opposes. In current poetics, what you don't believe defines you as much as what you do.

Said presents some of his complaints against the discipline in "Roads Taken Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism;" scholars at Calvin will doubtless recognize and share his exasperation.

Criticism, he says, is divided against itself. On one side stand those for whom "'Good'—in the sense of approved—criticism can... be associated with Anglo-Saxon moral concern, evaluative assertion, a certain kind of attention to stylistic performance, an emphasis on 'concrete' reading as opposed to 'abstract' (and foreign) pseudo-philosophy or general-terms like 'structure,' 'semiological,' 'hermeneutical,' 'deconstruction.'" This coterie of French structuralists is isolated and aloof; they speak in jargon and only to themselves. And the casuality of it all is "the isolated integrity of English studies—as a body of texts, as tradition, as an object, as a tone of voice, as a coherent, well-defined discipline."

Going beyond a broad critique, however, Said executes a maneuver calculated to put his opponents just where he wants them; he equates today's structuralist with yesterday's "new critic" and associates with Anglo-Saxon moral concern, evaluative assertion, a certain kind of attention to stylistic performance, an emphasis on 'concrete' reading as opposed to 'abstract' (and foreign) pseudo-philosophy or general-terms like 'structure,' 'semiological,' 'hermeneutical,' 'deconstruction.'" This coterie of French structuralists is isolated and aloof; they speak in jargon and only to themselves. And the casuality of it all is "the isolated integrity of English studies—as a body of texts, as tradition, as an object, as a tone of voice, as a coherent, well-defined discipline."

David Baker is editor of Dialogue.
by means of specialized critical vocabularies. The functionalists lingo "makes the break between the community of critics and the general public very sharp;" it "must, and so does, emphasize the anti-natural, and even anti-human, characteristics of verbal behavior in written language." Though, as Murray Krieger observes, "Said has shrewd strategic reasons for his groupings." Our critic's dexterity must not blind us to the arbitrary "violence" of this association; the formalist's "surface" coherence is not the structuralists quasi-linguistic patterning—and cannot be. Still, for Said's purposes the juxtaposition works well enough. He has yoked together those whose tendency it is to withdraw the text from the realm of public discourse (historical, social reality) so as to isolate the text as an independently existing, "veiled" object, transparent only to the arcane methodology of the initiated "functionalist" critic. So removed from history are such critiques, avers Said, they are unwilling even to write genuine histories of themselves; "critical attention to criticism viewed as an intellectual phenomenon in a historical, social setting is resisted in ways exactly congruent with those I listed for functionalist attitudes." 

III. Said vs. Structuralism

"Abecedarium Culturae: Structuralism, Absence, Writing," an earlier essay, is less polemical, more a critique from within than without. Here, Said treats of the structuralist "mind," and, surprisingly, his tone at times is almost tender; he speaks of the "protracted Orpheus-cry of anguish at the immense difficulty of producing unity" in the structuralist's inchoate reality. "Abecedarium Culturae" is a long essay; my explication must perforce be brief and of necessity do some unavoidable violence to the subtlety of Said's thought.

It was Yeats who wrote, "Things fall apart the centre cannot hold." The structuralist's reality, at least as Said articulates it, is pervaded by a sense of loss, a yearning for a center which gave way long ago, leaving the "decentered universe" of... language. The horror lies in language's radical discontinuity with Being, though it may be difficult for the reader untutored in this alien mentality to understand why this is so. It should be remembered that structuralism is no mere methodology; it has its pantheon of progenitors (Vico, Saussure), its prophets (Derrida) and its myths. Largely responsible for the formulation of these last is the anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss. His understanding of the origin and structure of human society provides the structuralists with an anthropology and a cosmology: in fine, a governing vision. If Said thinks of the structuralists as tormented by a knowledge that language cannot be congruent with Being, it is because he, like all the structuralists, has read Levi-Strauss's account of pre-literate, "primitive" man's fall from grace, his exposure to the power and alienation of writing. As Said describes it, the anthropologist encounters the Namibikwara, a tribe of Arizona primitives.... There, among them, Levi-Strauss speculates on the origins of writing and concludes... Before writing, man had lived at a zero point... life... was ruled over by a central 'floating signifier' (the Origin), by virtue of which "spoken words and concrete objects were) interwined in a complex but profoundly logical unity." Then literate man imposes his literacy on the primitive; he is made to write. Entrapped in écriture, he "fails"; the Origin is lost.

The biblical parallels are explicit, and Said capitalizes on them in a way the Calvin reader will appreciate more than most. Said speaks first of Milton's Paradise Lost, a poem whose very title announces it as a paradigm for the primal fall, the irrecoverable Origin, the lost Paradise of pre-literary. Paradise Lost, as Said understands it, is and must be a decentered poem; that is, it's entire burden is to speak of a "center" to which the poet, as a fallen creature, can have no access. How can an essentially sinful being know what it is to be sinless And, by analogy, how can post-literate man know what it is to be free of the written word? Milton, like the structuralist, must circle endlessly about a Void, a nothingness where the primordial meaning should be, trapped in language, articulating in language what by definition is beyond language. "Words represent words which represent other words, and so on." Levi-Strauss encounters the same impasse; the pre-literate mind is a "state to which civilized man can have no real access... the modern mind must conceive it entirely as a system of endless parallels and reflections." The anthropologist "discerns" the Origin, not by its presence (now obliterated), but by its absence in the culture he scrutinizes. And, like Milton, who seeks to justify the ways of God to man though his whole poem cries out that Paradise is lost, Levi-Strauss tries to speak the unspeakable and define the Origin. All for nothing; "there is no center available to the modern thinker, no absolute subject, since the Origin has been curtained off." 

The temptation, of course, is to make much of the evident affinity between the Origin and the Christian Word; and it is not one to be resisted. Said himself plays with the equation, only to dismiss it. In Paradise Lost, "we may take comfort in Raphael's assertion that there had been a Word, a primal unity of Truth, to which such puzzles as 'meaning' and 'reference' are impertinent. Yet on the other hand, we have only his word for it." Man, then, will not be delivered from this wordy maze; there is no exit. Man's fall from linguistic grace brings with it the totalitarianism of language. Just as, by a Christian view, man traded innocence for sin, only to be enslaved by it, post-literate man is a creature of language. The structuralist believes this because he affirms with Vico, Kant, Colegrove et al. that man structures his reality, that he determines what, for him,
will be its configurations. In the heyday of Romanticism, man's capacity to make his world proved his creative supremacy. With structuralism, however, power has passed from the one who structures, man, to the structure itself. And since the principle tenet of structuralism that all structures are patterned after language, it is this "linguisticity" which becomes the measure of all things. One might, as Said does, describe this overarching domination as the tyranny of a "metaphor without brakes." 17 Without language man cannot think (thinking is language). Beyond language man cannot think (what is beyond language is unthinkable). Man does not speak; he is spoken. He is a pronoun inserted into a universal grammer, dissolved in the overarching wave of discourse, the stridency has crept in along with the language itself, turning finally into little more than a constituted subject...fixed indecisively in the eternal, ongoing rush of discourse.18

V. Said vs. Functionalism

If, in 1972, Said was willing to confine himself to a somewhat sympathetic (albeit interested) analysis, by 1979 he has written The Question of Palestine and is ready to denounce. With "The Text, the World, the Critic" (hereafter: TWC), we return to Said the polemicalist. His antagonist of the moment is not so much the structuralist who thinks the world a text, but the "functionalist" who makes a distinction between text and world, but will allow no worldliness into textuality. Said's effort must be to thrust the text into praxis, demonstrating "concrete" relations between the stuff of the text and the materiality of the world, the "real" world, where it is "right for a Jew born in Chicago to immigrate to Israel, whereas a Palestinian born in Jaffa is a refugee."20

The tone of TWC is jarringly different from that of "Abecedarium Culturae:" a stridency has crept in along with the political activism. Of the position of Paul Ricoeur (cf. Prof. Clarence Walhout's article in this issue), Said asserts, "There are so many things wrong with this set of ideas that I scarcely know where to begin my attack."21 Ricoeur has posited an irreducible difference between spoken and written discourse. The situation of spoken discourse is informed by what are termed "conversational implicatures;" written discourse is not. The critic functions to reconstruct the implied discursive situation of the written text. By this view, though, the text is isolated from praxis; its significance determined not by some extratextual reality, but by the hermeneutic action of the critic. What is "wrong" with this view is mostly that Said disagrees with it: he has Ricoeur set a position up so that he, Said, can knock it down in the remainder of the essay.

Now, it must be remembered that the prime obstacles to Said's insertion of text into world are the arguments against the intentional and genetic fallacies. These state, respectively, that 1) an author's intention does not, for the purposes of exegesis, determine the text, and 2) neither does the text's situation in the world (Taine's "race, moment, milieu." Said's handling of these theoretical impediments in "Roads Taken and Not Taken" is a marvel of delicate, oblique argumentation. He professes a genetic theory modified to incorporate the generally accepted critique of the old historical criticism. No longer are we to explain a text simply by locating it within its historical moment; instead each poem or poet is involuntarily the expression of collectivities; what becomes an interesting theoretical problem for criticism is to determine how, or when, or where the poet or his poem can be said to be a voluntary (i.e., personal and/or intentional) expression of difference and/or community. Here genetics is not a simple empirical idea like birth date, which has no genetic power of explanation, but a conceptual test of critical interpretation. To admit that we now have only some genetic thesis about literary production is quite another thing from saying categorically that there can never be a satisfactory genetic thesis.21

By which he means, I think, that intentionality and genesis are not now perceived through the text, but are somehow within it. The text does not express intentionality; it "is" an intentionality, an intentionally informed, but not determined, by all that which the "functionalist" bans from exegesis: economics, sociology and, especially, politics. And it is the critic's "interesting theoretical problem" to decide just how these "collectivities" impinge upon the text's supposed pristine insulation. In TWC, Said recounts the means of ingress through which the world infiltrates the text: mostly, it seems, the text is worldly because it approximates spoken discourse (pace Ricoeur). Such writers as Hopkins, Wilde and Conrad are shown to have "intentionally" modelled their writing on speech and to have accepted the "practical" responsibility which accompanies such discourse.

V. Editorial: Part B

It is hard to know what to make of this geneticism in newsprint. I myself feel our task is easy with it, probably because, as Said himself notes, it collapses "irreducible dualities—subjective/objective, author/poem, and so on, and these are oppositions I would want to keep. But, Said believes they extort too high a cost in understanding and discrimination. To affirm them constitutes a "Lud-dite approach to what after all is in the critic's possession as a sentient rational historical being—the capacity to make genetic hypotheses... (and) a violent denial of some portion of his humanity.22 Perhaps it is, and perhaps something like Said's reluctance to restrict the critical enterprise led Prof. Wollenstorf to so resolutely put literary theory in his second, nontransformational category and to subjugate it to the transformational imperative. A poetics which respects the limits of Self and Other, of text and world is restricting and, I find, sometimes paralyzing. And theorizing predicated on a delimited text does produce an arcane, even elitist poetics. What one can legitimately say of a text is often not what most will want to hear and not what they can share. And a Said-style poetics would I, grant, labor under no such restraints. What could be more topical than the rights of oppressed peoples? And, at Calvin, what could be more accessible than the Church's call to "liberate" tormented mankind? Still, it is my initial and hesitant view that, while it is of the first importance to acknowledge that the critic's exegesis is inevitably pervaded by ideology, texts should, for the purposes of criticism, be regarded as ideologically pure. Calvin needs something like a "functionalist" poetics. Of "Christian" criticism it has more than enough. If any poet must firmly choose to direct himself towards the text or the world or the critic, though between the text and the critic I could make no choice, the world, at least, I would exclude.

Footnotes

5 Directions, p. 34
6 Directions, p. 36
7 Directions, p. 38
8 Directions, p. 9
9 Directions, p. 45
11 "The Second Coming," W. B. Yeats
12 "MFC," p. 303
13 "MFC," p. 312
14 "MFC," p. 354
15 "MFC," p. 342
16 "The phrase is Roland Barthes.'
17 MFC, p. 349
18 From The Question of Palestine, quoted in Newsweek, Feb. 18, 1980
19 Strategies, p. 165
20 Directions, p. 53
21 Directions, p. 53
Towards a Faithful Poetics

Nobody comes to a poem with ear untutored and mind pristine. We all come taught and inscribed. We come trained to listen and look for some things and ignore others, to prize some of what’s there and disparage the rest. Mostly our practices are induced in us by the model of others. Sometimes, though, persuaded by the theorists we read, we adopt them quite self-consciously. And now and then we work them out for ourselves, often in the attempt to cope with poetry recalcitrant to our old practices. But in any case, the reading of poetry is a committed enterprise. It’s an activity stretched between the commitment of the reader and the poem that’s there.

Seeing this, the Christian who hears the call “give all” and who, accordingly, strives restlessly for wholeness and integrity in his life, will struggle to bring the commitments which surface in his reading of poetry into harmony with his acceptance of the Christian gospel and his commitment to the way of discipleship.

The question whose answer I want to pursue in these brief remarks is, then, this: What might a poetics look like which is faithful to the Christian vision of man in the world before God? Or to put it in other words: If one looks at poetry through the eyes of someone committed to the Christian gospel and his commitment to the way of discipleship, to accept this invitation is to miss very much of what is significant in poetry.

Let me add, though, that, judged by this test of opening our eyes to what’s there, the various secular poetics floating around in our society don’t pass muster either. Many are in fact perversely deficient.

Among those Christians who have seriously addressed themselves to the formulation of a poetics faithful to the Christian gospel, far and away the dominant approach has been that which regards what is most important in poetry as consisting in the poem’s being an expression of the artist’s religious Weltanschauung. Two concepts are placed to the fore in this approach: The concept of expression, and the concept of a religious Weltanschauung.

Though I myself once held such an “expressionist” view, I have slowly come to think it inadequate. I no longer think that, in any significant sense of the word “religious,” everyone has a religious Weltanschauung. What characterizes some modes of unbelief is just their finely crafted secularism. But perhaps more importantly, such an approach does in fact constrict our perceptions and our sensibilities, at least if faithfully followed. In the face of all that poetry accomplishes in human affairs, in the face of all that the poem is and all that is of worth in it, this approach invites us to let our ear and mind leave the poem and follow the arrows to what lies behind the poem—to the religious Weltanschauung of the artist. In my judgment, to accept this invitation is to miss very much of what is significant in poetry.

Many of those Christians who hold this view and with whom I am acquainted are in fact sensitive readers of poetry. They do not just regard poems as arrows to Weltanschauungen. But then what has to be said is that their sensibilities are not integrated with their theory. Their self-as sensitive human readers of poetry is disconnected from their self as Christian theorists.

Let me then suggest an alternative approach which I have been working to formulate in recent years. Obviously I do not here have the space to go beyond suggestion.*

Poetry, along with human artifacts in general, must be set within the context of the human being as responsible agent. Definitive of our humanity is the

*Those who want more than suggestion can read my Art in Action, forthcoming from Eerdmans Publishing in April of this year, and my Works and Worlds of Art, forthcoming from Oxford University Press in July of this year.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a professor of philosophy and fellow of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship.
fact that we all have responsibilities, and that, at bottom, those responsibilities consist in responsibility to God. We are responsible to God for cherishing and developing his creation, we are responsible to God for loving our fellows, we are responsible to God for nourishing our own potentials, we are responsible to God for worshipping him. And poetry, I suggest, must always be set within this context of man's office in the world. The poet, too, is called to humanize nature and bring forth its potentials, thereby to serve the needs of his fellows, to nurture his own self, and to acknowledge God.

To say only this, however, is to make poetry sound grim, duty-laden, "calvinistic." Poetry must also be set within the context of our appointed destiny as human beings—shalom. The appointed goal of human life is to dwell in shalom—that is, to experience harmony and delight in all one's relationships, in one's relationship to nature, to others, to God, and yes, to oneself. In our use of what the poet makes, we experience some measure of the delight, the joy, the fulfillment, that is our destiny.

That's the embracing context. But what, specifically, does the poet do? Well, the poet is one who projects a world, as I like to put it. The action of world-projection lies at the center of what he does. And he performs this action by way of composing a poetic text. He puts forth for our consideration a 'world' containing characters, episodes, emotions, thoughts, situations, etc., by way of structuring words in poetic fashion.

The world the poet puts forth is a world distinct from our actual world—related to our actual world in a variety of ways, but nonetheless distinct from it. He puts forth what Tolkien calls a "sub-creation." The world he projects may in one and another respect be true to the actual world. Characteristically, however, it will also be false in one and another respect to the actual world, though, indeed, perhaps only in unimportant ways. Nonetheless, usually it is a world alternative to the actual world. Thus we must not, in our approach to poetry, get hung up on actuality. The possibility of literature lies in our human capacity for the envisagement of worlds alternative to our actual world.

The poet accomplishes his world-projection by way of composing an artifact, an expressive artifact, specifically, a poetic text. One of the functions of this text is to indicate the world projected, thus enabling us to grasp and enter the world. Sometimes it's easy to get from text to world. Sometimes it's challengingly, even frustratingly, hard. We have to catch the sense of metaphors, to spot ironies, to judge the significance of word placement, to catch allusions. Thus arises elucidation of the text, sometimes called hermeneutics.

Perhaps it's tempting for someone working with this perspective to regard the significance of the text as exhausted in its indication of the world projected. Perhaps it's tempting to regard the text as merely a servant to the lord which is the projected world. To yield to that temptation would be profoundly mistaken, however. Always the text bears a significance beyond its use to indicate a world. The text, for one thing, also gives us a point of view on that world. And sometimes that point of view is even more important than the world projected. But the text has significance even beyond this. The text has aesthetic significance. Part of this lies in the fact that the text is, as I mentioned earlier, an expressive artifact. And part of it lies in the fact that it is a structured artifact. In these respects, the world projected is like the text. It too is expressive, and structured. Indeed, the expressiveness and structure of text and world are indissolubly connected.

So the poetic work is not merely the text, counter to what the formalists assumed. But neither is it merely the world projected, as traditional critics in their practice so often assumed. The poem is text-cum-world. On this, the contemporary structuralists are correct. It must especially be said to Christians, who characteristically shy away from the sensory and the physical, that the text also counts—the words, in all their sensory reality. And it must especially be said to our modern secularists, who characteristically acknowledge nothing but the sensory and the physical, that there's more than the text that counts. There's also the world projected.
I mentioned my agreement with the structuralists that the poetic work is text-cum-world. Where I depart from them is in my insistence that, at bottom, poetry does not confront us with an object. At bottom it confronts us with an action, with a human being doing something—specifically, projecting a world by composing a text. The structuralist’s understanding of the poetic work is richer than that of the formalist. Nonetheless, he too illicitly abstracts the poem from its context of action.

One knows what the formalists and structuralists would reply to the theory I have proposed. To adopt such an approach, they would say, would be to invite us to return to burrowing around in the intentions of the poet. It would be to invite us to commit “the intentional fallacy,” whose deadly results we all know. But not so: What counts on my theory is not what the poet intended to do with his text. What counts is what he did with his text. And of course, I do not accept the skeptical claim of the reader-response theorists that a knowledge of that is unattainable.

The person who adopts this action-theory of poetry will attend to the object—to the text-cum-world. He will analyze it, seek to understand it, take delight in it. But he will do more than that. Remembering that the poem enters our lives through the doorway of the artist’s projecting this world by composing this artifact, he will also take note of the artist’s purpose in performing this action. And here we come upon the phenomenon to which many traditional theorists give central importance in their poet-theories, the phenomenon of the poet projecting a world for the purpose of communicating a message to his readers.

It’s true that the poet often projects his world for the purpose of communicating a message. But not always; and not always, when this is his purpose, is this the most important thing that he does and aims to do. The traditional theorist goes wrong, not in his insistence that sometimes what is important in poetry is the poet’s message, but rather in his exaggeration of the extent and importance of this aim of the poet. That becomes eminently clear, for example, from Denys Thompson’s book, *The Uses of Poetry*, in which he undertakes to describe the multitude of public uses for which poets have made their works, down through the ages and across cultures.

But what, lastly, about the religion of the artist? In explaining my theory, not a word has been said about religion. Am I not thereby missing the central thing? I said, near the beginning, that there was a great deal more to poetry than its being an expression of the religious Weltanschauung of the poet; and I intimated that the ‘religious expressionist’ approach does not provide a promising access to that more. So I proposed an alternative. But now it seems that in this alternative, we have the opposite defect. The religion and Weltanschauung of the poet seem now to have entirely disappeared from view. Surely that cannot be correct?

Indeed it can’t. The purpose that the artist adopts for himself, and the manner in which he makes his artifact, are an expression of his commitments, his beliefs, his values. Or to put it in other words: the commitments, beliefs, and values of the artist help to account for his work—for its existence and for its character. In that way they all together constitute what one might call the world behind the work. And prominent and decisive in the world behind the work will always be the religion and/or Weltanschauung of the artist. There is no accounting for mankind’s art apart from mankind’s religions.

That, in its bare-bone outlines, is my action-theory of poetry, specifically, my speech-action theory of poetry, the central action, according to the theory, being that of projecting a world by way of composing a poetic text. It seems to me that this theory both respects the richness of the poetic work and illuminates its multifaceted functioning in our lives, while at the same time being faithful to the Christian gospel. It describes the rich look of poetry as seen through the eyes of someone committed to the Christian gospel, after the spectacles of our contemporary, skepticisms and reductionisms have been discarded.

"If we, as theists, believe that the universe is fundamentally personal in character, it follows that our ultimate understanding will not be in terms of things, which occupy space and may or may not possess certain properties, but of persons, who characteristically do things. Action, not substance, will be our most important category of thought" (J. R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace*).
Iser the Exegete

Barbara Carvill

A couple of years ago, on a trip to Germany, I dropped into the German department at the Free University of Berlin. It was a hectic registration time. To my amazement I saw in front of the department at least eight different display tables set up by various student organizations representing the whole political spectrum from the extreme left to the far right. The Catholics and Protestants were somewhere left of the middle. To the new student of German, each of these groups offered pamphlets, bibliographies, and advice regarding what courses to take, what extra reading to do, and how to be critical of what was taught in the department. The message coming from these displays was clearly this: “Studying German literature, interpreting texts, is an ideological battle! You, students, better decide soon for what and against whom you want to fight! Come to us! We can support you with strategies and ammunition!” There were recommended readings on theories of communication, Semiotics, Structuralism, Russian Formalism, Pragmatics, Hermeneutics, etc.

When I think back twelve years to my own studies of German literature at the University of Freiburg, I realize how different my own introduction to this academic discipline was from the introduction students are receiving today. In an introductory course, “Methods of Literary Interpretation,” we had to learn about different approaches to and methods of explaining a text, about basic merits and deficiencies of author and text-centered criticism. We were told never to separate form and content; we were encouraged to be flexible while doing literary criticism because each of the dominant approaches had its good and its bad points; we were advised not to condemn any approach completely nor use any particular approach exclusively. All in all, we were encouraged to exercise a prudently sceptical methodological pluralism with heavy emphasis on “text-immanent” analysis (new criticism). Our task as future German teachers was to help the students see and appreciate in a given work the author’s skillfulness in using stylistic devices, themes, metaphors, as well as to appreciate the work in the context of its own time.

The display tables in Berlin showed me that things had changed very drastically in a relatively short time. During the revolutionary late sixties and seventies, literary criticism became highly politicized and language departments turned into explosive, ideological battlegrounds. Students now demanded that reading and analyzing literature be “relevant” and directly serve the larger aims of changing the political and social order of the country. The focus has shifted from understanding and appreciating the beauty of important works to scrutinizing them for their social and political function. For instance, students are concerned with identifying texts in the history of German literature which have helped persons to become emancipated and free for political praxis and, by contrast, works and critical approaches which have kept persons enslaved to the “system”. Needless to say, the dominant text-immanent method has been unmasked as hopelessly middle-class, as expressive of a repressive bourgeois mentality which has supported and perpetuated a heinous status quo that every student wants to overthrow.

In the last ten years German Departments have been attacked as useless, authoritarian, and fascist. Many professors of German literature have packed up their bags and sought refuge at quiet North American universities, where they enjoy the blissful naiveté and disinterested diligence of the average student of literature. Student unrest in Europe is beginning to calm down now, but the revolutionary years left a deep mark on literary studies. Literary criticism has become highly self-conscious and theoretical. Everybody is aware now of historical conditioning in the process of understanding and of the underlying theoretical and world-and-life-view assumptions of various approaches to literature. Most important, the focus of interest has shifted away from the author and the “text itself” to the context in which a literary work was or is received and, above all, to the reader and reader’s response to the text. Literary theory has become literary hermeneutics; literary history is unthinkable now without the history of reception (Rezeptionsgeschichte). Literature is seen as “communication” (the pet concept of the seventies) and the challenge of the day is to show as precisely as possible how literary communication is different from all other kinds of human communication.

Wolfgang Iser is one representative of this hermeneutical school whose work is so symptomatic of neo-enlightenment, revolutionary Europe of the sixties and seventies. Iser (EEser)
a professor of English literature at the University of Con-
cstance, developed his systematic theory of reading and the
reading process from his own practice of textual analysis. His
first major book, Der implizite Leser, (The Implied Reader),
deals with typical patterns of communication in the English
novel from Bunyan to Beckett. A second book by Iser, entitled
Der Akt des Lesens, Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung (The Act
of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response) deserves our
special consideration.

Iser's intention is to present a model to account for what
happens when a person reads fiction. What is going on, he
asks, when someone gets absorbed into the imaginary world
of a novel, into something which does not really exist but
which is experienced by the reader as if it does exist? What
effect does this experience have on the reader? Why is
reading novels such an important human activity.

The reading process, according to Iser, is a dynamic
interaction between text and recipient. The fictional text sets
the mind of the reader in motion for constructing an imaginary
object and an imaginary world. The reader does the work; the
text provides a mere score or a set of instructions for the
creative mind. Consequently, the meaning of the text is not
something which exists prior to and independent of the
reading subject. Meaning is produced and projected onto the
text by the reader in the act of comprehension. Iser avoids the
pitfall of total subjectivism, for he ascribes to the fictional text
certain dispositional properties (Wirkungsstrukturen) which
provide the conditions under which meaning can be ac-
tualized. In other words, the author structures his text in such
a way that it not only invites response but also compels the
reader to perform certain operations in the construction of the
imaginary object.

What kind of operations, according to Iser, does the reader
perform? The human mind necessarily thinks in gestalten
because it needs to build consistency into experience. The
text of a novel, however, cannot be grasped as a whole but
has to be read in a linear sequence. With every new sentence
the reader processes new information and builds up expecta-
tions based on his or her own experiences. If these expecta-
tions are not fulfilled in the course of the reading, they have to
be changed and new expectations have to be formed. The
reader links up what he has selectively remembered with new
information which, in turn, is grouped together into a new
gestalt. Modifying and rearranging these groupings create a
foreground and background in the imaginary world. In short,
there is a continuous interplay of modified expectations and
changing recollections.

Text and reader, according to Iser, are together in an
intense, cooperating, and communicative process whereby
the reader brings something to the text and the text something
to the reader. Involvement in creating the imaginary object is
heightened when there are obvious inconsistencies and dis-
crepancies between the reader's expectations and the text.
Habitual orientations are challenged by the reading process;
sometimes the reader is pressed to change in order for the
text to make sense again. The more the reader gives in
creating the imaginary world, the more absorbing the creation
becomes and the more it appears as a real event. Because
the ordinary self recedes into the background during this vivid
imaginary process, it experiences a state of "irrealization".
The fictional text not only gives the reader contradictory
information, it also leaves gaps and purposely stays inde-
terminate. It is the reader's task to fill in gaps with projections
from ordinary experience. The more frequent the omissions
in the text, the greater the reader's participation has to be.

Because the reader gives so much to the text, often he
becomes aware that the text has stimulated a kind of self-
inspection bringing to consciousness some aspect of his
personality hitherto unrecognized.

In the formulation of this theory of the reading process Iser
builds on the ideas of Roman Ingarden, George Poulet, and
Stanley Fish. It is telling, however, that the very type of literary
communication which Iser treats in a systematic way stems
from the 18th century novel, the literary genre of Enlightened
Humanism. In the novel, for the first time in European litera-
ture, authors consciously avoided all overt moralizing. As a
result, the reading public learned to draw moral conclusions
on its own. The enlightened author helped readers to come of
age and to be partners in the establishment of sense and
meaning. One may ask in connection with this: is the value of
reading novels that one experiences the self as an active,
creatively responsible being? Perhaps Iser envisions another
function that reading and literature have for life.

Iser rejects a mimetic understanding of literature. Literature
is not a reflection of but a reaction to reality. What is the
precise nature of this "reaction to reality"? According to Iser,
literature is made up to a great extent of extra-literary material
which he calls the "repertoire." For instance, literature selects
elements from literary convention, from historical events, from
social contexts, and from everyday life. These elements are
taken out of their pragmatic context and defamiliarized. Lit-

terature questions the validity of the existing world view by
deforming and degrammatizing its norms. It makes the reader
scrutinize a system which is normally accepted uncritically
because the reader is a functioning part of the system.

As Iser explicates his view of reality as a source of the
literary repertoire, his position as a modern Humanist with
deep roots in the Enlightenment becomes evident. Because
the world is contingent, there is a human need to build
cohesive systems as a means of overcoming this con-
tingency. It is MAN who gives meaning and order to the
environment. Every one of these self-made cohesive world-
pictures or thought systems is by definition a closed one
which cannot account for the totality of existence and human
experience. By taking over elements of the prevailing system
into the imaginary world, literature rearranges elements,
shows them in a foreign light, and thus points to the limits and
deficiencies of the system. Literature has, in Iser's view,
a basically critical and counterbalancing function in human life.

All good art has for Iser this character of "negation."
Excluded from this are propaganda and didactic texts, which
Iser does not consider true literature. Good literature calls the
validity of the familiar, the accepted, the posited into ques-
tion. "Literature, from Homer right through the present day,
abounds with examples of misfortunes and failures, wrecked
aspirations, ruined hopes—the negativity of man's efforts and
the deformation of his being." (The Act of Reading, p. 227) But,
since literature is not a copy of the world but rather a reaction
to it, this cannot be the final word about reality. By presenting
an alienated picture of the world the text does not and cannot
provide an answer for the causes of this alienation nor a
solution to the problems formulated. It is up to the reader
to construct what is unsaid and not given. Entrapped and en-
tangled and part of a self-made system, the individual has
only one way to take distance and become momentarily free:
It is through reading and constructing the imaginary. Thus,
only art and the aesthetic experience can offer liberation from
the bondage of flawed reality. Redemption is found in aesthe-
tic experience. But, haven't we heard this before? Isn't this the
gospel according to Kant and Schiller?
A Critics's Colloquium

Baker: How did each of you become interested in literary theory?

Carvill: I became interested in literary theory in Toronto at the graduate school. At the Institute for Christian Studies I was made aware that literary interpretation really reflects on certain ideological battles that are part of the 20th century. I was made aware that procedures and approaches of literary criticism reflect basic anthropological questions. I also participated in a couple of seminars that were put on by the Department of Comparative Literature where quite important literary theorists like Todorov and Gadamer and Iser and Paul de Man appeared.

Wolterstorff: Let's see, my interest in poetics goes back to college days here. Your question reminds me of that. I took a course from Henry Zylstra in Literary Criticism which I found was a most interesting course, but my interest in poetics was in suspension for a long time until I began working on aesthetics. Then, what with my attempt to work out an aesthetics theory, getting into literary theory was simply part and parcel of that, an inescapable part of it.

Wolthout: My interest goes back to 1975, when I participated in a seminar with Ralph Cohen, the editor of *New Literary History*. I found that seminar to be the most stimulating and exciting educational experience I've ever had. It enabled me to deal somewhat with the frustrations that I had with the "establishment" literary criticism.

Harper: I'm in the same case as Nick. I was exposed to English literature through Henry Zylstra, though I did not take the course in criticism from him. But at one time he induced me to read a book called *Road to Xanadu* written by John Livingston Lowes, whom Zylstra called the literary cormorant. (Lowes' theorizing) looked very good to me then when I was young. But I have not found any satisfactory explanation ever since—and that one wasn't satisfactory either. I've become very agnostic about the ability to account for literature. And I haven't been convinced by anything I read since (which isn't very much) that anyone can account for good poems or bad poems.

Baker: What do you think is the state of poetics?

Wolthout: My impression is that poetics now is chaotic; I feel a good deal of frustration in trying to deal with it. But, personally, I'm not depressed by this; I find it very stimulating and exciting. It's a very challenging time, a time of all sorts of opportunities for anybody, but specifically Christians, and people at Calvin to deal with some exciting and live issues.

Wolterstorff: That's roughly my impression. Now, you know my field isn't poetics or literature, so I don't especially keep up with it all that much, but I think Clare is right. The great ideologies of the first part of the century have collapsed: the formalist or autonomous ideology, the expressionist ideology which, I suppose, was dominant in literary criticism. . . . And now one sees these lunging at alternatives: structuralism, which, I suppose, is the latter-day descendant of formalism, reader response criticism. There is not a reigning orthodoxy at the present. It's open, fluid, exciting.

Carvill: I think the openness comes from a certain "ecumenical" attitude. Psychology, sociology, and Marxist economic theories all impinge upon the field. The areas of discipline become very less defined. For instance, on the question, what is a literary text? Some say even society can be read as a text. There's a cross-penetration or a cross-fertilization going on. What amazes me mostly is what's happening in poetics hasn't really reached into the classrooms yet. Teaching is mainly still influenced by New Criticism.

Wolterstorff: I suppose when the teacher of poetry goes into the classroom that teacher, tacitly or explicitly, is going to be working with some poetics. So, the interesting question would be, Barbara, what do you think in the classroom are the reigning approaches?

Carvill: One of the things that always amazes me is, that if I discuss this whole topic with my colleagues they don't (admit to not having) a definite approach. . . . There's a certain naiveté. The very questions you ask the text, your own presuppositions, what the literary text is, "is the meaning actually something hidden in the text? Or is it something that is reconstructed by the reader? And, in a Christian context, where you have to "discern the spirits", "do my views square with the Christian anthropology"? These are not burning issues.

Wolterstorff: People often think of the critic as the fellow who evaluates. And when I actually look at what people other than newspaper critics do (newspaper critics are a species of their own, I think) it strikes me over and over again how little explicit evaluating they do. What you've rather got to look for is what that critic emphasizes, what he tacitly takes to be important. And the clue to that is what he spends most of his time on. So, why can't he go into the classroom with some poems in hand, saying to his students 'we're going to focus on this. And a Marxist, for instance, would do it differently than I will.'

Wolthout: I think the dominant approach in American colleges still is one influenced primarily by New Criticism: the formalist method. The emphasis is an analyzing, maybe evaluating, literary works in terms of their aesthetic value. And this
be done. For one thing, we're fighting 18 years of television, of incompetent teaching. And probably a philistinism, you know, "this course had better give me something practical." It's against those obstacles that one has to try to get people to enjoy a story or poem. I don't see that feeding them some kind of theory... Carvill: Well, I would contradict that. Wolterstorff: I detect a general lack of interest in poetics at Calvin generally, maybe for several reasons. The field has become so enormously complex; it's extremely difficult for anyone to work into it. And then there is the feeling that, at a place like Calvin, which emphasizes traditional Christian viewpoints, there are activities going on in the secular world which are not immediately pertinent to our situation. Another reason: just that the practical problem we're teaching classes; we have to struggle with the relatively simple problems of reading. It may seem that the more arcane questions of literary theory are irrelevant. The issues, though, are ultimately not only theoretical, but very practical. The way we teach a course in literature does reflect a way of seeing literature.

Walhout: I detect a general lack of interest in poetics at Calvin is, as I mentioned before, a certain naiveté. Everyone thinks we are not biased. We go to the text with "clean" eyes and "clean" questions and we let the text speak for itself. Wolterstorff: Which is the formalist view.

Carvill: There is the illusion of objectivity. Because most of us were trained in the heyday of New Criticism, there isn't a self-critical awareness. And, if one believes that, okay, we as Christians are to "discern the spirits"; then often one is labelled as "myopic." To have a Christian approach to literature "limits your freedom." You put on myopic blinders and you immediately predispose the students to look only for certain things; you rob them of an intense aesthetic experience. When I came here, I was very hurt by that. If we as Christians do literary criticism, it has to have Christian integrity. Reflecting upon our presuppositions would help us to clarify where we stand. I've been missing that.

Wolterstorff: It seems to me that it's of first importance for the relevant faculty members to ask: what form or forms, of literary criticism are responsive to the Christian gospel? It's less clear to me how much of that should be loaded on the students, David. Thought-out views on those matters ought to inform teaching. Now and then it would be illuminating for the teacher to clue the student in to his approach and say, "here's how we're going about it, had you noticed? And here's why." But to hope for much student interest in this second order enterprise... here you've got poetry in front of them, and you invite them to stand back from that and question how you go.
about... Well, that's a pretty arcane enterprise and it would be good if we had more of it. But we ought to be fairly relaxed about it. I even want to encourage Tom to be a bit more relaxed. I think the poetry of the West, especially modernist poetry, is extremely elitist poetry. It's enormously complicated and one's got no right to expect everybody to appreciate it. Which is not to say it's not worth having it around but we ought to recognize its peculiarities for what they are.

**Carvill:** But we have a liberal arts college here; we have a generalistic approach; we don't introduce students to English as an academic discipline, but to the appreciation of "great works." How can they come to know the text?

**Harper:** And enjoy it?

**Carvill:** And enjoy it. I agree that poetics should not be a classroom subject. But at the end of every semester one can ask... That's the basic difference between the European system. There when you start going to a university to study English, you do it as an academic discipline. So, the first semester they give you an introduction into the eight or nine or ten most prevalent methodologies for approaching the literary text. So much so, that, at least in Germany, all those theoretical questions are so acutely discussed that nobody reads texts. (Laughter.) Everybody is very well-versed and there are heavy ideological battles. This is amazing: through the radical left one saw much more clearly than one does here that, in the field of literary studies, there are ideologies, there are world-and-life views at work.

**Wolterstorff:** So you think the question is how one lives responsibly between those extremes. How one can both confront the student with the literature, not having those critical questions obscure the context of the literature, while at the same time making the students aware of the fact that you don't approach literature with naked eyes.

I'm leery about special courses in poetics, though I think they're worth having too. I don't think though, many students through the radical left one saw much more clearly than one there are very heavy ideological battles. This is amazing: the theoretical questions are so acutely discussed that nobody reads texts. (Laughter.) Everybody is very well-versed and there are heavy ideological battles. This is amazing: through the radical left one saw much more clearly than one does here that, in the field of literary studies, there are ideologies, there are world-and-life views at work.

**Wolterstorff:** So you think the question is how one lives responsibly between those extremes. How one can both confront the student with the literature, not having those critical questions obscure the context of the literature, while at the same time making the students aware of the fact that you don't approach literature with naked eyes.

I'm leery about special courses in poetics, though I think they're worth having too. I don't think though, many students through the radical left one saw much more clearly than one does here that, in the field of literary studies, there are ideologies, there are world-and-life views at work.

**Wolterstorff:** So you think the question is how one lives responsibly between those extremes. How one can both confront the student with the literature, not having those critical questions obscure the context of the literature, while at the same time making the students aware of the fact that you don't approach literature with naked eyes.

I'm leery about special courses in poetics, though I think they're worth having too. I don't think though, many students through the radical left one saw much more clearly than one does here that, in the field of literary studies, there are ideologies, there are world-and-life views at work.
not only a concern of most contemporary theorists of literature models for living _your life._

### New Literary Criticism

**Walhout:** As I see it, in English classrooms (at Calvin) there has been a predominance of new critical formalist approaches. Although New Criticism today may be undermined theoretically, it’s still the dominant method. One way to think through a Christian approach to literature is to rethink New Criticism, at Calvin we have not been so entranced by New Criticism as at other places. What do we actually do, maybe, is better.

**Wolterstorff:** Or worse.

**Walhout:** Yeah, it’s possible that it’s worse. We don’t really articulate a Christian approach to literature. Still, if you look at what is actually done in the classroom, much of what is done, maybe not all, but much would be what one would expect and want within a Christian framework.

**Wolterstorff:** What one’s really got to do is ask what literature is.

**Harper:** What’s its metaphysical status? Is it real?

**Wolterstorff:** Yeah, well it is real (Laughter) . . . to ask, even more fundamentally, what does it do in human affairs? Why has it always been around? Why has mankind always broken out into poetry?

**Harper:** Any why those who have broken out so often been aslant of their society?

**Wolterstorff:** Yeah! And why in the past has the poet so often confirmed his civilization? Why in the modern world does he so often want to disconfirm it? And stands in an agonized opposition to everyone else? One’s got to see how poetry fits into an anthropology. It’s common to think of the arts as a luxury, of course. But when you look at art in the life of mankind, that turns out to be an idiotic view. If it’s a luxury, it seems to be an inescapable one. And it’s good to ask why.

**Carvill:** What does it mean? (Our students) will be confronted with the question “what is literature and what is its goal in human society?”

**Wolterstorff:** I expect that, at Calvin, too, we live in conflict with two very different educational visions. One is to transmit the culture of the past and insert the student into it. I’m not sure. That’s sort of a Renaissance humanist vision. And the other vision is what Barbara was talking about: to enable the student to “discern the spirits” of the literature that comes his way. And reading Chaucer . . . well it’s not obvious that (poetics) helps so much for that. Maybe we’ve got to acknowledge that these are both important things; literary departments ought to do them both.

**Walhout:** The only way to cope with (poetics) is to see it in some historical perspective . . .

**Harper:** My opinion tells me (and it’s very old-fashioned) that we begin with literary history.

**Walhout:** The issues in poetics . . . much of it has a new historical emphasis. The title of the journal, _New Literary History_, suggests that many hermeneutical theorists, particularly, manifest a concern with historical theory.

**Carvill:** I too, can sometimes take refuge in literary history. I derive a certain comfort from saying, Chaucer was reacting to his time; in the 18th century that was the view of man; we see how it comes out in this work. But it’s not clear we get in literature models for living your life.

**Walhout:** In the newer interests in literary history, the question is always, what is the contemporary relevance of the study of history? That’s a humanist idea. But transmitting culture is not at all a concern of most contemporary theorists of literature . . .

**Carvill:** I can see that and I can see the importance of those issues, but I can also sense a sterility in it too. We have to be careful.

**Wolterstorff:** Some of it is for me (I don’t know about you professionals) a terrible bore.

**Harper:** There’s a kind of theoretical triumphalism in America. I understand that it’s true in France and Germany also. The opposite is what one finds going on in England, where most of the lectures I heard were replaying Matthew Arnold’s tapes with concessions again to the labor state. “Read this stuff because it will help you maintain this civilization of which we are so proud.”

**Wolterstorff:** The best that’s been thought and said. David, in answer to your question about the state of poetics at Calvin: it seems to me that our educational vision was that we pass on the great tradition in a Christian perspective. That accounts for the deep hostility to the social sciences here. This college is almost unique in America in that the science major is not the most prestigious. Science majors here have almost had to apologize for their barbarism, and sociologists for their neologisms. So we’re asking, how can sophistication concerning literary theory be attached to that educational vision. We’re talking about literary issues, anthropological issues, educational issues—to make it overly cosmic, perhaps.

**Baker:** How would you characterize yourself as a theorist? Any critic with whom you feel an affinity?

**Walhout:** Among the various schools of contemporary poetics I find myself generally in line with what’s called hermeneutics. The most stimulating thinker, in this area I think, is Paul Ricoeur. I lean strongly toward Nick Wolterstorff. In fact, Nick Wolterstorff and Paul Ricoeur aren’t as far apart as many think.

**Wolterstorff:** Half a year ago I read a marvelous book by Robert Pinsky, an enormously, I thought, perceptive understanding of the philosophical/religious commitments characteristic of modernist poetry. Namely, that it commits itself to a sort of nominalism, to the world out there being just particulars, just shreds. The poet has the choice of reproducing those shreds or imposing an order, but the notion of discovering an order as given is not an option. That seems to me a post-enlightenment man’s notion that the world’s got to be improved, that as it is we’ve got to renounce it.

**Carvill:** What type of literary criticism am I practicing in the classroom? I tend towards the history of ideas approach, answering, as far as an art work gives an answer, fundamental questions that nearly every artist has to deal with. Namely, what is man? what was the origin of sin? (or what is sin?); who is God? If I can have my students penetrate to that level of understanding, I am satisfied, for the moment. Now, this is very rough, but I’m at the beginning of my career. (Laughter)
Writer’s Guild meets at 8:00 on Wednesday nights in the English Conference Room. The Guild consists neither of esoteric intellectuals nor of competitors eager to cut each other down to size. Rather, it is a relaxed gathering of people who have gotten up the courage to share what they have written. Visitors are always welcome, whether they come to share their writing or to hear the writing of others. Three Writer's Guild members will here share their poetry with you and some of their thoughts on why their writing changes and how Writer’s Guild affects the way they write. Miriam Pедерson, the group’s mentor, will comment on one poem as she would in an actual meeting.

In my first weeks at Calvin, I missed my high school friends with whom I had always shared my poems and stories. So I, a scared freshman armed with the poem, “mirror shavings,” that I had written in high school, crept shyly into a Writer’s Guild meeting. I needed other writers to read what I wrote and encourage me to continue writing. Since then I have attended Writer’s Guild nearly every week. Even when I contribute little to the discussion, I feel I am a part of them: we help each other by reading together what we have written. When I write a short story I feel let down after the story is complete and the world of my imagination fades into the real world. I pace back and forth across the dorm room, wishing I could share the world of the story I have created. But I can always look forward to Wednesday night, when I know I can share that world with the Writer’s Guild.

In my first weeks at Calvin, I missed my high school friends with whom I had always shared my poems and stories. So I, a scared freshman armed with the poem, “mirror shavings,” that I had written in high school, crept shyly into a Writer’s Guild meeting. I needed other writers to read what I wrote and encourage me to continue writing. Since then I have attended Writer’s Guild nearly every week. Even when I contribute little to the discussion, I feel I am a part of them: we help each other by reading together what we have written. When I write a short story I feel let down after the story is complete and the world of my imagination fades into the real world. I pace back and forth across the dorm room, wishing I could share the world of the story I have created. But I can always look forward to Wednesday night, when I know I can share that world with the Writer’s Guild.

mirror-shavings

remember
Lord
last new year’s eve
when I skated from last year
into the first few seconds of this year
at the skating rink
with the broken hot chocolate machine
remember the mirror of ice
before we scored it with silver skate blades
right after
the ice-polishing machine ground away the shavings
of other skates
so that the lights of the dome above rose
in perfect reflection
at our feet
remember my first step onto the mirror
when I could hardly stand
and tried to skate
backwards
but couldn’t even move
remember my resolution
as I circled to a standstill
on the mirror-shavings
I said I would reflect You better than before
but I forgot that in time
every mirror clouds
and
I forgot
Lord
to pause in my skating
and watch the ice-polishing machine
grind off the shavings
and polish the roughness
so that the lights of the dome above would rise
in perfect reflection
at my feet

Laurel Vanderkleed

compiled by Laura Smit
photographs by David Bouwsma
Evening Blazed

The wait the sky imposes, running drift
Of cloud across the face of morning sun,
Postpones the rush or orange and red: the gift
Of blood through which the sun suggests the Son.
And in the east the hills await the dawn
When heavy sky will pass and drop its veil,
So sun may burst upon the barges drawn
Through rivered valley, watched by hills now pale.
And then the sun your belly holds, dear you
Who bears the rise of tender morning's grace.
The yellow warmth of moments now too few;
The mist of distance hides in you my place.
The end of evening bathes in blood the hills,
Our opened hearts the field the Farmer tills.

Chris Campbell

The emphasis of my poems is often emotional. I try to contact or touch a particular life-moment or a particular place. The images of the first poem contain the emotion of a particular moment and place, but they lack the focus and direction which I hope the second poem provides.

As I re-wrote the poem, the sonnet-form functioned as an organizing principle. The meter and rhyme lent a context in which I could focus the images. I allowed four lines for each of the first three images and built the images on top of each other. Then, I closed the poem with the couplet.

Involved with the emotion of my subject and guided by the framework of my form, I was freed to play with the language of the poem. Note how lines 9-11 do not form a sentence. The sound and rhythm of the language combined with the emotion of the image carry the lines despite the fact they don't contain a “complete thought.” This freedom and playfulness comes when I feel my subject meaningful and when I pay attention to a framework.
Country and Western I

Make sure you got a mudflap on the stylus of your stereo. Lie back in the sun like cucumbers and grow. Rain cools the young skins. Cloud formations settle in a glass of cider. This late in the season, the potter kicks his wheel pulling out a road from the harvest sun.

Bob Boomsma

Response to “C & W 1”

The language of the first two lines is different from that of the rest of the poem—more “down home” as the title would have it. I’m curious to know why; how you make the connection between it and the rest of the poem. Why did you choose this title? For me this part of the poem is confusing.

The visual images are fresh and surprising. The last, “pulling out a road . . .” is strong because it evokes for me a multitude of new images while recalling references to the sky (lines 3 and 6). I like to be jolted at the end of a poem and this one does the job.

Miriam Pederson

Bob’s Response to Miriam

Because it results in some confusion, the difference of the first two lines from the rest of the poem is a major weakness, for that difference should be one of the poem’s strengths. Your confusion tells me that the energy and voice of the first two lines need development.

Just in the interest of symmetry, to fully develop all I wanted those first two lines to hold, I should have had seven lines and the, “Lie back in the sun . . .” The impatient, wild, intense, abandon of the youthful desire to act now behind those first two lines needs a good deal more than what’s there.

The poem would then pit the reckless energy of youth against the more mature, yet youthful, discovery of submission. I could either add to the beginning and make it one poem or cut off the first two lines and work with them on another poem.

I chose the title—Country and Western—because I thought of it as arching over the images and dimensions of the poem and even giving the poem an added dimension. I am not particularly attached to the title and think less of it as time goes on; although, something like it may serve my purpose yet.

I’m pleased that lines 3–11 work well for you. But your jolt at the end? End jolts are one of the traps of contemporary poetry. I like to be jolted, punched, pushed, hugged, caressed, and kissed throughout a poem; a poem should emit energy rhythmically throughout.
Ricoeurian Hermeneutics

While much intellectual energy was being expended in American academic circles on the "covering law" theory of explanation posed by Carl Hempel, there arose in European circles a movement which provided an alternative theory of explanation. This movement, which goes by the name of structuralism (sometimes French structuralism), is concerned with cultural rather than natural phenomena. It is rooted in linguistic theory and argues that, since none of our theorizing can take place apart from language, the linguistic model of explanation should be applicable to all fields of inquiry, including both natural and human science. The linguistic assumptions of structuralism have, however, been critically examined over the last two decades by, among others, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's hermeneutic theories constitute a more refined theory of explanation and one which, I believe, is superior to those of both structuralism and Hempel.

Whether structuralism is simply a method of inquiry or a full-fledged philosophy is a matter of debate even among structuralists themselves. Either way, however, it holds the view that all cultural behavior is rule-governed and that it is only by virtue of this fact that we can arrive at an understanding of human actions and institutions. It begins with the view that the meaning of anything is established by virtue of its relationship to other things and that there must be principles or rules or laws or codes in terms of which things are related. These laws are structural laws in the sense that they are descriptive of the relations that hold among things which are related. Further, these laws are seen to form systems, that is to say, structural laws have meaning in relationship to the systems in which the laws are operative. For example, grammatical laws function in grammatical systems; legal codes function within legal systems; moral norms function within ethical systems, and the like. Structuralists assume that, with respect to cultural systems, the laws are established by human beings and have no necessary or absolutely binding power. These laws are culturally relative, and thus an understanding of them requires analysis of the system which is operative at a given time in a given culture.

The particular character of structuralist theories comes from their orientation to the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, whose Course in General Linguistics was published in 1916. Several of Saussure's principles have been influential. One of them is the distinction between langue and parole. In linguistics we must distinguish between actual speech (parole) and the rules of grammar which are implicit in language and which enable speech to be meaningful. We understand the speech acts of one another because we mutually assume the same language code (langue). Without such a code or system of rules we would not be able to speak meaningfully. Because of these two levels of linguistic study, we can distinguish the synchronic dimension of language from the diachronic. Diachronic relationships are those of actual speech and take place in time; synchronic relationships are those which pertain to the system of linguistic rules and are nontemporal. The synchronic rules of the language system constitute the paradigms of the system. Structuralism is almost exclusively interested in the synchronic and paradigmatic laws or codes of the language system; these codes may be said to constitute the language structure. To understand or to "explain" language phenomena is to uncover the structures of the language.

A very influential distinction is introduced in Saussure's definition of a sign. A sign is the smallest functional unit in any structural system: in language studies one focuses on the word as a sign (phonetic elements may be smaller units which constitute the word, but they cannot function as independent units). The sign (word) is made up of two interdependent elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the sound-image associated with the word; the signified is the concept designated by the sound-image. Thus, when we say the word tree we utter a sound (which may be "triggered" by the graphic signal tree) and we thereby designate a concept tree. The important implication of this distinction lies in Saussure's assertion that the relationship between the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept) is an arbitrary one. This arbitrariness means that no necessary connection obtains between the sound and the concept—the concept tree can just as well be signified by the sounds specified by the letters arbor or Baum (or any other sound designated for that purpose). The reasons we associate the sound-image t-r-e-e with the concept tree are cultural and historical.

Since the connection between signifier and signified is made within the sign system, the meaning of the sign tree cannot be grasped apart from the sign system within which it functions. The structuralist concludes that we speak of language as having meaning not because signs refer to a reality outside of language, but because of the relationships among the signs which constitute a system and which function according to the "laws" of the system. The signifier t-r-e-e refers to the concept tree, not to a real tree or a "tree in reality." Meaning is a function of the sign system. To explain something, thus, is to analyze it structurally—to show how it functions within the structural laws.
we create as human beings: the structural forms which lie outside our language (or semiotics). Even in the structuralist model which encompasses our cultural experience, language does not adequately describe the world which exists outside of language and to which language ultimately refers. This argument is clearly stated, that we can say nothing clearly stated, that we can say nothing purely intralinguistic, contained within the language as a closed system. Ricoeur focuses his attention on the diachronic dimension of language, its use in actual speech or discourse. In discourse, language acquires certain qualities of form and meaning which are not reducible to semiotics. Some of these qualities are shown through Ricoeur's analyses of symbol and metaphor. These analyses are rich and complex and cannot be given here in full. On the subject of symbolism, I will only state Ricoeur's conclusion that analyses of the "double-intentionality" of the symbol (Ricoeur's analysis in The Symbolism of Evil focuses particularly on the symbolic language used in confessions of sin) shows that the symbol is more than a sign and that an understanding of symbolic meaning points us to the reality of a "cosmos" which is seen through the symbol.

Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is also complex (see his book The Rule of Metaphor), but a few abbreviated observations on the distinction between polysemy and metaphor may be helpful. Words in natural languages, Ricoeur claims, are polysemic (having more than one meaning). This marks a distinct divergence from the structuralist-semitic assumption. For semiotics, words (signs) must be univocal, for both signifier and signified are part of the definition. One sound-image designates one concept. If the same sound-image (e.g., pipe) designates more than one concept, we would by definition have more than one sign. Several concepts may share the same sound-image, but the definition requires us to regard them as separate signs with univocal meanings rather than a single word with polysemic meanings. In theory, the semiotic assumption of the univocity of signs would require (like a Turing machine) an infinite lexicon.

Ricoeur argues, however, that a sign in a linguistic system is only a lexical unit and that it does not become a word (i.e., a semantic element) until it is used in purely intralinguistic, contained within the language as a closed system. Ricoeur focuses his attention on the diachronic dimension of language, its use in actual speech or discourse. In discourse, language acquires certain qualities of form and meaning which are not reducible to semiotics. Some of these qualities are shown through Ricoeur's analyses of symbol and metaphor. These analyses are rich and complex and cannot be given here in full. On the subject of symbolism, I will only state Ricoeur's conclusion that analyses of the "double-intentionality" of the symbol (Ricoeur's analysis in The Symbolism of Evil focuses particularly on the symbolic language used in confessions of sin) shows that the symbol is more than a sign and that an understanding of symbolic meaning points us to the reality of a "cosmos" which is seen through the symbol.

Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is also complex (see his book The Rule of Metaphor), but a few abbreviated observations on the distinction between polysemy and metaphor may be helpful. Words in natural languages, Ricoeur claims, are polysemic (having more than one meaning). This marks a distinct divergence from the structuralist-semitic assumption. For semiotics, words (signs) must be univocal, for both signifier and signified are part of the definition. One sound-image designates one concept. If the same sound-image (e.g., pipe) designates more than one concept, we would by definition have more than one sign. Several concepts may share the same sound-image, but the definition requires us to regard them as separate signs with univocal meanings rather than a single word with polysemic meanings. In theory, the semiotic assumption of the univocity of signs would require (like a Turing machine) an infinite lexicon.

Ricoeur argues, however, that a sign in a linguistic system is only a lexical unit and that it does not become a word (i.e., a semantic element) until it is used in purely intralinguistic, contained within the language as a closed system. Ricoeur focuses his attention on the diachronic dimension of language, its use in actual speech or discourse. In discourse, language acquires certain qualities of form and meaning which are not reducible to semiotics. Some of these qualities are shown through Ricoeur's analyses of symbol and metaphor. These analyses are rich and complex and cannot be given here in full. On the subject of symbolism, I will only state Ricoeur's conclusion that analyses of the "double-intentionality" of the symbol (Ricoeur's analysis in The Symbolism of Evil focuses particularly on the symbolic language used in confessions of sin) shows that the symbol is more than a sign and that an understanding of symbolic meaning points us to the reality of a "cosmos" which is seen through the symbol.

Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is also complex (see his book The Rule of Metaphor), but a few abbreviated observations on the distinction between polysemy and metaphor may be helpful. Words in natural languages, Ricoeur claims, are polysemic (having more than one meaning). This marks a distinct divergence from the structuralist-semitic assumption. For semiotics, words (signs) must be univocal, for both signifier and signified are part of the definition. One sound-image designates one concept. If the same sound-image (e.g., pipe) designates more than one concept, we would by definition have more than one sign. Several concepts may share the same sound-image, but the definition requires us to regard them as separate signs with univocal meanings rather than a single word with polysemic meanings. In theory, the semiotic assumption of the univocity of signs would require (like a Turing machine) an infinite lexicon.

Ricoeur argues, however, that a sign in a linguistic system is only a lexical unit and that it does not become a word (i.e., a semantic element) until it is used in purely intralinguistic, contained within the language as a closed system. Ricoeur focuses his attention on the diachronic dimension of language, its use in actual speech or discourse. In discourse, language acquires certain qualities of form and meaning which are not reducible to semiotics. Some of these qualities are shown through Ricoeur's analyses of symbol and metaphor. These analyses are rich and complex and cannot be given here in full. On the subject of symbolism, I will only state Ricoeur's conclusion that analyses of the "double-intentionality" of the symbol (Ricoeur's analysis in The Symbolism of Evil focuses particularly on the symbolic language used in confessions of sin) shows that the symbol is more than a sign and that an understanding of symbolic meaning points us to the reality of a "cosmos" which is seen through the symbol.

Ricoeur's analysis of metaphor is also complex (see his book The Rule of Metaphor), but a few abbreviated observations on the distinction between polysemy and metaphor may be helpful. Words in natural languages, Ricoeur claims, are polysemic (having more than one meaning). This marks a distinct divergence from the structuralist-semitic assumption. For semiotics, words (signs) must be univocal, for both signifier and signified are part of the definition. One sound-image designates one concept. If the same sound-image (e.g., pipe) designates more than one concept, we would by definition have more than one sign. Several concepts may share the same sound-image, but the definition requires us to regard them as separate signs with univocal meanings rather than a single word with polysemic meanings. In theory, the semiotic assumption of the univocity of signs would require (like a Turing machine) an infinite lexicon.
words acquire multiple meanings. But if this is so, then it appears that metaphor is fundamental to our process of extending, establishing and discovering meaning. Before every instance of polysemy, there was a metaphor. And since the metaphor represents a power to "shatter" semiotic systems by discovering and exploring new meanings and by "redescribing" reality, metaphor and polysemy attest to the inadequacy of semiotics to deal with the full dynamics of language as it functions in discourse.

As a general conclusion we may say that Ricoeur demonstrates that the semantic qualities of language are not reducible to semiotic systems and that the meanings of a language are not contained in and limited by its formal structures. Rather, language analysis itself shows that language functions as the means we have for speaking about and exploring the meaning of the world.

Because we are engaged via language with both a semiotic system of signs and with a translinguistic world, we need a theory of explanation which is larger than that provided by structuralism. Like Hempel's theory, structuralism offers a formal and atemporal theory which does not do justice to the temporal processes in which we can create new cultural systems and discover new meanings. While Ricoeur does accept structuralist procedures and models for purely semiotic analyses, he wants to establish a theory of explanation which accounts for the semantic or meaning dimension of our language and culture (that dimension which is opened up by metaphor and symbol). He develops such a theory through further analysis of discourse, text, and event. These views may be briefly summarized by citing his analysis of four features of discourse and their corresponding features in written texts.

The four features of discourse are these:
1. Discourse as a temporal phenomenon is a speech action and hence it reveals the patterns characteristic of actions generally.
2. Discourse has a speaker; it carries its meanings with reference to a speaking subject.
3. Discourse is referential. Through its original metaphorical and symbolic character it is grounded in (refers to) a world outside of language.
4. Discourse has an addressee, a hearer.

Since much of what we explain in our academic pursuits comes to us via texts, we need a theory both of texts and of the interpretation of texts. Ricoeur defines the hermeneutic problem of text-interpretation by reference to the world of discourse. A written text is discourse which has lost the dialogic situation. Thus, the four features of texts corresponding to the four features of discourse (speech) may be given as follows:

1. The text is no longer speech action and hence the meaning in text-discourse is fixed. The propositional force of the discourse remains but must be interpreted apart from a dialogic situation.
2. Because of the loss of a speaker, the intentionality of the text requires interpretation. The text is dissociated from the mental intention of the author.
3. The text loses the ostensive reference of spoken discourse; the reference of the text must be seen as non-ostensive; or, as Ricoeur puts it, the text projects a world. More on this in a moment.
4. Because the text loses the hearer of spoken discourse, it is addressed to all who read it. The implied audience is universal.

The third point is of particular interest. For Ricoeur all texts retain their referential power (which was demonstrated on a smaller scale in the analysis of symbol and metaphor), though the reference may not be to the actual world, or the world as it really is. Take, for example, fictional narratives. The "world" of a
novel is, Ricoeur says, a projected world. As a metaphor explores new possibilities of meaning by projecting new meanings on the basis of established meanings, so fiction on a larger scale projects new "worlds" which explore possible meanings in relation to the world as it is already known to us. Fictional narratives, like metaphors, are not mere decoration or frill or cultural ornament, but represent a fundamental means whereby we can reflect upon new possibilities of meaning. One of the things that is necessary for the interpretation of texts, then, is the analysis of the world that is projected in the narrative. Neither the creation nor the method of interpreting fictional worlds is our concern here. We will observe only that this referential power of texts provides an important basis for Ricoeur's rejection of Romantic and subjectivistic theories of interpretation and his attempt to reshape the principles of hermeneutics.

Before summarizing Ricoeur's conclusions concerning explanation, we will note that Ricoeur, in a 1973 essay entitled "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," proposes that the model of the text may be extended to social and cultural events and that the hermeneutic principles of text interpretation may provide a model for social scientists and historians. If texts must be understood in relationship to speech actions (discourse), then analogously social and historical events may perhaps be seen in relationship to agents who act within the world. Events are, so to speak, the actions of men "written" in the text of history, just as in actual texts we have the record of speech actions. Since the events which are part of the "record" of history have been cut off from their actors and intentions, they, too, must be interpreted. Because of the factors of agency and action, the task of interpreting events may be similar to the task of interpreting texts. In any case, Ricoeur makes an interesting and provocative extension of his theory, which now reaches from the primary elements of language—words, symbols, metaphors—to language systems, to discourse, to texts, to cultural and historical events. What he proposes in his hermeneutic theory is no less than a methodology which embraces the whole of human culture and which would also have implications (not as yet developed as far as I know) for the natural sciences. We may turn, then, to a statement of Ricoeur's views concerning explanation.

As we have seen, Ricoeurs' analysis of language, discourse, and texts points to the two sides of language, the semiotic and the semantic. The one involves a coherent system of laws and the other involves a personal involvement in the discovery of meaning. Traditionally these distinctions are related to such dichotomies as science vs. aesthetics, objectivity vs. subjectivity, analytical rigor vs. impressionistic judgment. In the traditional view the systematic and scientific side demands explanation (erkennen) whereas the personal and semantic side requires understanding (verstehen). Explanation is thus the concern of objective and logical thinking whereas understanding is the concern of subjective interpretation. Since Ricoeur has insistently argued for the interdependence of meaning and structure, semantics and semiotics, established systems and methods of discovery, he also wants to redefine understanding and explanation in a way that makes them interdependent and responsive to each other.

With respect to explanation, Ricoeur accepts the model of semiotic-structural analysis. This model, as was seen, is structural rather than genetic and does not entail the problems raised by causal and predictive theories. Since human culture is structured, "we can investigate and uncover the "laws" which obtain within a system. However, a systems analysis cannot exhaust the possibilities of meaning and therefore structural explanations are not complete. As soon as we enter the stream of history we move beyond the system of cultural codes and create the possibilities for expanding or breaking or changing the codes. Indeed, since we are always "in" history, cultural codes are not static but are constantly in the process of changing or developing or being abandoned. The synchronic analysis which characterizes structural explanations involves a methodological strategy which "arrests" the temporal process. This strategy is legitimate, but it is not sufficient for understanding. Explanation must always be seen, therefore, in the context of history, and it will always respond to the "discoveries" and contingencies of history.

With respect to understanding (verstehen) Ricoeur argues against the reduction of interpretation to psychological interactions or subjective opinions and holds that interpretation can achieve a measure of objectivity and validity through the analysis of events and texts on the model of his analysis of discourse, particularly through a concern with the referential dimension of events and texts. Yet, since events and texts and discourse are not contained within closed systems, they require the interpretation of the investigator (scientist). As a model for approaching the ideal of validity in interpretation Ricoeur proposes the analogy of the courtroom. Legal and juridical decisions on specific cases (in contrast to the analysis of legal and juridical systems) never can achieve logical and "scientific" finality; they are always a matter for debate between prosecution and defense. Yet the fates and often the lives of people rest on such decisions. Interpretation at the level of understanding (verstehen) may not achieve the kind of explanation which is possible in structural analyses, but this important part of scientific inquiry can move toward validity as it interprets evidence in the light of both the "laws" and the specific historical situation. Explanation, thus, depends on and aids understanding, and understanding in turn depends on and aids explanation. Both processes—interdependent and mutually supportive—are the two dimensions of hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics provides, then, a framework for all of our efforts to understand the world and to interpret its significance for us as historical and cultural persons.
what i would have done to stop
your caress &
lips moving ever so slightly.
lovers, lovers what an incongruous word—
listen, listen my heart to beatific women
and angels who strike terror in the sons of god.

please woman please, with
all of your allies
dont forget the sin that rides with the sun.
clarity is but ordered chaos
and is still chaotic at heart . . .
but the soul which possesses you
   eats at my mind with each movement
of its body.
no longer, yet longer even still
   i stand in the shadow of the fierce madonna
   and am but the death of an echo.

city on the hill

who is this creature, this devourer of children?
his blood-filled mouth and grey-green eyes
   burning through every icon.
but who cares about the dead madonna
lyeing on the altar, a silver stake through her frozen heart
while the monster laughs with the echoes
in the alcove? (to them i ask
of what value is the resurrection to the pagans?)

but only a stone pigeon answers with a sigh.

Steven Pruett
Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do, and the God of peace will be with you.

—Paul

Theodore de Bruyn

Paul can be awkward at times, because he never allows for mediocrity. Suppose I were reading a book and in a moment of distraction recalled Paul’s words. I would have lost two chances for escape from Paul’s exacting advice. I could no longer throw the book aside, for it might be a treasure of true and honorable and just things. But neither could I continue reading the book as before, without wondering whether it was indeed such a treasure. Instead, I would be forced to be critical, to find out whether the book was in any way true and honorable and just. And if that were not difficult enough, Paul has to make this business of criticism a religious matter, something I do in relation to God. And so in one short moment of distraction I would be thrown from simply reading my book into the muddle of religious criticism, or, as it is more commonly known, moral criticism.

Before I could even begin moral criticism of my book, I would have to define briefly what I mean by moral criticism. Criticism, here literary criticism, is the study of literature according to some canon, some principle or method. The particular canon will, of course, vary with each literary critic, but for the moral critic it will be a moral canon. If he is a Christian moral critic, he will hold to the canon of Christian morality, which, I take it, claims that man, in all that he is and does, is a responsible creature before God and also before his fellows. Specifically, the Christian moral critic will seek to measure literature by the teachings of Scripture and—because few Christians have the temerity to claim the insight of a solitary prophet—with the help of the Christian tradition. So, having a basic idea of what I mean by moral criticism, I would have to investigate how I am to go about it.

I would be unfit to criticize literature at all, let alone as a moral critic, unless I were what C. S. Lewis calls a “literary reader.” (Lewis would probably think that the moral critic runs a good chance of never being a literary reader, but I would hope not and so work on toward the model of reading he so highly and ably recommends.) The literary reader is one who receives literature rather than uses it. The user of literature reads only to further his own activities, to revive for the thousandth time his tired imaginations of himself. He gives attention to little more than plot, and is especially annoyed when anything truly literary—a fresh image or a careful description or an unlikely narrative—forces him to tread ground outside his worn circle of clichés. The receiver of literature, on the other hand, eschews his own pattern of thought and enters as fully as he can into the pattern of the author. He presses all his senses and his imagination into the service of what he reads, and is especially pleased when it broadens and deepens his literary experience. In short, the receiver strives to dwell in another’s world for a time, to breathe its strange air, while the user dwells in a world of his own, always.

There is good reason to insist that, if I am to be a moral critic, I must be a literary reader. Two sorts of people fashion themselves moral critics. The one sort are the Thomas Bowdlers*—otherwise known as censors—who blacken a word here and snip out a scene there. Because these Philistines deal in pages and lines, not books and plays, they put forward a clumsy treatment of literature, patchy and incomplete. If they are of no harm, they certainly are of no help. But the other sort, the true moral critics, strive to see a work steady and to see it whole, because that is how they see life, especially moral life. They know that moral life is comprehensive and complex, and they expect the same of literature. And so they are concerned not with a word here or a scene there, but with the force of that word or scene within the interpretive whole of the work. They are literary readers, ready to explore the author’s full intent.

There is more good reason, however, to insist that I, the moral critic, should be a literary reader. Literature is not an arrangement of dogmas, a list of propositions, set out for my analysis. Literature is thought dressed in the folds of imagery and set to the music of words. It is glimpses of life described in spare understatement or in realistic detail or rich hyperbole. It is ideas and emotions strung within the tension of meter and verse. It is a host of devices by which words are built together into a meaningful fiction. When these devices pull the unliterary reader out of the easy chair of his own experience, they are the plague of his existence. Therefore he hardly reads anything which strays even a hair from the usual, the hackneyed, craft. But these devices are for the same reason the pleasure of the literary reader. And unless one prizes them as the literary reader does, he cannot be a moral critic. For literature knows of no other access than these. They are its very stuff.

Clearly, I, the would-be moral critic, must be a literary reader. But how then am I to be moral? Would not even the imposition of any moral scheme on my reading prevent me from being a truly literary reader, one who abandons his own world as much as possible for the author’s?

It would be impossible for me to be a moral critic if to be a literary reader I would have to abandon my own world entirely. But then it would be impossible even to read. For reading always involves a subject, the person who reads, and, much as the subject may try to read as sympathetically as he can,

Theodore de Bruyn

is a Calvin Seminary student. He graduated from Calvin as an English major in 1979.

*Editor of the expurgated Family Shakespeare.
he remains the subject. Thus, rather than abandon his own world entirely, the subject, when he is a literary reader, abandons it as much as possible. That is, he abandons the nonessentials, the biases and prejudices of his age. If he is a moral critic, he abandons the specific instances of moral conduct, the conventions by which he is accustomed to live, the moralisms which are secondary to morality. But he holds on to his basic moral point of view, which for the Christian is that all men are responsible creatures before God and therefore toward each other. This he can never let go, for it is his life, and nothing, not even literature, can warrant the loss of his life.

But the literary reader, the subject, is not the only one who holds a moral point of view. So does the author whose work he reads. (At least, this is what the Christian moral critic would maintain. For him all men are moral because all are religious, either turning to God or turning away from God, but always living before God.) And the author, too, will write his, or an imagined, moral point of view into his work. Whether explicit or implicit, it will be there, enfleshed in characters and events, in structure and imagery, more or less carefully shaded according to the insight and skill of the author.

When the moral critic reads, therefore, he enters into a moral dialogue, an exchange between his moral vision and the author's (or at least that put forth in the work). And that exchange becomes the focus of his criticism. The scope of the moral critic's study will, of course, be far broader than its focus. Because the author's moral vision embraces the whole work and emerges in all of its facets, the moral critic, too, must embrace the whole work with all of its facets. Like as not, therefore, the moral critic will be a master of various literary critical skills. But these skills will be ancillary to his main task, the criticism of the work's moral vision. Beginning with these skills, the moral critic will interpret the work's moral vision as embodied in literary form—in structure, imagery, narrative, and so on. But then he will go on to estimate the quality of that moral vision, its depth and breadth, and the subtlety and complexity of its expression. And after than he will judge whether, in his opinion, that vision is right, is true.

Now I should have a better idea than before of how I am to be a moral critic. But if I were to start into my book again, I would quickly discover two things. First, I would discover that there is no easy standard by which I can grade my book. Scripture is not a handbook to English literature, not an Index Librorum Prohibitorum. Even if it were, literature would probably evade its application, for literature involves ambiguities as ticklish as those in life. Therefore I would find out that the canon of the moral critic cannot be a facile catalogue of the good and the bad and the in between, but, for the Christian, must be the whole of Scripture and the Christian tradition. And as complex as he finds that canon to be for the moral problems of life, so complex ought he to expect it to be for the problems of literature.

The second thing I would soon discover would be that a moral judgment of an author is not a judgment of that author's abilities. I may have hoped that moral criticism would surely establish that infidels can only write doggerel. But then I would have expected of literature what I do not at all expect of life. I do not really believe that the house which my godless neighbor is building will fall apart in a year. Genius is not proportionate to moral character. And so the moral critic will not declare Housman a poetaster or pronounce Lawrence a second-rate novelist, though he may entirely disagree with their views of the universe. Housman and Lawrence remain for him fine writers, because with great mind and imagination they embodied naturalism in literature. But for the Christian moral critic the naturalism their literature embodies will always be found wanting.

More than a few moments of distraction would have passed now before I would return to my book with a clearer idea of moral criticism. But then, alive to the moral vision of the book I am reading while nevertheless steadfast to my own, I could begin reading again, discerning, I would hope, with Paul what was true and honorable and just.
Few things could be more appropriate than to begin a discussion of Northrop Frye with a quotation from William Blake; the two, mythical poet and archetypal critic, share much. Like Blake, Frye is something of an anomaly in his field, a critic standing rather magnificently alone, fitting well into no large school of criticism, pursuing his criticism with that unique vision which so exasperates the others who simply do not see it that way at all. And yet, he, like Blake, seems to rise above the squabbles over how coherent, useful or correct his system is. Whether Frye is "right" or "wrong," he does his work where Blake wrote his poems, in the realm of the visionary, which lends his criticism an aura of self-validation (a quality which profoundly irritates Frye's attackers). Of course, the similarity between these two is not at all accidental; it is, in fact, often remarked upon. Frye's entrance into the critical world occurred in 1947 with his publication of Fearful Symmetry, which has been called the definitive critical work on William Blake. Blake was the poet through whom Frye crystallized his understanding of literature and criticism, and that understanding (along with Blake) has remained with him ever since. Frye himself claims that he chose Blake as "a kind of spiritual preceptor" for criticism, and that he "unconsciously arranged" his life to imitate Blake's. Not to belabor the point, I think we cannot begin to understand Frye's project of critical iconoclasm unless we truly understand this affinity between Blake and Frye.

Blake's seeming obscurity, his prophetic authority, his personal vocabulary, his faithfulness to a unity of vision, his views of literature and man, encompass his insistence that: 
I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's. 
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create. 
All of these traits are carried over, pure or "displaced" (to use one of Frye's words), into the criticism of Northrop Frye. The distinction between poet and critic blurs; for Blake, too, wrote criticism, and Northrop Frye's writing is sometimes poetic. In a real way, for Frye there is only one poet, Blake, and Northrop Frye is his prophet to the twentieth century. What Frye has found to be true about man and literature through his study of William Blake is what he extends to reach into all corners of art and human reality. Blake was the first great poet of the romantic movement; Frye has become a romantic in an age of irony.

Of course, it is this very fact which causes other critics' dislike of Frye's criticism. In his far-flung attempt to create an order out of critical chaos and to find the relationship of Man to his art, Frye is accused of perpetrating "oddities, implausibilities, even patent contradiction," of using "cliche," or using "intimation of the primordial" and "de-arrangement of epitaphs" to hide his bankruptcy. W. K. Wimsatt entitles his critique of Frye, "Criticism as Myth." Geoffrey Hartman objects that Frye's subsuming all literature into one whole neglects the historical, temporal aspect of literary criticism. Tzvetan Todorov, in his book The Fantastic, attacks Frye's classifications as "not logically coherent," inconsistent, contradictory and as mere "catalogue." Actually, Frye himself answers many of these criticisms in an essay entitled "Reflections in a Mirror," and answers to others are implicit in his works, but even where an adverse criticism is valid, it usually is not as important as its author would like to think, simply because of Frye's own frankly-avowed notion of his work as completely non-definitive. It is important, I think, that we realize exactly what kind of system Frye is presenting before we can look at that system correctly.

To see this, we must turn our attention to the Anatomy of Criticism, the summation of Frye's systematic criticism and the center against which Frye's opponents fling their critical flying columns. Frye begins this book with what he frankly terms a "Polemical Introduction." It is useful here to quote at length from the first words of that introduction:

This book consists of "essays" in the word's original sense of a trial or incomplete attempt, on the possibility of a synoptic view of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism. The primary aim of the book is to give my reasons for believing in such a synoptic view, its secondary aim is to provide a tentative version of it which will make enough sense to convince my readers that a view, of the kind I outline, is attainable. The gaps in the subject as treated here are too enormous for the book ever to be regarded as presenting my system or even my theory. It is to be regarded rather as an interconnected group of suggestions which it is hoped will be of some practical use to critics... Whatever is of no practical use to anybody is expendable.

And as Frye opens his introduction with this caveat so he ends it:

It is clear... that a book of this kind can only be offered to a reader who has enough sympathy with its aims to overlook, in the sense of ignoring but of seeing past, whatever strikes him as inadequate or simply wrong... No importance is attached to the schematic form itself... Much of it, I expect, and in fact hope, may be mere scaffolding to be knocked away when the building is in better shape. 

Now, though the skeptical among us
may consider this merely a ploy of Frye
to cover his mistakes, there seems to be
no real reason for rejecting these asser-
tions unless there is something in the
Anatomy which contradicts them. And
there is not; the book is composed of
a series of basic insights presented in
admittedly rough form and supported
somewhat impressionistically.

Furthermore, again in the first part
of his introduction, Frye gives us ano-
ther hint at what kind of criticism he is doing.
The subject-matter of literary criticism
is an art," he says, and adds, "and criti-
cism is evidently something of an art
too." 9 Frye’s criticism is artistic criticism,
even while he calls for a scientific basis
argument entails that his method_will not
criticism itself can be placed into the
structs to hold works of literature.

Frye’s criticism is artistic criticism,
even while he calls for a scientific basis
which contradicts them. And
there is not; the book is composed of
a series of basic insights presented in
admittedly rough form and supported
somewhat impressionistically.

We may not conclude from this that
Frye’s Anatomy should not be taken
seriously. Rather, it must be read with an
understanding that the system con-
tained in it is tentative and incomplete,
supported largely by an enumeration of
elements upon which is deduced from
basic premises logically leading to a
conclusion.

Once this is understood, it is time,
finally, to look at the Anatomy itself and
determine just what it is and says. As the
title implies, the book is something of a
dissection of the art/science of literary
criticism. It attempts to discover and
isolate the various critical approaches
to literature and to schematize the prin-
ciples on which they are based. It is
unnecessary to describe the system in
detail; certain features of it are worth
noting.

Frye follows Aristotle in his attempt to
divide literature into various genres,
styles or types according to different
rules. Such an attempt, as Frye says, is
based on the idea that literature is an
ordered whole whose principles of or-
ganization can be found and studied.
Such a study is literary criticism. Frye
draws an analogy between criticism and
physics; just as, in studying physics, one
assumes that the object of
study, i.e. space, is complete, orderly
and regular, so literature must be if criti-
cism can be the science every critic
claims it to be. And once this assump-
tion is made, the critic must order his
field of study and becomes ‘a totally intelligible
body of knowledge.’ 10 So Frye sets out
to systematize criticism by ordering the
knowledge it encompasses. This pro-
motion of criticism to a science has sev-
ergious consequences, but of that
more later.

Clearly, in this program of making the
study of literature systematic, Frye must
place literature in a larger framework of
other sciences and human experience
generally. Only when we know what set
of things comprises literature can we
know what to examine for patterns and
regularities. Frye places literature mid-
way between the science of history,
which is the recording of the real empiri-
cal events and things of human experi-
ence, and philosophy, the record of
man’s nonempirical excursions into the
ideal world of thought. Literature, then, is
the area of shifting between the real
and the ideal. In fact (and here Frye
shows his affinity for modern psycholog-
ical theories of art), literature is wish-
fulfillment, the creation of a non-
empirical imitation (mimesis) of the
real world in an ideal form that conforms
with human desires—or, their opposite, that
which repels. Literature (and all art) is

In its archetypal aspect—a part of
civilization... defined as the process of
making a human form out of nature. The
shape of this human form is revealed by
civilization itself as it develops... An
archetypal symbol is usually a natural object
with a human meaning, and it forms a part of
the critical view of art as a civilized product, a
vision of the goals of human work. 11

Thus literature is one of man’s tools
whereby he assimilates the external,
real, natural world and forms it to his
own image.

Of the numerous ordering principles
Frye imposes on this artistic effort to
mold his empirical experience into him-
self, the most important is the principle of
the archetypal mythoi (“generic plots”). Frye identifies four basic
mythoi: romance, comedy, tragedy
and irony. These four movements are
fashioned, in western literature, primar-
ily from the imagery of the Biblical sys-
tems of “apocalyptic” and “demonic”
imagery, and secondarily from classical
mythology. The images of, to name a
few examples, righteous god, perfect
man, lamb, tree of life, new Jerusalem,
living water, fire and wind of the spirit—

these archetypal Christian images en-
fold all of man’s universe and are joined
in the true man that is Christ. They are
then opposed to corresponding de-
monic images of Satan, Leviathan, Hell
and so forth.

These basic images stand as the vo-
cabulary of literature which is then struc-
tured into cyclical movements from real
to ideal that are based in the fundamen-
tal cycles of nature: birth and death,
night and day, lunar and solar cycles.
And every work of literature, from the
highest to the lowest, can be placed in
its proper archetypal place by its
permutations of these elements of im-
agery and cyclical movement. Of
course, not every work of literature will
have such things as a literal sun-god or
descent into hell, but the basic motifs
are always present in a “displaced”
form; Christ, Beowulf, Saint George,
Moses and even Tom Sawyer 12 all share
in the messianic archetype. From the
relatively pure archetypal form of the
mythic tale, the images and events may
be displaced down the scale to become
more and more like actual experience,
closer to the real empirical universe
and farther from the ideal spiritual
world where the archetypal patterns dwell
in Platonic stasis.

But to return to the four mythoi. Just
as the Bible provides the vocabulary
of images for the mythoi, so it provides
the single mythic action of which each
mythos is a variation. The action of this
basic pattern begins in an ideal innocent
society from which the hero falls. He
then undergoes a quest, a testing and a
descent into death. The action culmi-
nates in a reestablishment of a perfect
society of experience. This action is,
of course, the Christian vision of the fate of
Man from the Fall in Eden, which resulted
in his quest for God, his testing as Chris-
tian, his death, which will end in the
renewal of a perfect creation at the end
of time. And this pattern, too, can be
seen in microcosm at the center of
Christian history; Christ himself is the
quintessential hero of this pattern.

And this fundamental pattern is the
first mythos, romance, the movement
from the ideal, through the real and
back to the ideal again. Comedy varies
the basic pattern by beginning out of
joint in the real and passing through the
quest to reach the crystallization of an
ideal order, out of the initial chaos.
Tragedy is the opposite of comedy.
The movement begins in an ideal order,
but the fall and descent leads, not to the
ideal, but to an assertion of the real, a
shattering of the original perfection.
Irony, the fourth and last mythos, is the exact inversion of the basic pattern. It begins in the sordid world of the real and enacts a quest for the ideal but ends back where it began or lower. Having no traffic with the ideal at all, it has none of the grandeur of tragedy which at least carries with it the memory and pathos of a fall from perfection. Yet even in irony Frye sees an upward turn, for, at its most profound depths, irony resembles nothing so much as hell, the kingdom of demons. And if the demonic is allowed, can the divine god be excluded? So the demonic pattern of irony leads into the pattern of the apocalyptic ideal, and the round of mythos itself conforms to the basic pattern of romance.  

Of course, this characterization of Frye’s archetypal patterns is simplistic. Really no mythos is ever present in its purest form; every work of literature shows a blend of some two, and many contain parts of another. Nor do I have space here to even sketch the intricate relationships of archetypal characters, setting and events in each of these mythos.

Instead, I would like to finish with a few observations about the implications of this system and Frye’s intentions for it. We should first realize that Frye is not producing this system of complex classification (and I have produced it only in its most skeletal form) merely for the literary critic, but for every person who has ever read—anything. These archetypal patterns are inherent in comic books, Harlequin romances, science fiction and mystery stories as much as they are in Hamlet, Paradise Lost and the Faerie Queen. The system eschews value judgements. The judgment of the quality of a work, Frye leaves to time and other sorts of criticism; if a work lasts the centuries, it is good. That is all we need to determine the worth of a work. This system is not intended to supplant any sort of criticism; it merely provides a framework in which every kind of legitimate criticism can be placed in relation to others.

What the system does do—or is intended to—is show every critic and every reader the basic patterns of literature as they spring from the essential nature of Man and his struggle to reconcile real and ideal. It is, preeminently, not a critical system, but a pedagogical tool. Northrop Frye wants us to understand the structure of literature so that the “primitive response” that we give to Agatha Christie or Arthur C. Clarke we can learn to give to Shakespeare or Dante as well. Once we have understood the essence of all writing, we will come to realize that the study of mediocre works of art remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience, whereas the profound masterpiece draws us to a point at which we seem to see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance.

Great works of literature are great because they fulfill the longings and needs of man better than poor ones; both use the same patterns; great literature uses the archetypal patterns profoundly, resonantly, saying the ancient say in a significant and beautiful way. Masterpieces vibrate to the core of experience and work in experience to reconcile the real and ideal; mere drivel mechanically uses the patterns at their most superficial and does not mesh with actual existence.

And when we begin to see Frye as a teacher and evangelist of true, archetypal mythic literature, then he begins to meld with Blake. Blake who in the epigraph to this article is quoted as saying that “all men are alike... in the Poetic Genius.” So in Frye, the “Poetic Genius” is the fabric of mythic imagination out of which he builds his literature, his religion and his view of the world. Frye’s literary criticism is an anthroplogy as well, for a great masterpiece builds civilization and man’s universe itself into the ideal Man of the romantic resolution. Frye is a romancer like Blake; like Blake, he structures the universe into a vast system—though where Blake saw gods, Frye finds archetypes. Like Blake, his idea of art is an anthroplogy. And that anthroplogy is a cosmology, for like Blake, Frye sees that “the Poetic Genius (which molds for man the perception of all things) is the true Man” and that that true man is the measure of the universe. Frye’s system itself is a romance, for it creates a vision of the perfect ideal constructed in great literature, moving through the real of our experience until that literature helps to build our real environment into an ideal society. And, as Christians, we may remark one more thing about Frye’s romantic vision: if the fundamental, controlling vision of Man’s mind is the romance pattern of Christianity, can we not, with C. S. Lewis, conclude that this is the archetypal pattern of reality itself. If Man must see the world as a pattern of Christian fall and redemption, then perhaps the proper conclusion is after all that that is the true structure of the cosmos.

Footnotes
8Anatomy, p. 29.
9Anatomy, p. 3.
10Anatomy, p. 16.
12Anatomy, p. 190.
13For this insight I am grateful to David Baker whose helpful comments did much to aid the completion of this article.
14Anatomy, p. 17.
15Fearful Symmetry, p. 19, quoting Blake.
Night Reminiscence

... you will have no need to take other men's fish, while you will have enough of your own catching, if you care to work for them. It will be a true pleasure to see the fair, bright, shining-scaled fishes outwitted by your crafty means and drawn out on the land... Also, you must not use this aforesaid artful sport for covetousness, merely for the increasing or saving of your money, but mainly for your enjoyment and to procure the health of your body and, more especially, of your soul.

-Dame Juliana Berners in The Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle 1486

We were seniors in high school. Often we would drive out to the Mentha Drain to trout fish Saturday evenings. All the summer long, in fact. We'd fish the upper reaches mostly. The creek was not very wide, only ten to fifteen feet. But it was cold and swift over fine, clean sand and mottled, grey and brown gravel. Most serious trout fishermen ignored these grassy banked upper reaches but somehow we had learned an interesting fact. The water was deep for its size, averaging two to three feet. And wherever there were elm or maple logs dropped into the stream or on the S-bends there were pools, or holes as we called them, that dropped to five or six feet. Some special places were even deeper. It was this unusual streambed that we assumed was the reason for the astonishing, lurking number of good-sized to large brown trout and occasionally a phenomenal, to us, brook trout. We fished light, long, limber fly-rods with nightcrawlers for bait. We'd cautiously crawl down the grassy, sloped banks, gently drop in the crawlers, and let it work freely, naturally under the watercress beds, under the logs into the purple-black depths on the bends. We'd take turns. One week he'd take the south bank and I the north. Each fishing the holes best reached from our respective bank. We never talked much. Just stuff like:
-Holy smokes, it must be five pounds.
-It was a wonderful creek.
-Any fish over 14" weighed
-Almost five pounds. I'm not kidding you.
-Any fish over 10" weighed
-About 2 lbs, maybe only a 1 1/2 lb. Closer to two though.
In spite of our boastful cries, we took many good fish. Fish that honestly weighted two and three lbs.
One evening Jim was very quiet on the way to the creek. He was kneeling in the grass above a sweeping bend letting his crawler explore the dark, hidden bottom under the undercut, outside bank. I sat opposite: quiet, watching. He had caught no fish yet.
-Hey Herbert, he said softly.
-Got a good bite? I said.
-No. He looked over at me and then down at his brown fly line weaving serpentine in the current like a single strand of dead waterweed.
-Are you going to take Sherry to the fair next week? he said.
-Yeah, I was planning to, Why?
-He fed out a few more feet of line and said nothing.
-The fair will be over next Saturday night though mostly, I said.
-No, No.
He jerked his rod and brought his crawler up to the surface, stripped it in and grabbed hold of the line, swinging the crawler in to inspect it.
-Damn, he said.
-Something's been chewing on it?
-No, he said, Damn, and he flipped the crawler back in.
-I've been thinking about asking her out myself, he said.
The water slipped by quicker and noisier. It seemed cooler in the growing dusk. I laughed and laughed.
-What the hell you laughing at?
-Okay, okay. Before you come splashing over here to whop on me, I'll make you a proposition. If you aren't going to catch a trout out of this hole, don't ruin my chances.
-Well you aren't going steady. You hardly ever take her out. You never talk about her. I mean...
-Hey, Catch that trout in there and I'll tell you my proposition.
-Alright, he flicked the line mending it away from the near bank, alright.
-When we get back to your house tonight, we'll sit in your
father’s den and have a chess match. One game. Winner has the privilege of approaching the lovely brown-haired lass via the telephone. Agreed?

-You are crazy.

-Hey, agreed?

-He nodded and laughed.

-Now get your damn line out of that water and let somebody fish it who knows how to catch a trout.

-You’re crazy.

During our match I could not believe his anxiety. He sweated. He wrung his hands. He rubbed his forehead and cursed when he made a bad move or rather noticed that he had inadvertently allowed me to pass a turn without casually. He was in a fever. I did not pay any attention to the game because I sat marvelling. Romance. Ah, romance. What was the origin of the virus of the sudden and surprising disorder? Herr doktor?

Actually I had not dated her often. I was in a fallback position: a safe date. A little crazy but a friendly, chummy character. I wouldn’t have ever had the chance of taking her to a prom or a tournament football game. No post-hamburger necking on.deadend streets. She reserved such occasions for priviledged, real dates. She looked lovely, slick and rich. But that is unkind. I believe she went out with me though it was in violation of her caste. Her girlfriends reproached her, her mother rubbed her temples with her forefingers. I think she was awakening to an adolescent disenchantment with the package form in which her life was coming down to her. She would tell me what her husband was going to look like, what kind of clothes he was going to wear, what kind of work he was going to do, where they would live, in what style house, with this kind of furniture with this many children with these wed­
ing presents with so many years wait till acceptance into that country club. Jabber, jabber. Jabber. Fly in the web watching the spider descend.

One night she said:

-And when my father dies, my husband will call my doctor for tranquilizers. And I’ll be at the funeral home with mother and in a lull she will wring her black lace handkerchief and turn to me and tell me exactly what kind and how many stocks and bonds Father left.

She put her hands on the dash and pushed. -Stiff?

-Headache.

-Let’s go to the park. I think the fountain will be lovely tonight.

-Alright. She smiled, gave my shoulder a little punch.

-Thank you.

-Huh?

-Thank you, Herbert. And she quickly kissed me on the cheek.

The park was dark but a summer moon lit our walk. The moonside of the trees and the dewy grass reflected a soft grey light. It looked like someone had poured a precious decanter of grey liquid velvet all about us. Above the splash­ing of the fountain, the drips, the gurgling, the snare drum splat ta splat, we heard a recorder flute. Off to one corner of our park is an opening, where there is an Indian burial mound. In the soft moonlight sitting crosslegged on the mound was a long-haired fellow wearing just fringed buckskin breeches, mournfully calling to and occasionally celebrating in joyful runs his moon love. A cool breeze swept by for a moment tossing his hair in the luminescence like the spray of a stiff wave.

-It’s beautiful, she said.

-Your troll has departed?

-It makes me feel like crying. Why is that?

-I could not answer then. I was young, too preoccupied. All I could do was say, Here look at this, look at that. Yes, isn’t it beautiful. All I wanted then was to be very alive. Beauty of moonlight summer and winter; rain, wet brown and green autumn field; crystal stream flowing in a June dusk.

You know, I try and try to remember, but I’m almost sure he never said a word about their one date. Nothing. We resumed our Saturday night fishing but the season was almost spent. The sumac was showing its blaze orange-red color and I went off to college. He came to see me the second weekend for a fishing trip; the last weekend of that year’s season. We went up north to a special river. It is cold, cold. It has bushy alderlined pools and swift, singing riffles with green cedar sweepers. There are wild ducks: mallards; blacks; woodies; teal in the flooded grasses on the inside of the slow bend holes. One spring we saw an eagle sitting in a dead elm. But that last day it rained all day: a cold, persistent drizzle. There was a fine spot where a large birch tree and some cedars lay tangled along a deep pocket. When his night crawler could not “buy a fuckin’ bite,” I caught him a small minnow with my hands. He hooked it through the lips and flipped it ten feet above the jam. As soon as it hit the water there was a streak and a tremendous, silver swirl. He jerked and started hollering and splashing backwards upstream, his rod held high, jab­bing wildly above his head. Somehow he got the trout out of there. After a swift period of vigorous activity on the part of the angler and angleress and much excitement from the observer, I netted a beautiful 19” hook-jawed male brook trout aflame in full scarlet and white trimmed spawning dress with spots of cobalt blue the size of dimes.

-Oh, my god, he said slowly. Holding the fish and looking at the clear, cold water. He smiled.

-Thanks for that minnow.

-It was dark and raining harder. We were almost back to the campus.

-Think we’ll be able to fish tomorrow with all this rain?

-No, he said, I don’t think so. Anyway I have to get back. I’ve got to get my things together.

-Huh?

-I’ve been drafted.

-I looked out the window at the damp, black woods. I could never said a word about their one date. Nothing. We resumed our Saturday night fishing but the season was almost spent. The sumac was showing its blaze orange-red color and I went off to college. He came to see me the second weekend for a fishing trip; the last weekend of that year’s season. We went up north to a special river. It is cold, cold. It has bushy alderlined pools and swift, singing riffles with green cedar sweepers. There are wild ducks: mallards; blacks; woodies; teal in the flooded grasses on the inside of the slow bend holes. One spring we saw an eagle sitting in a dead elm. But that last day it rained all day: a cold, persistent drizzle. There was a fine spot where a large birch tree and some cedars lay tangled along a deep pocket. When his night crawler could not “buy a fuckin’ bite,” I caught him a small minnow with my hands. He hooked it through the lips and flipped it ten feet above the jam. As soon as it hit the water there was a streak and a tremendous, silver swirl. He jerked and started hollering and splashing backwards upstream, his rod held high, jab­bing wildly above his head. Somehow he got the trout out of there. After a swift period of vigorous activity on the part of the angler and angleress and much excitement from the observer, I netted a beautiful 19” hook-jawed male brook trout aflame in full scarlet and white trimmed spawning dress with spots of cobalt blue the size of dimes.

-Oh, my god, he said slowly. Holding the fish and looking at the clear, cold water. He smiled.

-Thanks for that minnow.

-It was dark and raining harder. We were almost back to the campus.

-Think we’ll be able to fish tomorrow with all this rain?

-No, he said, I don’t think so. Anyway I have to get back. I’ve got to get my things together.

-Huh?

-I’ve been drafted.

-I looked out the window at the damp, black woods. I could not say anything.

-Should have gone to college, he said and smiled as he gave me a little punch on the shoulder.

It was no coincidence that Sherry had come to the same college as I. It was simply similar parochial backgrounds. I had not seen her for several months. I hadn’t even tried to call.
Nothing. Lost her in a chess match, you know. I ran into her one late fall afternoon. She was arm-entwined with a handsome fellow, looking up into his face smiling and laughing. All around there were other students bustling and rustling the fallen gold and scarlet leaves. They strolled past me and I just watched. She never saw me but her boyfriend nodded his head at me in an inquisitive friendly way.

Sometime later I met a friend of hers, a mutual acquaintance in the coffee shop. When I told him Jim had been drafted and was likely to go he shrugged his shoulders, "-Somebody's got to go, he said.

I was sitting on the bank of a trout stream the other day. Some acquaintances tell me I do this much too often. Even my wife reproaches me. Crazy. Fanatic. I often hear these words. Sometimes I want to die, I'm so ashamed.

And they shake their heads some more.
The other day it was raining some: a lovely, fine, cold, September drizzle. I was thinking on things, people and places stuffed in boxes back on the closet shelves of my mind. Reminiscing.

Jim was assigned, awarded? a gunner position on a helicopter gunship. I think he was assigned, maybe he volunteered. They'd daylight chopper over a village and then blow incendiary rockets into the huts and waste hundreds of rounds of heavy machine gun fire into running packs of Vietnamese men, women and children who had allegedly given rice in the night to Cong.

The first summer break from college I had a night shift factory job. One night I came home and my mother was sitting up at the kitchen table under the single hanging lamp, reading, and drinking a cup of black coffee.

"Jim's mother called me tonight, Herbert. They told her his helicopter was shot down on a mission and he's missing in action. They don't know if he's alive or dead or a prisoner. They're going to announce it in church Sunday but she thought you'd want to know.

One day that fall back at school I was sitting outside the lobby of the library smoking a cigarette. The sky was clear and light blue. It was very windy. The flag was crackling, tattered in the wind. Then Sherry sat down next to me.

-Hello, she said softly.

-Well, I haven't seen you in a long time.
-No.
-How are you?
-Oh, I'm getting married in the Spring.
-Well?
-Have you heard anything? Is he still missing?

Before I could say anything all hell broke loose and like a drug in my veins terror swept through me. I heard in the distance mourning chants, cries. The wailing shrieks of women; women tearing their breasts with stone knives, pulling their hair out by the handful. I braced against a roar in my ears and saw pools, little pools, big pools, a running brook, a brook of scarlet, shining blood. Where is your brother, fool, where is your brother?

She was saying:

-You know he wrote me letters from there, even from training camp. I have dozens.

-He never wrote me back. I never wrote him. Not once. And all these lonely letters all about that stinking jungle, his camps and comrades and the damn guns. And everyone ends, "Sherry, I'll love you. Always, Jim." Just like that. What was I supposed to do. Every one. Herbert, I used to be able to talk to you. Sometimes I want to die, I'm so ashamed.

She took a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her eyes.

-What should I do? Ought I to write his parents?
-Express your carded sympathy, or condolences?
-What? I don't know anymore. It confuses me so. Don't hurt me.

I stood up, kissed my fingertips and touched them to her forehead.

-No sorrow now.
-He's dead.
-Well.
-Allow around you. How many here can say they have been loved at anytime with such a fine devotion. Such is a gift. And wasn't it a lovely gift? Be happy, I wished it were mine.

Her eyes welled with tears.

-I took the handkerchief from her clenched hands and as gently as I could, wiped her eyes.
-I've got to go. Tomorrow I'm going north. I'm going fishing. There's a place I have to go and a trout I have to catch.

-He wrote a lot about fishing with you.
-Goodye, I said.

Now she smiled.

-Maybe they'll be another there, like the other.
-Well, I'll accept what the river gives.

She rose and hugged me briefly, hard.

-I'm always saying Thank you when I talk to you.

-Maybe I better start sending bills, I said, and we went our separate ways.

Three years later another acquaintance of mine from high school bumped into me in a bar. We had a couple of beers and talked about old friends. He told me Sherry and her husband had died. Her face had been horribly disfigured, but the plastic surgeons had done a wonderful job.

-She doesn't look half bad, he said.

From other inquiries I have learned that she became reclusive, but after some time she did emerge to return to school for a degree in education. She is now a teacher on the grade school level. Children. Laughter and song. Promise. The river flows. It has been several years now. A war is over. Many, many are still missing. Many more cry softly, in restless half sleep, in the dark of night.