
Pro Rege

Volume 33 | Number 4

Article 2

June 2005

"Whither?" Some Thoughts on the Genre of Literature in an Electronic Age

James C. Schaap
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2005) ""Whither?" Some Thoughts on the Genre of Literature in an Electronic Age," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 33: No. 4, 10 - 19.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol33/iss4/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.



A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Editor's Note: This article was originally presented as a lecture for the MacLaurin Institute, a Christian study center at the University of Minnesota, on January 19, 2005.

“Whither?”

Some Thoughts on the Genre of Literature in an Electronic Age



by James Calvin Schaap

Just a few weeks ago, I found myself doing something I had not done in thirty years of teaching literature. At the time, I was reviewing an assignment I had given my first-semester

Author of *Romey's Place*, *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, *The Secrets of Barneveld Calvary*, and others, Jim Schaap has been honored by the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association for his fiction. He has also written plays, histories, and numerous articles on Faith and Writing. Among his other titles are *On the Trail of the Spirit*, sixteen stories of people affected by the ministry of the Back to God Hour; *Every Bit of Who I Am*, a devotional for teens; and *Paternity*, a collection of short fiction. *Touches the Sky*, released in the fall of 2004, was recently given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in their annual book awards. His most recent work is *Fifty-Five and Counting*, released last spring by Dordt Press. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for almost thirty years.

American literature class, reading over some poetry by Emily Dickinson. In a survey class, Ms. Dickinson gets no more than a day or two, and I had assigned a dozen of her most famous poems.

I have been reading her for years of course, but her work never ceases to amaze me because, like all good literature, it glints anew every time through. I am not a Dickinson scholar and am woefully behind on any and all recent research; but to me, Ms. Dickinson is the finest nineteenth-century American poet. I like talking about Whitman, but I'm not as great a fan.

So much in Dickinson is worth experiencing—her little nature portraits (“A narrow fellow in the grass”), her almost aphoristic wisdom literature (“Success is counted sweetest/by those who ne'er succeed;/to comprehend a nectar/requires sorest need”). There are her pseudo-confessional moments (“The soul selects her own society/ then shuts the door. . .”), her memorable dalliances with death (“I heard a fly buzz when I died”), and her passion's mammoth force, totally imagined (“Wild nights, wild nights/ were I with thee/ wild nights would be our luxury”)—all of that still leaves me incredulous.

But first, in the interest of full disclosure, a confession. Sometimes I fall too quickly into the sour grip of a sneer, as I did that day, knowing that I would soon walk into class, late in the semester, the Belle of Amherst in my hands and heart, and play to the glazed eyes of 25 college students whose daily planners would neither anticipate nor record the joy I feel.

Maybe that petulance, which comes more easily to me with each passing year, had something to do with what I did as I prepared. I was reading

through those poems, one after another, when suddenly I realized that I was not asking myself what was in the line; instead I was asking a very simple question: “why should I care?” I was asking that question because I knew my students would be thinking it—“What’s so hot about this strange bird Dickinson? Why is she in the book? Why should I care?”

I am growing closer to sixty than I would like to admit, and I have taught literature my whole life—in secondary schools for a few years, and in college for a quarter century, Dordt College, a place where all the students, I swear, are above average. But that day I found myself arranging a new lecture in answer to a question I had not asked myself before: why spend all this time on Emily Dickinson? Perhaps I should have been approaching such questions before, but I hadn’t. If that is a sin, I am a sinner. I never thought it necessary to make a case for Emily Dickinson.

But jump not to hasty conclusions. Several weeks before, I had spent an entire Saturday reading essay tests and was honestly impressed with the quality. I was between speaking engagements, far from home, and I had to get these tests back; they had to be read, so I read them—all of them, all day—and I found myself significantly encouraged. My American lit class is not a gaggle of slow-learners, and what I am about to say is not a Jeremiad on the dumbing down of American youth. They are not dolts, but they are different from their predecessors, a fact that is only to be expected.

The problem that literature’s advocates, people like myself, are facing is complex and far-reaching; and it seems to me that the questions we can fairly ask on the topic come far more easily than answers. What is the state of literary studies today? In a culture that is undeniably more visual than it has ever been, what is the importance of Emily Dickinson? What is the future of literary studies, specifically what we speak of as “the genre of literature”?

Something is happening in the world that I’ve held dear, something that concerns me as a writer, a novelist, and a teacher. “Whither?” is what I’m asking—where are we going?

Such questions I’d like to examine by way of analysis, by way of some recent research, a few anecdotes, and a short list of Christmas gifts,

shaping it all into something that testifies to my faith and its influence on me as a writer and teacher.

Anyway, it was at this point, in my office, preparing for Dickinson, that I remembered a place on a sidewalk not that far from where I was sitting. In 1966, I went to Dordt College because I was the child of an ethno-religious tribe that wouldn’t really allow me to consider a college other than one of “ours.” Just as importantly, I thought I could play basketball there.

I was no literary *wonderkind*. I hadn’t written a novel before I was twelve, nor devoured Lewis’s *Narnia Chronicles*. I had fantasies to be sure, but none of them involved hobbits. My parents were not readers; my sisters were not readers; for the most part, high school English classes were part of the cost of admission to the gym.

But in college I had an English teacher who insisted I could write, wouldn’t stop saying it, in fact, and kept jotting notes in margins about handsome diction and how, someday, I had to write a novel. It was her first year teaching—what did she know? What’s worse, I believed her.

I remember a moment—and I know exactly where I was at the time—I could show you the spot on the sidewalk—when I was walking to a morning American literature class with a roommate, the two of us talking about the assignment. I don’t remember whom we were talking about, but I remember suddenly thinking that this discussion about ideas that arose from literature was something one could actually *do*—I mean, for a living. It was the fall semester of my second year in college—oddly enough, the semester I nearly flunked out. That day, without the aid of any career counselor, I forged both a major and an occupation.

I entered the profession because I wanted to be part of a conversation I had never known existed before coming to college, a conversation about ideas, about writing and art, about what literature suggests about us, about our world, and about what it means to be part of the human pageant, a conversation I’d suddenly found immensely interesting. I came into the profession—an English teacher *and* a writer—because I respected and even loved that conversation, a conversation that continues at this very moment, in fact.

For the rest of my undergraduate and graduate

studies, I told myself that if I wanted to be a part of that conversation, I needed to understand what was being said. If I didn't understand Emerson's "Nature," for instance—and I didn't—I was the problem, not the literature or the nature of the conversation. If I wanted to know why people said what they did about *Moby Dick*, I needed to gird up my loins through all the whaling minutia to reach the cosmically rich final scenes. I needed to understand what Thoreau meant when he wrote so playfully, "I rejoice that there are owls."

I was and am but one person, whose story may or may not be typical. But what I am saying is that, that day at my desk just a few weeks ago, Emily Dickinson's poetry in front of me, I realized something had changed because if, when I was a student, I didn't "get it," I simply took for granted that I needed to work harder to become part of the conversation. For better or for worse, back then—and even today—I was the supplicant and the canon was the altar, its environs, holy ground.

I did not need a professor to build a case for Emily Dickinson. She was, I was confident, worthy of every bit of our attention, even if I didn't "get" the idea of her hearing a fly buzz at her own seeming death.

No more. Today I think I need to explain why it is important to read and understand Emily Dickinson, even to students who have decided they're going to be English majors. I need to make a case for her presence in the brick-like anthology spread on the desks before them.

Here is what I was thinking—Dickinson is everything people say she is because few writers ever sealed so much life in so slight a receptacle. Look at the verse form—she took it from a hymn-book; look at the range—she found everything in her own imagination; look at the honesty—unseen, really, in conventional nineteenth-century poetry, save Whitman. Look at the wide-ranging issues of the heart—this woman traveled far in Amherst. All that life in so insubstantial a package creates a tension that's astonishing, a tension that is at the very soul of art. And she's surprising, always surprising.

That day, I was creating an aesthetic. I don't remember ever before feeling that I needed to do such a thing for the Belle of Amherst, but that day I *was* — and what

I'm saying is that today, I believe I must.

Those who have been tuned in to the conversation will not be surprised when I say that the literary canon is, in many ways, in shambles. Some would say, of course, that it has simply deconstructed itself in the last several decades, especially by way of the critical eyes of post-modern literary theories that have assailed holy writ for its privileged character. When forces from within the establishment appear to seek its demise, who needs enemies?

But few, if any, of my students are disciples of Derrida. The vast majority are the children of staunch Republicans. I don't need to make a case for Dickinson because they've been deeply influenced by deconstruction, feminist theory, or Marxist criticism. They haven't.

Exterior forces are at work as well, and one of them, certainly, is the prevalence of visual media (film, TV, video games) that constantly and effortlessly offer us sufficient provision to satisfy the human need for story. "Why read the book if you can see the movie?" was the old question; the new one is, "Why read a book when you can watch movies?"

But there is more to the shift that's going on in my profession. I am finding it increasingly difficult to teach early American literature because, or so it seems to me, my students' ability to read and understand nineteenth-century prose style slips almost every year. Edwards, for them, is an immense challenge, despite his importance to them as Christian students; Emerson is almost inaccessible; and Thoreau is, in their words, tedious; even Poe is a headache.

Something has changed on both ends of the equation: the means (simply reading traditional texts) seems far more difficult to them than it was to me, and the end (an academic conversation that begins with literature) is simply far less appealing.

My estimation of their reading abilities is not anecdotal. A few months ago, the National Endowment for the Arts released a comprehensive study called *Reading at Risk*. Somewhere there's a bad pun in this line, but let me just say that the NEA study is not encouraging reading. Let me summarize some of the findings. Today, less than half of all Americans over the age of 18 read novels, short stories, plays or poetry (with-

out regard to quality). What's more, the trajectory is downward in all demographic areas and most recently, most precipitous. Here are a few specifics:

- While the population of the United States increased by 40 million in the last twenty years, the number of those reading literature—poetry, fiction, and plays—stayed the same: 96 million. Thus literary readership dropped by 14 percent.
- By all measures, that decline is accelerating. Between 1982 and 1992, readers of literature declined in our culture, just over 4 percent, from 60.9 percent to 56.6 percent. In the last decade, however, that percentage declined by 14 percent.
- The steepest decline in literary reading has occurred in the demographic that includes my American lit class: almost 60 percent of all 18-24 year olds, in 1982, read some literature; in the past year that percentage had fallen to 42.8 percent.
- In 1992, 54 percent of those who responded to the NEA's earlier study indicated they had read "a literary work of some kind." A decade later, that percentage fell to 46.7 percent, a decline that is more than twice that of book reading in general, at a rate that accelerated three times faster than it did a decade earlier.
- Twenty years ago, over 82 percent of this country's most educated populace (college and university graduates) had read literature; today that percentage has dropped to 66.7 percent, a decline of 18.7 percent.
- The vast majority of book buyers are women, but the decline in reading literature is just as obvious among women as it is among men. Sadly, just slightly more than one-third of adult males read literature.

Perhaps no one has been as outspoken about the gravity of these findings as the NEA's current chair, poet and essayist Dana Gioia. "Each of us has anecdotes," Gioia told a gathering at the New York Public Library after the release of the report, "but quantifying it shows that the trends are worse than you imagined." Gioia pointed specifically at the precipitous drop in reading literature among the youngest demographic, 18-24-year-olds, and said, "This is the visual trend of an

activity that is going out of existence" (McLemee).

The "Executive Summary" of the NEA Report ends dolefully:

Reading at Risk presents a distressing but objective overview of national trends. The accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults indicate an imminent cultural crisis. The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen. Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century. (xiii)

Perhaps I should simply take solace in my dotage, be happy I've less than a decade of teaching left, and start hunting for some gabled cottage up north on a reedy Minnesota lake. But the whole issue—my relationship to my American literature class included—is thornier and more complex than meets the eye or ear, even though I feel the pain Dana Gioia does when he talks about "an activity going out of existence" (McLemee).

Nevertheless, it's difficult to cast a fully persuasive argument for the death of literature (or reading) when the flood of books from publishers has reached 179,000 and more this year, with more than two billion books in sales (2003). It is difficult to claim the apocalypse is now when registers at Borders and Barnes and Nobles ring up sales in every shopping center in America, when 1100 people line up at a Washington bookstore for the release of Bill Clinton's *My Life*; when elementary school students devour Harry Potter; or when Sally Williams, Book Review Editor of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, reports receiving at her newsroom desk 100 new books every single day, not to mention 80 or more phone calls, 300-plus e-mails, and 60 faxes from eager publicists. In 1986 there were 21,000 publishers in America; today there are 70,000. Print culture itself is not history, certainly.

Toni Morrison once told an audience that winning a Pulitzer was nice, but having Oprah pick a novel was, each time, a real blessing. Single-handedly, Oprah can raise the dead after all, jetting Leo Tolstoy to the *New York Times* Bestseller List recently. The popularity of all book clubs,

hither and yon, means people still find real and stimulating life between the covers. Some novels have been chosen by entire municipalities, even states—among recent favorites, Leif Enger, whose novel *Peace Like a River* has blessed millions of book club enthusiasts.

And there's more to cheer about. The rise of chain bookstores has been abetted by a certain latte chic, has it not? Stop by for espresso, a soft chair, and lamplight—pick up a book or two in a tweedy ambience. Whatever the marketing ploy, one can't help but rejoice at the effect: big bookstores appear to be thriving, and certainly, books are selling.

Reading—even reading something in the genre of “literature”—is not dead in the water. Marvelously strong small presses continue to turn out wonderful stuff that originates, frequently, with local and regional writers. Technology has made publishing itself a beneficiary of its new ways. It is simply much easier to type, set, and print a book than it's ever been in history. Computers have created a world in which anyone can be a publisher.

Most of those who have written books, like me, know very well how many would-be writers are, even as we speak, dutifully huddled over keyboards putting the finishing touches on a screenplay or memoir—or even poetry. A recent survey reported that 81 percent of all Americans would like to write a book someday (Tenner). The Association of Writing Programs claims that, in this same period of decline in what we might call “creative reading,” creative writing is more popular than ever; in fact, the highest percentage of creative writers is the same demographic that has the lowest reading rate—18-24-year-olds, who presently account for 12.7 percent of all those enrolled in MFA programs (Fenza). I am certainly not the first to believe that in America today it sometimes appears there are more people writing than reading—or at least buying reading. ABC News, at years end, named bloggers as “People of the Year”—writers all.

And one more salient fact, as journalists might say. In a July article in the *New York Times*, a commentary on *Reading at Risk*, Bruce Weber dropped this note in the last line of the article: “The one category of book to rise markedly [in the last year] was that of religious texts, with total

sales of \$337.9 million, 36.8 percent over the previous year.” Pardon the bad joke, but if American culture stops reading and simply goes to hell, it seems that Christians will be happy to be left behind.

In his book *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900*, Clive Bloom says that more books “are consumed by a greater number of people who speak and read English than at any other time in history....We do live in an age where print is more pervasive than ever and where authorship is very big business” (as quoted in Murray).

In many ways the new electronic technology has been a great blessing to the book industry. My most recent book, *Fifty-Five and Counting*, a collection of essays, has been done in what is called “print on demand,” a form of publication that is a tremendous boon to small publishers like the Dordt College Press. The profusion of publication in America today is directly attributable to electronic technology. In the same way that digital technology makes anybody with an eye and a decent camera into a landscape photographer, word processing has made the process as well as the infrastructure of writing—from composition to publication—far more democratic.

The question of “whither?” I am saying, is a good one; and it may be altogether too easy to see the world that we are entering as Chicken Little might. But whatever losses the literary community has suffered, it seems impossible to argue that reading—or the book itself—is imperiled by anyone or anything. And there lies the paradox of our situation.

So let us return for a moment to the canon, the once-assumed foundation of the profession of literature pros and literary writers. Internal and external threats notwithstanding, the canon changes, period. Almost without exception, I have noted that my students really dislike Theodore Dreiser, whose presence looms over the early twentieth century in American fiction. As much as I hate to admit it, being a regionalist myself, my students—and I—find it difficult to make it through almost anything of our own Sinclair Lewis.

In rural northwest Iowa, our literary heritage includes two names almost entirely gone, even from Amazon.com: Frederick Manfred, once thought to be the region's Faulkner, and Ruth

Suckow. Only recently, I began to read Ruth Suckow, who, in the early to middle decades of the twentieth-century, had a much larger literary following than Manfred. While I enjoyed her work, its givens were rather sadly out of date. Want to find her books? Contact rare books dealers—on the net, of course.

As much as I hate to say it, my Damascus-like sidewalk experience might deconstruct itself with a little anthropological tweaking. Maybe I just wanted out of stifling limitations of a Dutch Calvinist world by way of a more sophisticated and urbane culture, one that disdained the lower-middle-class vision of work and play I'd inherited from my parents. Maybe Marx and Freud weren't all wrong. Perhaps the worship I felt of the canon itself is exactly what Derrida, may he rest in peace, was fighting.

While all of that may be true, *Reading at Risk* seems to prove that something is changing, something a writer and teacher of literature—not to mention most academics—simply cannot ignore.

Let me add some weight here. In a recent front page essay in the *New York Times*, Paul Theroux looks back at the life of Graham Greene and begins with this line: "Graham Greene lived, and thrived, in an age when writers were powerful, priest-like, remote and elusive.... It is impossible now for any American under the age of 60 or so," he goes on to say, "to comprehend the literary world that existed in the two decades after World War II, and especially the magic that fiction writers exerted upon the public" (1).

During those very years, I experienced that epiphany on a college sidewalk. My entry to the literary world was, in fact, the aforementioned Frederick Manfred, a man whose novel, *The Secret Place*, I bought because my Siouland friends, born and reared on farms adjacent to those where Manfred had been, were bountifully apprised of his novels' unblushing portrayal of human sexuality. Manfred—Feike Feikema—was, in Sioux County, Iowa, quite notorious actually; and to me, he was "powerful, priest-like, remote and elusive," an artist, something approximate to the sainthood Emerson wanted to bestow on those who would take the name of *poet*. I did not aspire to be like him because of whatever money he made as a writer; I aspired to gain something of the power achieved in the way his

work spoke, to me and others, for good or ill. I thought him to be a seer.

As Theroux says, it is almost impossible for today's students to understand a world in which writers are perceived as cultural high priests. Stephen King and John Grisham wear no such mantle, after all; a few months ago, when we talked in my class about Emerson's adulation for the poet, it was impossible for me to point at any writer in my students' lives who might even come close.

The substantive changes in the world that I entered when I graduated from college have taken place in the literary culture and the conversation to which I aspired. There may be more books around today and no less reading going on, but literarily we live in a brand and brave new world where I probably need to make a case for Emily Dickinson.

I'm not sure anyone has a firm grasp on this elusive word *post-modernism*, and I am not, by nature, a scholar. But whatever our partial definitions, we seem to be, presently, decidedly in its grasp because what seems obvious—especially with the ascent of spirituality in all quarters of our cultural life—is that modernism's verities are best seen today in a rear view mirror, its claims silly, its agenda an artifact. As many far brighter than I have made clear, if there is a doctrine at all to the post-modern vision of things, it is that nothing is written in stone. In the world of literature, that means there really is no canon anyway, so why should I care? What's so special about Dickinson?

In the absence of the authority once exerted by modernism—the privilege given certain ideas and certain genres of literature, let's say, in the world of the arts and the world of ideas more broadly—the new privileging may well be granted by the forces of consumerism and celebrity. And I'm starting to sound like a Marxist again. But who among us will even try to argue that today we don't live in "the age of choice."

Recently, *Image* magazine celebrated its fifteenth anniversary with discussion titled "Redeeming the Time: A Symposium," a series of essays about, generally, how things are going in fiction, poetry, nonfiction, film, dance, the visual arts, music, and theater. As one might expect, the landscapes therein described soon

began to look remarkably similar. Let me summarize again:

- In music, we have suffered a “collapse of cultural consensus.” According to Michael Capps, a composer from Dallas, Texas, “...modernism has run us to the fringes of what can be considered music—everything now qualifies, from audible conceptual sounds to ambient noise and even silence” (61). Robert Cording, a poet, says “...we are alive in a historical moment in which the old truths are experienced as inadequate” (75); and James Romaine, an art historian, claims that, “the modernist project...has come to an end” (33). “You might say,” Michael Capps writes, “that we’ve been released on our own recognizance, writing for ourselves or whichever audience we prefer” (63).
- In the absence of traditional consensus, consumerism, plain and simple, wins all too easily in the battle for increasingly shrinking attention spans. As Ron Reed, a playwright says, “Postmodern culture is notoriously—and increasingly—word resistant and image oriented, not to mention fractured, hurried, and advertised-to. Fast, cheap, and out of control.” Traditional theater, he says, is at a disadvantage in that world. “Consumers... aren’t likely even to hear about what’s going on at the local skit factory; it can’t afford the billboards, and electronic media looks after it own.” Furthermore, theater’s reliance on the word “lacks the jump cuts, digital effects and—let’s face it—graphic violence and sex that sell its flashier sibs” (41).
- However, the sky is not falling. What comes across in the *Image* appraisals just as fully as the despair some can feel is the possibilities many recognize in this new world. There is, it seems, a renewed commitment to the totality of human experience, spiritual longing included. Faith has a remarkably more striking profile in contemporary art and literature and film. “The future of filmmaking, for both the mainstream and art house audiences,” says Jeffrey Overstreet, who writes a weekly column for *Christianity Today*’s website, “is a place of intense spiritual dialogue and debate” (37). The novelist Valerie Sayers claims that “much of the most chal-

lenging fiction in the U. S. now takes religious faith as a matter, at the very least, worthy of exploration” (50), a point to which we will return.

- The disintegration of a cultural consensus makes smaller communities seem fertile ground for original work and consensus-making, including reliance on smaller outlets for an artist’s work. “If writers want to keep bearing witness to the absurdities of our contemporary reality, we’ll have to keep inventing and supporting publishing outside the corporate world,” says Valerie Sayers (52). “Many of the great films of the next era will be discovered at independent film festivals,” says Jeffrey Overstreet, “and in the web-logs of vigilant cinephiles rather than at major studio press junkets” (39). And Anne McCutchan, a non-fiction writer, claims that “in the future, an increasing number of writers who work outside the usual literary and theological circles will contribute in significant and surprising ways to the growing body of spiritually driven creative non-fiction” (55).
- Several of the artists looked to the church community for new opportunities, especially in the areas of drama and music. Joel Hartse, a writer specializing in pop music, says that Christian music could be “a musical version of the Body of Christ—shared resources, an aesthetic based on love and truth, a do-it-yourself aesthetic coupled with a devotion to artistic quality” (60). “Churches,” says Michael Capps, “are one of the few remaining places where people may routinely engage with live performances of art music” (64).

What seems clear is that at least some of the problems I see occurring within my profession and practice are happening as profoundly in all of the arts—a malaise at the heart of things, old cores falling into disuse, the seeming demise of high culture, a democratization of aesthetic standards, consumerism as the conquering worm. But there are concomitant new opportunities: increasing regard for spirituality, the growth of smaller presses and artistic venues, the reordering of communities.

It may well be that the information age itself is

most responsible for those changes, but, as I've already confessed, the computer chip and the cathode ray tube have also created immense blessings. All the while I've been composing here at my computer, a little box at the bottom of my screen reminded me that a gateway to the internet was open when I needed it. I wouldn't want to be without the icons on the screen before me.

My workout regimen begins each morning on the machines in the local gym, with about 45 minutes of fiction that happens to be, as I write, *The Secret Life of Bees*.

I listen to books. Just last week, I realized that most of the fiction I'd purchased from Audible.com was stashed in a corner of a microchip within my computer. Since my old Dell Dimension is not as quick as it once was, I deleted that entire shelf with a single key stroke, an amazing feat, maybe twenty books whose pages I've never turned. (For those of you not techno-savvy, I can get them back anytime online).

It would cost you dearly to wrest away my digital camera, and, yes, my wife and I watch television. I too am part of this electronic age, and it's clear to me that like every other technological innovation in human history, ours offers menus that include a multitude of curses as well as blessings.

There is cause sufficient for someone like me to be worried about the future of everything I've held dear since a walk to class almost 40 years ago on a sidewalk not far from where I'm sitting. I don't have to think all that much to take my place with Dana Gioia and see the end of the literary world as I know it. To me, it's not particularly difficult to imagine the sky is falling.

Furthermore, I am neither blind nor deaf to the way in which the immediacy of individual choice in our cultural diets, symbolized most specifically, perhaps, by the ubiquitous remote, endangers every phase of our lives, encouraging what Christine Rosen calls "egocasting," which is "not the cultivation of taste, but the numbing repetition of fetish," and breeding thereby she says, "a vast cultural impatience." I feel "vast cultural impatience" in my students, in my children, and in myself.

Are things changing? Yes, undoubtedly. Are

those changes good? Not all. Are we observing the end of literature as we know it? No. I don't believe so.

I received two gifts this Christmas, at the very time I was writing this speech, two gifts which make me believe that there is cause to look up, not light out for some illusionary West.

One is a brand new novel I received from my wife—Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, a kind of last will and testimony of John Ames, an old pastor in small-town Iowa, who knows his imminent death will prevent him from speaking to his boy, a seven-year-old, about all the things the boy needs to know.

In a front-page *NY Times Book Review* little more than a month ago, James Wood wrote of *Gilead*, "Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction, what Ames means when he refers to 'grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials.'" Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* creates a fully realized human being, whose feet are planted firmly, despite his precarious health, on green earth he knows belongs to the Lord. "When a thing is truly seen, seen intensely," Czeslaw Milosz once wrote, "it remains with us forever and astonishes us, even though it would appear there is nothing astonishing about it." (as qtd. in *Image* 72). Such a literary creation is John Ames, I believe, and Robinson's novel is just such a "thing."

Amid all the doomsday speculation, it's important to note that if the demise of modernism had not occurred, it's possible—just possible—that Robinson's novel would not be as celebrated as it has been in the few weeks since its release. Her novel is, blessedly, spiritual biography of highest caliber.

Thank God; the times have changed.

Gilead offers me, a Christian writer, a model of what can be done. For that I give thanks, great thanks.

I received another gift this Christmas, one that requires a story.

As I wrote much of this, a little green booklet titled *In Bethlehem Inn* sat upside-down beside me at my desk, a Christmas play that's really, as my students might say, "cheesy," the kind of schlock that extends the claws of my cynicism.

On Christmas Eve, in our church, I was a member of the cast of that play—I had the lead

because I was arm-wrestled into participation. Trust me when I say, “In Bethlehem Inn” should never be part of any canon. The only redeeming value for its being performed in our church—or any, for that matter—was the theory that it would, in three rehearsals and a performance, bring together twenty or so cast members from different age groups of the congregation to build community. By my estimation, those same people could have done better roller-skating.

When I came home after the first rehearsal, my wife would not listen to my ranting; she is fond of asking me what part of N-O it is that I don’t understand.

If being an artist, the kind of artist I have always aspired to, the kind of artist who takes seriously the findings of the NEA study—if being a real artist means forswearing such balderdash—then I won’t make the cut.

Trust me. Reciting the lines of that silliness required more work than writing out a wholly different play, but no one had asked. I live in a small, Midwestern town among people whose ethnic and religious pedigrees are akin to my own, a community where musicians and writers don’t always choose the literature. You might say that when I giggle at Garrison Keilor, I do so *from* Lake Woebegone.

But just for a moment here, I want you to think about the stunning irony of *In Bethlehem Inn* tented atop those *Image* articles I’ve referred to, as well as my copy of *Reading at Risk*. As I was writing these words, I was terrorized by having to recite so many lines for such serious silliness. Isn’t life marvelous?

The show must go on, and it did. I was the innkeeper, a Mr. Eli Merriman, a tyrannical father and shekel-squeezing businessman who, shockingly, wouldn’t admit Mary and Joseph to an overbooked inn. And no, the three rehearsals were not sufficient to help me recite dozens and dozen of lines, some of them sermon-like in length. On Christmas Eve, I held the book in one hand and read.

But then, no one seemed to care. It wasn’t theater, really, the entire play aspiring to slapstick comedy with a few tinsel-y Christmas delights for good cheer. Most of the characters seemed once-removed descendents of *Laugh-In*.

At the end of the play, it was my job to usher

the congregation out of the fellowship room. “Come, come—follow me!” I said, waving an enrobed arm, and the entire crowd moved across the room, where I banged a switch on the electronic folding doors, opening them miraculously to a wooden manger with a real baby, a girl actually, beneath her swaddling clothes, a child brooded over by her own costumed parents, a kind of live nativity.

Now some people may well be “truly blessed” by such tableaux, but I’ve always found them tasteless. After leading the faithful past the crèche, I hid, like a child with his little light under a bushel. After all, I was at that very time writing this.

People took seats in the pews for a few carols. The preacher read Luke 2, and the cast lit individual hand-held candles, whose flame was then passed along to everyone else, those hundred candles the sole illumination in the place.

We were standing in the front, the entire cast, including Mary, Joseph, and the baby—standing there on the risers, when just for a moment my eyes caught that child. I didn’t mean to look over that way; I wasn’t looking for a thrill.

But just for a moment I saw a baby’s face, red and round, within the kind of wrap we used to bundle our own children in after a bath. I have no idea if she was asleep or awake, crying or still. I didn’t stare. What I’m saying is that I just happened to glance over in that direction and my eyes caught—I am the passive recipient of this epiphany, I swear—my eyes caught this baby’s face, and by way of that single image my mind and heart exploded.

With a force that nearly buckled my knees, I was struck by the enormity of this madness we call the incarnation, that God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, parceled out a part of himself, pulled on human skin, and alighted to a woebegone world in the form of something as helpless as a newborn. That moment was, as John Ames would say, “grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials.” A baby’s face created a vision almost as cleansing as a bath in the blood of Christ—in so slight a package, so immense a gift.

“My hope is built on nothing less,” says the old hymn, “than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

For a moment, pretension died in the face of the

singular fact that makes all the difference. A reminder, I suppose, that even writers don't create grace; it is, for all of us, a gift.

Right here above me on the wall is an old diploma from my grandfather's high school graduation in Parkersburg, Iowa, 1897. It lists the courses he took: 32 weeks of Plane Geometry, 38 weeks of Cicero, 38 weeks of Caesar, 23 weeks of English literature, and more. Having been in education for almost all of my life, I don't find it difficult to imagine the havoc that must have been raised when some young turk told the powers-that-be that the curriculum, the canon, simply had to change. But change it has.

I do not know whether or not I have any more novels in my head and heart, but two gifts, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and a glimpse of a candle-lit baby's face on Christmas Eve, firm my resolve as a teacher and writer not to change course, but to run the race I've believed for years that He has set before me. There are worse fates than having to make a case for the Belle of Amherst. Just two weeks ago, I created a blog.

The question "whither" is, I suppose, largely existential. I can not answer it for all Modern Language Association members or the myriad novelists now writing. I can answer it only for myself, and, just like you—all of you, no matter what you're callings, no matter how cultural directions shift—I have never had anything more to give than my very best, in thanks.

And that is, I suppose, the answer I'm offering to "Whither?"

Works Cited

Fenza, D. W. "Brave New World: Aliteracy in America." The Writer's Chronicle (Sept. 2004): 24-25.

McLemee, Scott. "Literary Reading is Declining Faster Than Before, Arts Endowment's New Report Says." The Chronicle of Higher Education (9 July 2004): 3+ . 12 Dec. 2004 <<http://chronicle.com/cgi2-bin/>

[printable.cgi?article=http://chronicle.com/free/2004/07/2004070901n.htm](http://chronicle.com/free/2004/07/2004070901n.htm)>.

Murray, Brian, "For the Madding Crowd." Rev. of Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900, by Clive Bloom. The Weekly Standard (30 Dec. 2002): 1-6. 7 Dec. 2004 <www.weeklystandard.com/Utiliites/printer_preview.asp?idArticle=2047&R=A0F729F9F>.

National Endowment for the Arts. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America. Research Division Report #46. June, 2004. Available on-line at <http://www.nea.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf> .

"Redeeming the Time: A State of the Arts Symposium." Image: Art, Faith, Mystery 42 (2004): 31-79.

Robinson, Marilynne. Gilead. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004.

Rosen, Christine. "The Age of Egocasting." The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society (7): 1-15. 15 Jan. 2005 <www.the-newatlantis.com/archive/7/rosen.htm>.

Tenner, Edward. "So Many Books, So Few Readers." Princetoninfo.com. 12 May 2004. U. S. 1 Newspaper. 23 Dec. 2004 <www.princetoninfo.com/200405/40512c03.html>.

Theroux, Paul. "Damned Old Graham Greene." Rev. of The Life of Graham Greene, vol. 3, by Norman Sherry. New York Times Book Review 17 Oct. 2004: 1+.

Weber, Bruce. New York Times 8 July 2004: 1+. 7 Dec. 2004 <www.nytimes.com/2004/07/08/books/08READ.html?ei=5090&en=0478807a580f2a85&ex=12470. . >.

Wood, James . "Acts of Devotion." Rev. of Gilead, by Marilynne Robinson. New York Times Book Review 28 Nov. 2004: 1+.