

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 22 | Number 4

Article 5

---

June 1994

## Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal (Book Review)

John Van Rys  
*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Rys, John (1994) "Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 22: No. 4, 29 - 31.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol22/iss4/5](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol22/iss4/5)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

mark of a superb craftsman, and there is a quietness in his prose that makes O'Connor's stories seem noisy in comparison. Yet like O'Connor's stories, Woiwode's reveal the intrusion of grace in the lives

of his characters. O'Connor, as she has said, shouts to the hard of hearing in her audience. Woiwode speaks *sotto voce* most of the time. But the message reaches the back rows just the same.

*Rock Bottom: An American Heartland Farm-Town and Family From Settlement Through the Great Depression*, by John M. Wilkinson (Privately printed, 1993). 226 pages, paperback, \$14.50. Reviewed by Louis Y. Van Dyke, Professor of History.

John Wilkinson received a B.A. degree in economics from the University of Minnesota and a graduate degree in public administration from Harvard University. After concluding a varied career which included being a U.S. Army officer, an economist in both the private and public sector, and an author on various topics on economics and public policy, Wilkinson decided to write the history of his home town, Rock Falls, Iowa, (population 140) from its founding in 1855 through 1940. When he related to an acquaintance the story of his town and its slow but inevitable decline, the rejoinder was that perhaps the town should have been named "Rock Bottom." Hence the title.

The book is really part history, part memoir, and part polemic. The history of the village's first sixty-five years is compressed into eighty-one pages. Wilkinson's tale is the familiar story of many mid-Western towns. There is a promising beginning as the local economy is sustained by the developing farm economy. Eventually, technology in the form of improved transportation and communication causes the village to lose out to the neighboring town, in this case Mason City. Businesses close, people move away in search of opportunities elsewhere, and the village fades into obscurity. Indeed, as a young man, Wilkinson himself leaves never to return.

The bulk of Wilkinson's narrative is devoted to his first twenty years in Rock Falls between the wars. We

do get acquainted with the young Wilkinson, his life, loves, hopes, dreams and frustrations, and his father appears as a character of the first magnitude. However, the rest of his family as well as other citizens of Rock Falls remain two-dimensional. We need to know more about the characters who ran the businesses in Rock Falls and the farmers who were their customers if the book is to be truly a history of Rock Falls.

In the last few pages, Wilkinson proposes a unique solution to the problem of lack of basic services to the rural elderly in villages such as Rock Falls. These small towns should be designated "open retirement homes" composed of clusters of twenty-five or more homes with a center which would provide basic services such as citizens in urban areas enjoy. He argues that a rural hamlet should be a "retirement home without walls."

While Wilkinson might have been inspired to propose a solution to rural poverty by his Rock Falls experience, his argument is really not part of the story of "Rock Bottom" and is rather the material for a separate article in an appropriate journal. The manuscript could use some close editing as typographical errors abound.

The book is written in a chatty, informal style, and those who have grown up in a mid-Western village would have no trouble relating to the story of "Rock Bottom," substituting the name of their own town and reliving John Wilkinson's experiences.

*Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). 314 pages. \$19.99 paperback. Reviewed by Dr. John Van Rys, Assistant Professor of English.

Five or six years ago, before I became a semi-respectable professor, I was a doctoral student in English literature at a Canadian university, struggling not just with a dissertation but also with theoretical debates "raging" (as debates always do, it seems) in the esoteric ivory towers of English departments from Alaska to Zanzibar. During this time I had also (due to my under 30 innocence) been drafted, by default I think, into the eldership of the small congregation I called home. Again by default (my schedule was flexible, while other elders had real work), I ended up going to a classis meeting or two. During a meal break

at one such meeting, I stood in line politely listening to an elderly elder of the greased head decade. Referring to debates over evolution, women, and the age of the universe (and the relationship between the three), he remarked something to this effect, either assuming my agreement or daring me to disagree: "If the Bible says it, then that's what it says and that's what we've got to believe." I think he was referring to either 24 hour periods or wearing hats, but I can't remember. However, being an intellectual coward as well as a meek debater, and sensing that my orthodoxy was at stake (as was my meal), I kept my mouth shut.

"Why are you telling me all this," you ask, "when you are supposed to be telling me about *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* and whether I should spend \$19.99 on it rather than on the homeless?" My reasons are these. First, this little anecdote drives home the connection between reading, believing, and living (even eating meals and wearing hats). The way we read is the way we believe, and this thought points out the intimate connections between our lives as readers of the Word and our lives as readers of other words, including literature. Second, as a graduate student immersed in not only literature but criticism and critical paradigms and critical philosophies, I found little guidance in the field and had few valid replies for comments like the one made by my fellow elder, though such comments made me feel uneasy. For these two reasons, *Contemporary Literary Theory* is an important book. As a collection of essays exploring the breadth of critical approaches to literature, this book announces in a specifically Christian context the complexity and richness of the acts of writing and reading.

Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, the editors, have made this above all a useful and usable book. The meat of the book is made up of individual essays by various critics on the various approaches to literature currently practiced by critics (and teachers, students, and even writers), from Leland Ryken on Formalist and Archetypal criticism to Alan Jacobs on Deconstruction and John Cox on New Historicism. In between are essays on Moral, Marxist, and Psychological criticism; Reader-Response theories, Hermeneutics, and Linguistics; as well as Feminist Literary Theory. While the format of individual chapters varies, each tends to cover the following: a definition of the approach that puts it in context, explores its history, and relates its main tenets; an assessment of the approach's strengths and weaknesses in the context of its philosophical and ideological roots, as well as its effects; and first steps at articulating a Christian response through points of attraction and deflection. In addition, each chapter introduces us to the key players in the debates and provides a solid bibliography for further reading. Such an approach—a diversity of writers introducing the diversity of approaches—gives the reader both practical guidance and much food for thought in the midst of current critical debates; debates which are after all part of a broader turmoil working itself through our societies.

The meat of the book is then enclosed within bookends (excuse the rather grotesque metaphor): an introductory chapter by Walhout announcing the purpose of the collection and two reflective chapters at the end, "Critical Theory" by Mark Walhout and an

"Afterword" by Leland Ryken, both of which seek to put the previous essays in context and set some directions for writers, readers, students, and teachers. These chapters, too, are useful, because they challenge the meek, chastise the scoffers, and reign in the overeager. These chapters solidify the notion that literature (and theory) are relevant to the Christian's life, and that the Christian reader's participation at whatever crossroads is a valid part of kingdom life, like caring for the homeless. However, these bookend chapters provide me with one criticism: the book could use a single chapter that tackles the historical development of criticism particularly over the past 200 years. Historical context is abundant throughout the essays, but in piecemeal fashion.

Again, however, the strengths of the collection are many, for the book challenges the reader, whether student or scholar, at every turn. First of all, the essays vividly portray the unsettled nature of current literary studies—the tensions, politics, victors and victims in the debates. Moreover, the writers point to this unsettled state as an opportunity for Christian voices, not a deterrent. While Ryken can lament current theory's iconoclasm, subjectivism, skepticism, and political agendas, and while James Vanden Bosch can relate that "the entire range of supposedly 'traditional' critical concepts is contestable" (30-1), from the canon to meaning to the critic, neither argues that Christian writers and readers withdraw from the field.

A second, related strength of the collection is its ability to convey the multitude of connections between the various approaches—philosophical, historical, social, and even "people" ties (the communities of academics who "people" the debates). The writers do not fall into the trap of theoretical isolationism that so many critics do. Instead, the reader comes to see the connections between New Criticism and Deconstruction, Moral Criticism and Feminist Approaches. The essays make sense of these approaches in their complexity, the writers using the language of theory without becoming jargon-riddled, so that students of literature making their first entrance into these approaches can in fact manage them. Furthermore, these writers neither embrace unthinkingly popular contemporary approaches nor lightly dismiss approaches currently under attack. The writing is measured, avoiding both the whiplash and bandwagon mentalities of so much theoretical discussion. In doing so, it seems to me, these critics gain a Christian critical voice in a place not particularly receptive to it. Particularly intriguing to me, while all the essays are valuable, are the following: Clarence Walhout's explorations of the connections between Mikhail Bakhtin's Marxism (though I would not call him one)

and Christian understandings of dialogue; Alan Jacobs' discussion of imagination in the light of developments in Psychological criticism and his interrogation of Deconstruction with *shalom* and *kerygma*; Michael Vander Weele's giving due to Louise Rosenblatt in his discussion of Reader-Response; and Susan Van Zanten Gallagher's balanced portrait of Feminist theory in the context of Christian concerns for justice.

Thirdly, these essays are, quite rightly, critical of Christian scholarship's relative silence in these debates. As Walhout announces in his introduction, "Among the many voices that have been clamoring for the attention of literary theorists and teachers during the last several decades, one of the weakest, or most ignored, has been that of Christianity" (vii). Walhout then proceeds to outline the reasons: scholars who skim what they want off debates; those who accept the dichotomy between private belief and the public activities of teaching and scholarship, who see religious experience in narrow rather than broadly cultural terms; and those quite simply intimidated, uncertain, or distrustful of the whole business. The whole volume, then, works to beat hiding Christian scholars out of the bushes and challenge them with awareness, even with entering the debate. Thus, Walhout argues that "if there is a viable Christian alternative to existing theories, it must begin with a full awareness of the issues and controversies that concern all theorists" (ix-x); indeed, "what is needed is a full participation in the contests—not a clearing of the decks, not a cantankerous sultanism, not an obsequious self-abnegation, not disillusioned retreat, but a serious, thoughtful, sensitive, and at times even jocular engagement with one's fellow players, both Christian and non-Christian" (ix).

Clearly, *Contemporary Literary Theory* is much more than descriptive or prescriptive. It demands

engagement and reflection, reflection on what lies within and behind our reading and teaching of literature, we as teachers and students and readers immersed in postmodern culture. This book challenges the easy and comfortable gap between practice and theory, arguing that the gap is too cosy for many Christian readers, practically and spiritually and pedagogically. As Vanden Bosch reminds us in his essay on Moral Criticism, "even if they don't consciously intend to do so, professors provide their students with regular, if unsystematic, lessons in criticism" (60). Because such lessons happen all the time, the theory-practice connection is crucial to the Christian reader. For this reason, Mark Walhout's bookend essay "Critical Theory" is central to the book. What is critical theory, he asks? Is it really an attempt to govern or control practice or interpretation with a system of thought? (279) It is (or should be) instead "just what critics do when they reflect on their practice" (284). Walhout then proceeds to suggest that the task of the Christian theorist (and I would argue all Christian readers) is "to develop a *theory of critical orthopraxis*, in which 'theory' means not the attempt to dominate practice but rather reflection on practice in the light of belief" (289-90). This is a compelling thought, indeed, for it makes the theorist the servant he or she should be, not the master he or she too often strives to be.

*Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* is a challenging collection that gives its readers the tools needed to accept the challenge. The various writers here help writers, readers, teachers, and students of literature (even confused, intellectually arrogant doctoral students) become more obedient, humble, and awe-struck participants in the dialogue, whether the dialogue be about sliding signifiers or the Word and hats.

*Christian Theology: An Introduction*, by Alister E. McGrath (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994). 503 pages. \$59.95, Hardback. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology.

The title and introductory materials of this book are a bit misleading. Both suggest that the work is a primer in theology. The preface even claims that the work is "comprehensive" in its task of introducing the neophyte into the theological discipline. Everything that the beginner needs to begin the study of theology is found here (xvii). False. At best, what McGrath has done here is give a descriptive analysis of a single branch of Christian theology: the history of Christian dogmatics. The section on systematic theology (part 3) is a replay of the historical section (part 1) poured through the grid of the classical theological loci. What is most obviously lacking here is any concerted attention upon Scripture and biblical theology. Telling the

Christian story via its heritage of great thinkers is a worthy exercise, but the great theologians attend to the text. McGrath has not done as they did and do. He has merely reported their theological conclusions.

As I said, recounting the doctrinal heritage of the church is a noble enterprise. McGrath is right to stress historical theology as he does. Listening to the church's past struggles with its faith and its detractors powerfully subverts all notions that theology is a static thing, something which exists in Scripture simply awaiting our discovery, and that humans beings and their thoughts exist outside of an historical matrix that influences them (121). Attending to both their theological constructs and the historical cir-