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Literature Through the Eyes of Faith (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Literature Through the Eyes of Faith. Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin, San Francisco: Harper & Row. (1989) 193 pp. \$9.95. Reviewed by Laura Apol Obbink, Dordt graduate and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Iowa.

This book explores the relationship of the Christian faith to the study of literature. Its goal is to help students of literature understand more clearly the nature of language and literature, to acquaint them with the tools of literary study, and to introduce them to the rich history of Christian reflection on literature, language, and the reading experience. (xi)

So begins Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin's book, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, a discussion driven by the question, What is the relationship between literature and Christian belief? or, as Nicholas Wolterstorff states in his forward to the book "How does literature look when seen through the eyes of faith?" To answer that question, the authors have carefully positioned themselves at the intersection of Reformed Christian thought and contemporary literary scholarship, marshalling their inquiry into three distinct but often overlapping areas: Why should we read literature? (Chapters 1-5), What happens when we read? (Chapters 6-8), and How should we select and evaluate what we read? (Chapters 9-13).

Like most post-modernist thinkers (and like Calvinist theorists as well), the authors recognize that any "neutral" position towards literature is impossible: all readers come to the act of reading firmly rooted in their own perceptions and assumptions. As Gallagher and Lundin put it, "There is no such thing as an 'innocent' reading of a book, for every reading is shaped by the biases of the readers" (89). At the same time, the authors readily maintain that

our assumptions or biases are not impediments to the understanding of a work of literature, but they are what make that understanding possible in the first place....[Our] biases do not block our path to understanding; instead, they show us where to begin the journey. They enable us to form the questions that begin our dialogue with the poem or work of fiction we are reading....The person who reads with completely open mind reads with an empty mind. (81-85)

Gallagher and Lundin recognize at the outset of the book

that their own stance toward literary interpretation is non-neutral, and they are forthright in expressing the position they take in their dialogue with literary texts. Throughout their discussion, the authors locate themselves firmly within the Christian community as reformed and reforming scholars, deeply rooted in the Christian faith. These are the assumptions that color their readings, the biases that inform their interpretations.

The authors' willingness to make visible the belief system that shapes their scholarship is not as revolutionary as it may first seem; after all, in the world of post-modernist literary theory, the admission of one's position has become quite acceptable: feminists, Marxists, formalists, and others are eager to define the convictions that inform their readings. The radical departure that Gallagher and Lundin make from other contemporary literary critics then, is not their articulation of a particular position; rather, their distinction lies in their surety that our universe is a universe of meaning and in their confidence that ultimately our existence makes sense. Post-Saussurean linguistics have convinced many modern thinkers that reality is merely a linguistic construction and that order is something we as humans create rather than something created to which we as humans respond. Gallagher and Lundin reject this aspect of post-structuralist thought from the outset, claiming early in their discussion that "the doctrines of Creation and Incarnation affirm that human life is inherently meaningful. God has placed us in a world filled with order and hints of wonder, and through his acts of revelation and redemption he has entered into our history" (5). Later they address the topic of the post-modern denial of absolute truth by writing, "Although we may acknowledge the uncertainty of meaning systems, we have a hope of someday finding an absolute. We never doubt the existence of a Reality; we only doubt our ability to know that Reality completely in a world of sin and error" (164).

The belief that "in a universe created and ruled by a sovereign God all things are meaningful" (3) shapes each of the chapters in this book, providing a foundation for the authors' answers to those questions posed early in the text. In the light of their faith, the authors examine

literature not simply as an object of beauty but as a form of human action, not only as an escape from reality or a saving transformation of it but as a response to the Creator. They argue that through the activities of reading and writing, women and men can act as responsible and significant agents in God's world. "Literary texts are not merely imaginative creations," the authors write. "[They are] also instruments composed of language that we use to perform certain activities, such as thinking about social issues, moral questions, or personal feelings" (xxv).

Even as they reject many of the sentiments that are expressed in contemporary literary theory, the authors maintain that "Christians need to be familiar with the major intellectual movements in the world so that they can carry on an intelligent dialogue with others" (163). Positions with which we disagree help us to better understand and act in God's world, for not only do encounters with new ideas allow us to better understand our neighbor and the society in which we live; they may at the same time challenge our own belief system and thus enhance our understanding of and commitment to our position.

The case that Gallagher and Lundin make for a Christian, faith-filled view of literature is cogent and articulated well in this book. The audience they address consists of undergraduate students who are well-versed in Reformed theology and who are just beginning a study of literature. In the opening paragraphs of the book, the authors state that "the task for the Christian student of literature remains that of grounding his or her thinking in the history of Christian thought" (3), and clearly this book represents the authors' attempt to aid students in that task. However, for those readers who may be looking for a more sophisticated reply to contemporary literary theory, this book offers only hints; it does not function as a convincing conversational turn in the debate among

modern literary scholars (although the broadness of their references and the scope of their subject matter indicates that such a project is not beyond the capabilities of these authors). Throughout the text, the authors are quick to reveal but reluctant to examine several of their basic underlying assumptions—assumptions about "truth" and "reality," "facts" and "correctness" that may be agreed upon within the Christian community, but which, if they are to truly engage contemporary literary theory, must be acknowledged, defined, and even debated at the outset of the discussion. More importantly, the authors summarize and counter huge systems of thought with alacrity and with ease, denying the power and complexity of modern theories and leading undiscerning readers to believe that contemporary theorists may be dismissed as easily as these theorists have in the past dismissed Christian thinkers. In their effort to clarify complex issues and thought systems, Gallagher and Lundin never fully escape the danger of misrepresentation and oversimplification.

In spite of these limitations, the authors are successful in achieving their purposes: the book grounds itself firmly in Reformed theology, then draws widely from literary theory and from literature itself. It addresses questions that are frequently raised by students of literature (Christian and non-Christian alike), and it makes some of the fundamental concepts of literary theory accessible in the college classroom. It articulates for Christian readers an alternative to contemporary ways of reading and to post-modern systems of thought. And ultimately, it explores the relationship between Christian belief and the literary experience, placing the activities of reading and writing within the history of Christian thought and providing a coherent vision of literature as seen through the eyes of faith.

The Homecoming Man. Hugh Cook Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press. 324 pp. \$24.95 hardcover. Reviewed by Dr. James C. Schaap, Associate Professor of English.

I don't remember the exact quote, but I know that an old actor's rule-of-thumb is to avoid sharing a stage with a kid. The danger, of course, is that you'll always be upstaged; for no matter how strong the drama, the attention of the audience will inevitably be drawn to the child.

I remembered the adage when I read Hugh Cook's *The Homecoming Man*, a powerful story about Gerrit Bloem, a Dutch immigrant nursery owner from Ontario, whose war memories from the German occupation of the Netherlands serve as the focus of this fine, well-crafted first novel. The power of the holocaust creates such a force in any story that it virtually destroys the potential power of any other sub-plot. Thus, Gerrit's story dominates our interest. While the analogy to kids on stage certainly trivializes the horror of Gerrit's suffering—and

that of all victims of the Nazi occupation—it does help to understand the overpowering effect of Gerrit's role in the novel itself.

Actually, Cook's eye seems more precisely trained on Gerrit's son Paul, an academic from British Columbia whose own Dutch past has led him into translating old country poets. Paul's life, like that of his father, has been scarred by personal tragedy and disappointment. After the apparent breakup of his marriage, he decides, at the suggestion of his father, to spend a summer back in Ontario, at his boyhood home. The reason for his visit seems largely therapeutic, a visit "to the one place that could still, through all time and loss, be considered home."

Paul's presence in the family home creates some