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Bridging Communities: The Liminal Role of the Christian Scholar

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My beginning point for this ridiculously ambitious conference paper is ostensibly the name of this study group [Christianity and Literature Study Group], but the problem of what it means to be a Christian and a scholar of English literature has troubled me since my undergraduate years. The Christian community that had shaped me saw little profit in the literature side of the equation that I was trying to balance. But then possible intersections between literature and Christianity are not often acknowledged in English departments, either. Alan Jacobs, whose work has influenced me a great deal, has observed that “[m]ost of the Christians [he knows] in English studies are pretty shy about announcing their beliefs [. . .] and tend not to think out loud about the relationship between their faith and their professional work” (“Thoughts”).¹ I am about to engage in some risky thinking “out loud” about such connections.

Another beginning point for me and the source of part of my title is the theme of Congress 2007. I will say more about the aptness of that theme near the end of the paper.

¹ George Marsden, in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, likewise wonders why “among so many academics who are professing Christians, all but a tiny minority keep quiet about the intellectual implications of their faith” (6).

My third reason for raising the question “what does it mean to be a Christian scholar?” is the current state of research and criticism in literature. Again, I will say more later; for now I want to paraphrase an observation of George Steiner’s—the parasitic proliferation of secondary texts written about secondary texts is a “mendacious notion of research” (*Real Presences* 36)²—and to add my own observation. The current membership of ACCUTE is over 1000 (MacFarlane). If, every year, even half of the members meet minimum expectations and submit one article,³ then, every year, various journals will publish approximately 500 new articles, each of which will be read by two or three peer reviewers, maybe a hard-working editor, and perhaps a couple of dozen readers, some of whom will be senior students and graduate students obliged to seek out such articles. As “semantic-critical jargon” mushrooms—the image is Steiner’s (48)—and the pressure to research and publish far outweighs the pressure to teach well, I wonder what role my faith commitment has in the way that I function in this world. Here I must pause for a full disclosure: I am a sessional lecturer in a position that will never turn into tenure-track. My stakes in this research enterprise are thus almost non-existent. Even without considering my identity as a Christian, I am already in a liminal position, or rather, not liminal, but marginal, since my position on the threshold of the ivory tower is not, realistically speaking, transitional at all,⁴ but permanent.

² This sentence is mostly paraphrase of Steiner’s parasite metaphor which he develops in greater detail several pages after the above quotation and brings in other metaphors as well: “The mushrooming of semantic-critical jargon, the disputations between structuralists, post-structuralists, meta-structuralists and deconstructionists, the attention accorded both in the academy and the media to theoreticians and publicists of the aesthetic – all these carry within their bustling pretence the germs of more or less rapid decay. [. . .] The inflation of the parasitic is halted when the constructs of spuriousness collapse under their own weight, when the zero-point of trust and of felt meaning is reached” (48-49).

³ I was told, after the presentation of this paper, that minimum expectations are actually two or even three articles per year.

⁴ My use of the word “liminal” is problematic in this paper. In its use by cultural anthropologists, the word refers to a transitional stage, the position between two stages of life, for example, adolescence and

These were my beginning considerations.

Now, according to Virginia Woolf, in her wonderfully satirical opening to *A Room of One's Own*, “the first duty of a lecturer [is] to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever” (2435). Like Woolf, who struggled with the vague and daunting topic of “women and fiction,” I will not attempt to find a nugget of pure truth concerning Christian scholars and literature, but will share my musings on the topic and, like Woolf, suggest other topics for “reflective inquiry.”⁵

First, though, a narrowing of parameters. I will not focus directly on the role of the Christian scholar in changing the intellectual atmosphere of secular universities and colleges, which has been, for some time, inhospitable to Christian perspectives. This is, indeed, an issue that should be addressed, particularly in the Canadian context. Some work has already been done in the more religiously charged American context. Harry Lee Poe, for example, in *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the Intersection of Faith and Learning* argues that “religion is a matter of great interest to students and faculty across the United States” (20) since “[t]he great critical questions of life are religious issues. They provide the glue that holds together the disciplines, now fragmented by

adulthood. It is “a special situation for a certain length of time” in which the individual who is proceeding through the transition “wavers between two worlds” (van Gennep 18). In this immediate context, as a description of the position of sessional lecturer, it is inappropriate since most sessionals are not in between two stages at all, but permanently marginal. In the larger context of the Christian scholar, the word presupposes some future movement, which is my ultimate hope. In the meantime, I have actually imagined the role of Christian scholar as closer to a mediator, to a bridge.

⁵ I am using the phrase “reflective inquiry” rather than “research” or “further study” in imitation of Pocklington and Tupper in *No Place to Learn*. I find their distinction between frontier research (appropriate for the natural sciences) and reflective inquiry (appropriate for the humanities) helpful. This paper itself is a work of reflective inquiry and does not pretend to be a piece of frontier research. A definition of reflective inquiry will appear later in the paper.

specialization” (20). Christians should thus actively challenge the “fundamental assumptions (philosophies)” of “every discipline of the academy” (22). John Sommerville, in *The Decline of the Secular University*, arguing from a broader, less directly evangelical, base,⁶ begins with the observation that universities have become academic in the popular sense of the word: irrelevant because preoccupied with inconsequential matters. His project is to demonstrate the inherent incoherence of secularism in relation to the important questions of what it means to be human, and then suggest ways in which Christian and Jewish scholars can be instrumental in opening universities for “faith-informed scholarship” (123), and in which they can enter intellectual dialogue without inviting immediate rejection. At least one Canadian philosopher, Elmer Thiessen, has likewise argued in *Teaching for Commitment* that secular objections to religious “indoctrination” are philosophically suspect, but he addresses the situation of primary and secondary school teachers, not academic faculty. Thus there is plenty of room for conversation in Canadian universities about the function of religious approaches in various disciplines. My focus, however, is on more quotidian matters.

The overarching commandment that, for the Christian, governs the quotidian, is Jesus’ succinct summary: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbour as

⁶ Poe’s monograph is a *RenewedMinds* Book, an imprint of a partnership between Baker Academic and the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, while Sommerville’s book is published by Oxford University Press.

yourself” (Luke 10: 27). Thus, as Alan Jacobs has noted,⁷ the Christian scholar, like fellow Christians in the marketplace and in the professions, is called first of all to love, and such a love of God and neighbour “is proved in three areas of your life—in your thinking, in your talking, and in your manner of working” (Rolle qtd. in Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading* 10). To put it another way, the role of the Christian is to be a servant, motivated by love (Jacobs, “Second Thoughts”). Since Jacobs devoted an entire book, *A Theology of Reading*, to the working out of the “hermeneutics of love” (his subtitle), I want to shift emphasis slightly and translate that law of love to mean primarily service in two areas: the first is teaching, and the second is mediating. The two overlap in significant ways.

To assert the primacy of teaching in our agenda as Christian scholars is to step head-long into what I said I wasn’t going to step into. Nevertheless, because individual professors choose their daily tasks within the prevailing academic culture, I cannot avoid saying something about the current relationship between undergraduate teaching and research. Tom Pocklington and Allan Tupper, in *No Place to Learn: Why Universities Aren’t Working*, observe that the reward system in universities now emphasizes frontier research far more than teaching. Although universities were first developed in order to teach and continue to exist in order to teach, teaching itself has been steadily downgraded in favor of research, the creation of new knowledge. Despite ubiquitous insistence on the important mutual benefit between teaching and research, our actual language about those two activities is revealing. Why do we speak about “teaching loads” and “research

⁷ I am indebted to Alan Jacobs’ paper “Second Thoughts on Charitable Reading” for this succinct movement from Jesus’ command to service of others.

opportunities” (Pocklington 69)? Why don’t we talk about “research loads” and “teaching opportunities”? Why do research grants enable professors to obtain “course releases” as if teaching were a form of prison from which we seek parole? Why don’t we speak of “course deprivations”? From my perspective at the fringes of academic activity, it seems clear that those who decide to make teaching, especially of undergraduates, their primary purpose in the university will have to sacrifice promotions, financial rewards, and even collegial respect. I speak reluctantly here because it seems too easy, even hypocritical, for me to recommend for others the sacrifice of what I will never have the chance to give up.

Despite the risk of inviting sour remarks about unreachable grapes, I do believe that choosing to serve in love will most likely translate into more energy given to teaching. To what extent this applies in other disciplines, I can’t say. For the Christian scholar in English literature, however, teaching undergraduates is a preeminent service, for several reasons. The most obvious one is the necessity of contributing to the well-being of us all by encouraging students, presumably future leaders and professionals, to learn to think critically and to speak and write clearly. If we think carefully about the God who is the Word, and if we remember Jesus’ injunction to use words well—let your yes be yes and your no no—, then we will care about combating dishonest and sloppy uses of language. In my experience, any serious teaching of good writing is welcomed as a necessary, remedial service. English courses, especially first-year courses, are frequently viewed by professors in other departments as a much-needed initiation into good writing. I do not quarrel with that position, although I heartily wish that professors in all departments likewise saw themselves as custodians of good writing and clear thinking—we can’t do this necessary work alone. However, we can at least set an example through

our willingness to teach first-year courses and incorporate basic language training. Too often such work is seen as drudgery, suitable for part-time faculty or for graduate students, almost akin to waiting on tables at the nearest pub. However, if the one we emulate was not too proud to scrub dusty feet, then we too should be willing to serve our naïve, book-resistant first-year students—and to do so without condescension.

Pocklington and Tupper, in fact, argue that first and second year courses should routinely be taught by senior professors who have had the most years in which to give themselves to reflective inquiry and to develop the broad understanding of their subject which is necessary for good teaching (191).

I also believe that teaching is of paramount importance for Christian scholars in literature because of the nature of our subject matter. We traffic in stories. We teach primary texts that are widely available to the general public and that contain, to quote Matthew Arnold, the “best that has been thought and said” (6). Our subject matter is especially suitable for the focus that George Marsden, in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, recommends: “Undergraduate teaching is the heart of higher education, and it is in undergraduate classrooms that students must begin to explore the intellectual relationships between their theological commitments and everything else that they are learning” (105). Thus it is entirely appropriate for us to invite students to think through the big questions of life, such as “How can we find a basis for our most cherished moral judgments? Is power the only means to decide what counts as ‘virtue’? How can we affirm a pluralism that genuinely accepts others, without lapsing into relativism? Can

we know anything about reality that goes beyond our socially determined constructions?” (Marsden 4).

Literature is “urgently important for the citizen,” argues Martha Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity*, because it expands “sympathies” in a way “that real life cannot cultivate sufficiently. It is the political promise of literature that it can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible, or at least more nearly comprehensible” (111). Literature is thus an examination of life and a preparation for encounters with the other. Canadian novelist Adele Wiseman has said that in “stories life was in a sense holding still for [her] to look at and learn from and make judgments on” (*Memoirs* 7). As more and more disciplines are recognizing the crucial role of narrative in our ways of making sense of life, of making meanings—Nussbaum is not alone in arguing that the narrative imagination is the foundation for compassion and subsequent moral action (*Cultivating Humanity*, Ch. 3)—, the teacher of English literature has an important function in inviting often reluctant students to learn how to enter stories imaginatively. Literature makes us think about what it means to be a human and how we as humans should live with one another and thereafter face death. If the secularist university discourse has left itself without any words for discussing values (as Sommerville has argued), then surely the Christian scholar of literature can return such discussions to the classroom and to do his or her utmost to develop a robust narrative imagination in students.

This is not a recommendation for proselytizing. One of the basic premises of the university is that open-minded and free dialogue on all available human issues shall be

conducted. That basic premise should not be violated in the name of religion, although by the same reasoning, that basic premise should never rule religion out of the public square. All that I suggest here is that we become aware of and intentional about those values we inevitably imply as we talk about literature. Whether we shape the conversation in the classroom according to a rigid focus on literary techniques (as I once did) or according to a particular theory of reading or political position, we communicate to our students what we think is important. Especially at the first-year level, we have, I think, an obligation to invite students to think about the difficult moral issues that literature explores.

That will mean helping our students recognize both the impossibility of achieving objectivity in the classroom and the necessity for continued debate about our inherited or adopted moral perspectives. In *Teaching for Commitment*, Elmer Thiessen has argued persuasively that professors and students alike do not approach literature, or any other subject matter, from a position of neutrality. We have all been initiated into traditions of thinking, and we make our judgments within a social context. If we openly acknowledge those foundations of our identity, we can encourage more honest, more engaged thinking in the classroom. The problem here is that too often students respond to an acknowledgement of what they automatically label “bias” with an unthinking relativism that sees all perspectives as personal, therefore equal and thus equally dismissable. It is often very difficult to move students from their shoulder-shrugging “whatever” to a conviction that ideas matter and are worth the effort it takes to articulate them and argue for them. There is another topic for future discussion that would deeply interest me.

But what of our immediate tasks in the classroom—the choosing of texts and the teaching of texts? Again, I refer to the law of love with which I began. Both the choosing

and the teaching of texts should be governed, to quote Alan Jacobs, by the “hermeneutics of love which requires that books and authors, however alien to the beliefs and practices of the Christian life, be understood and treated as neighbours” (*A Theology of Reading* 13). That means that my faith commitment should not determine which books I read or do not read, although it is only reasonable that I will befriend some books and authors more readily than others. While it is always a challenge to read something that opposes our dearest beliefs and ideological positions, we should offer texts a loving attention that does not seek to erase difference or to subjugate its content to my predetermined agenda.

Such a loving approach rules out any *a priori* suspicion in our initial reading of texts, in our choice of texts for the classroom, and in our interpretive acts in the classroom. In his chapter “Love and the Suspicious Spirit,” Jacobs suggests that “no one can practice hermeneutical charity who is unwilling to receive a poem, a story—a work—as a gift” (*A Theology of Reading* 81). That means a refusal of the stance of superiority, for accepting a gift implies dependency and humility, not a distanced objectivity “in which the text comes under the control of the reader as disengaged rational subject, unresponsive except to its own self-certitude” (Gerald Bruns, qtd. in Jacobs 15). For Jacobs, the final distinction is between despair and hope: “the charitable reader offers the gift of constant and loving attention—faithfulness—to a story, to a poem, to an argument, in hope that it will be rewarded” (89), remembering always that a refusal to offer loving attention ultimately forestalls knowledge that can come through love alone. Martha Nussbaum argues in *Love’s Knowledge* that without love, it is not possible to enter truly the world of the other and to know what or how to perceive (156ff). Without a willingness to surrender to the text and to enter its contexts and identify with its

characters, we will not truly understand it, although such surrender does not rule out discernment or an eventual resistance to motives or agendas.

Following the rule of love in our classrooms means modeling a loving attention to the texts we have chosen so that we can invite students to join us in the continuing inquiry about what it means to be human. Literature, observes Nussbaum, is more than a complex game because it “speaks *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections” (*Love’s Knowledge* 171). Literature is “conducive to our inquiry about how to live, because it does not simply [. . .] record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility—of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance—that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities” (171). Her argument, thus, is that to speak of literature without also speaking of its “sense of life” is to do violence to it.

To thus insist, in a classroom, that literature “speaks *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions,” is to become very vulnerable, particularly before students who may be resistant, both to the literature and to difficult questions. It may not even be possible to induct our students into loving attention to literature without our becoming lovingly attentive to them as well. Thus it is not only the texts that we must welcome as neighbours but also our students. Here, too, much more could, and should, be said, very little of it by me, because I am often guilty of lavishing more love on the texts I choose than on the students who do not affirm my choices or share my attitude.

Thus the law of love as translated into the service of teaching also implies the service of mediating: to teach is to stand between students and texts and invite the former to join a community of thoughtful interpreters—of texts and of life.

The act of mediation is, I believe, equally necessary in our function as writers. While I believe that teaching should generally take priority, I do not think that that rules out writing. Many of us, I suspect, cannot not write. How we define our roles as writers will differ according to our gifts and opportunities. Some of us may well fill our professional publication quotas through the writing of novels and poetry and drama. Such writing is by its very nature mediative, as Nussbaum and others have made clear. What about the rest of us?

I believe that our faith in the God who is the Word calls us to treat language with care and humility and with as much precision and honesty as we can manage. Our understanding of the complexities of language will probably never allow us to write without self-conscious awareness of our rhetorical strategies, yet our commitment to love calls us to begin with trust—trust in our audience and in language and in ourselves. Without some measure of trust, I do not see how service through writing is possible.

One way to serve, as Jacobs has suggested (“Second Thoughts”), is to become productive scholars through editing, particularly through making older texts available online. Or by creating textbooks, although I am skeptical here since of the making of textbooks, particularly writing textbooks, there is no end in sight.

There are also those Christian scholars who will become leading researchers in what Pocklington and Tupper call “reflective inquiry.” Reflective inquiry “involves careful thought about the human condition [. . . and] disciplined thinking about

scholarship beyond one's own specialization and discipline. It is an inherently interdisciplinary activity. Reflective inquiry demands rigorous thought about what we know, or claim to know; [about] the underlying assumptions; and [about] the key questions for inquiry" (91-92). One might call such reflective inquirers public intellectuals who have mastered the requisite theoretical language and have come out at the other end with books and articles for a much wider audience than their immediate peers in the specialties. These are the writers who can help to keep academics accountable to the public and to keep the public accountable for what uses it makes of the specialized knowledge that emerges through frontier research. Such writers, for example, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, can do much to make room for Christian perspectives in the halls of academia and the public square, even if not in the mass media.

Realistically speaking, however, most of us will not rise to such eminence. What knowledge we have will not become that public. How then do we handle the requirement of publication—to the extent that we do fulfill it? By daring to think of content and style in new ways. In a chapter of *Love's Knowledge* entitled "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," Nussbaum notes that literary theory has in the last century moved away from all practical application and indulged itself in textuality and self-referential aestheticism that refuses to look at life itself. Questions "about justice, about well-being and social distribution, about moral realism and relativism, about the nature of rationality, about the concept of the person, about the emotions and desires, about the role of luck in human life" (169-70) are debated in other disciplines, many of whom begin to think in interdisciplinary fashion, but literary theory (with the exception of Marxism and feminism) has avoided such discussion. Nussbaum sees this as a serious lack and

confesses to “a certain hunger for blood; for, that is, writing about literature that talks of human lives and choices as if they matter to us all” (171). George Marsden similarly notes that after the 1960s, “literature was no longer regarded first of all as uplifting [. . .] but rather became a field [. . .] legitimated by technical methodologies, often evidenced by esoteric terminologies” (22), and Sommerville observes bitterly that “the liberal arts [. . .] have turned into technical specialties. They’re often addressing questions nobody is asking, and giving answers nobody can understand” (8). “Wisdom” has disappeared from our vocabulary (Sommerville 9), and we initiate our graduate students into producing material that we do not willingly read ourselves, either for wisdom or pleasure.

At the risk of sounding naïve, I would like to propose that we see our scholarly writing as a service to as wide an audience as possible, rather than seeing it primarily as a CV-filler and a kind of rarified one-up-manship. I have listened to a limited number of conference papers and to papers given by candidates for tenure-track positions outlining their current and future research. Often, the only question I really wanted to ask afterwards was “and just whom will this research serve?” Sommerville suggests a similarly subversive question, “would you have trouble explaining your current project to the seatmate on your next flight?” adding that that “seatmate is a taxpayer, paying your salary. What will she conclude about academics if it all comes out in obscure jargon? Students, likewise, may be disappointed in the humanities when the point is not the appreciation of culture, but only criticism of culture” (9). Some of my students, after finishing their first major research paper, sound jaded and disillusioned with the whole scholarly enterprise, that is, if they have not been baffled into complete incomprehension

by what George Steiner calls the “grey morass” of further articles on “writers already entombed in pyramids of paraphrase and opinion” (35).

While I am sufficiently indoctrinated to find it hard to imagine doing without those pyramids of paraphrase and opinions, I wish that more of that writing was accessible to students and to colleagues in different disciplines. Such accessibility will come only when we are prepared to think long and hard about our vocabulary and our habits of thought. One limited suggestion here is that we let colleagues from different disciplines peruse early drafts of our articles. Surely they should be able to read our work with comprehension. Ideally, they would then want to rush out and read for themselves the primary text under discussion. Is it not worth the difficulty of writing simply if we can encourage once again as much direct and vulnerable encounter with the creative text as possible? Steiner insists that the truest, most responsible interpretation of a musical composition is offered by the performer, of a drama by the actor who plays a part, of a poem by the one who commits it to memory. I would welcome further discussion on how to engage students, peers, and the larger public in direct, thoughtful encounters with the creative texts, and not only because I’m tired of reading mangled versions of SparkNotes, written by students who do not trust themselves to respond directly.

The title for Congress 2007 is *Bridging Communities: Making Public Knowledge; Making Knowledge Public*. However we finally parse the possible meanings of “making public knowledge,” and whatever kinds of knowledge we wish to make public, the useful metaphor here is bridging communities. That is an act of mediation, since the construction of bridges presumes a divide of some kind and the will to cross that divide. Ideally, such a project is undertaken as a service, and not as an act of invasion, although

that risk is always there. As I have pondered the role of the Christian scholar, I can imagine the law of love as operative in such a project of bridging communities, bringing together our delight in literature and our students, reaching out through our writing to those who might not otherwise learn to appreciate the richness of literature and the magic of words. That will mean embracing the role of servant, which I hope will become exemplary in its eventual effect on the university culture, and thus, in the fullest sense, a liminal role.

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