

## A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO LITERARY CRITICISM: A NON-MORALISTIC VIEW

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The common question: "Is a Christian approach to literary criticism feasible?" may be more profitably reformulated as: "How should a Christian approach to literary criticism be?". It is clearly not a matter of the possibility of such an approach, but a challenge of formulating a new critical theory.

"What could be simpler and easier than to say *what* a work of art is, whether it is good or bad, and *why* it is so?" (Olson, 1976, p. 307). The problem of value judgments in literary criticism, contrary to Olson's view, has proved to be the most complex of all literary problems throughout the history of criticism. It is also the central issue underlying the distinction between different approaches to literature.

The formalist critic is traditionally reticent about value judgments and concentrates upon close reading of texts and implicit evaluation. Contemporary formalists, however, tend to move away from the ideal of critical objectivity.

On the other hand, the moralist critic is primarily concerned with the purpose of the literary work. In *Naaldekokker*, D.J. Opperman seriously doubts the possibility of a Calvinist approach to art, which he regards as a *contradictio in terminis* (pp. 61-63).

I shall attempt in this essay to show that there is a valid literary criticism which is neither exclusively based on aesthetic judgment, nor an attempt to subordinate literature to religion in a moralistic way, and that such criticism originates from a Christian vision of life.

### THE MODE OF EXISTENCE OF THE LITERARY WORK

#### The Platonic dilemma

The two main groups of answers given to the question of what a literary work of art is, originate from Plato and Aristotle, and are mutually exclusive. Plato may be seen as the father of moralism, in his "emphasis on practicality and utility" (Daiches, 1956, p. 21): his insistence upon truth in poetry, advocating a mimetic approach to literature. On the other hand, Aristotle's *Poetics* may be seen as a treatise on the ontological approach to poetry, which forms the basis for formalist theories of literature.

A third answer is offered by the Christian approach to literary criticism, which comprises elements from both the Platonic and Aristotelian theories, but reaches beyond their limitations.

### Olthuis' provisional scheme

In a lecture given at the PU for CHE during 1980, Olthuis offered a provisional scheme for the interpretation of literature. In this scheme, the literary text is perceived as a unique arrangement of the dimensions of reality. The distinctive feature of a literary work of art is the fact that it is *lingually* founded and *aesthetically* qualified. The dominant dimension is the aesthetic.

Olthuis pointed out that focussing the critical attention exclusively upon the *aesthetic* dimension of the literary work results in intuitivist criticism, while elevating the *lingual* dimension to an absolute results in positivism. Both of these extremes are present in contemporary criticism: itendency towards subjectivist, committed criticism on the one hand, and linguistic and stylistic criticism, aiming at scientific precision, on the other.

The Platonic dilemma may also be viewed in this perspective: Plato's rejection of poetry as an inferior imitation of reality is due to his isolation of the aesthetic dimension on art. Aristotle's solution is based on the isolation of features belonging to the lingual dimension of literature, so that the two theories represent two extremes, but neither offers a comprehensive characterization of the nature of literature.

In Olthuis' scheme the literary work may be judged in terms of aesthetic and lingual norms, but he points out a third dimension of the literary work which is its *leading dimension*: the certitudinal. Literature is always led by its world view. Olthuis represents the three dimensions in the following diagram, as a provisional device for the interpretation of literary works:

TRULY CHRISTIAN	world view norma- tive	aesthetically good	lingually good
NON- CHRISTIAN	world view distorted world view under- developed	aesthetically poor aesthetically fair non-aesthetic	lingually poor lingually fair non-lingual

All combinations of these dimensions are possible: a literary work in which the world view is underdeveloped and which is non-Christian in content, may be aesthetically good and lingually good; a work which offers a truly Christian belief and a normative world view may be aesthetically and lingually poor. Olthuis suggests that truly Christian literature should aim at the top layer in the diagram in every dimension. Christian criticism should operate from both directions: from the lingual towards the certitudinal and from the point of view of belief towards the lingual dimension.

This is clearly a comprehensive scheme for literary criticism. Against it, the following statement from a contemporary formalist tic seems very frail: "There is of course, a difference between the aesthetic valuation in the arts and outside of art. In the arts, aesthetic valuation necessarily stands highest in the hierarchy of the

values contained in the work, whereas outside of art its position vacillates and is usually subordinate" (Mukarovsky, 1964, p. 49). This statement shows the contemporary movement in criticism towards a mimetic approach to literature, due to the isolation of the aesthetic dimension of literature.

### REALISM AS A CRITERION FOR LITERARY VALUE

The mimetic fallacy has been pointed out by the New Critics. T.S. Eliot formulates it as follows: "It is simply not true that works of fiction, prose or verse, that is to say works depicting the actions, thoughts and words and passions of imaginary human beings, *directly* extend our knowledge of life" (1962, p. 49).

Rookmaker also deals with the question of artistic truth: "In a way art *does* the truth often more than it *is* true in the sense that it portrays reality according to its conceptual reality. Art does the truth in its own artistic way" (1970, p. 238).

The outstanding characteristic of any moralistic theory of literature is its dependence upon a mimetic evaluation of literary works. Seerveld (1968) conceives of art as style and deals with the dangers of mimetic criticism. He eventually offers a solution which acknowledges the unique qualities of the literary work of art.

The two crucial concepts in Seerveld's approach are that art is *symbolic* and that it is subject to the *law of coherence*. Coherent symbolical objectification is his *sine qua non* for the literary work. Seerveld also acknowledges imagination as a central concept in literary criticism, peculiar to the kind of knowledge and meaning in the literary work, which makes it different from science. However, he specifies the term *fictionality* as a distinctive feature of literature as follows:

"Fiction is a misnomer applied to literature unless it be understood as saying: this work deals in the world of imagination and it is as religiously conditioned, as steady and responsible a grip on reality as the human consciousness which yields scientific data or the ordinary breakfast eating experience" (p. 89).

This statement originates from Seerveld's conception of the symbolical as a prime mode of reality, which is present in everything, not exclusively in art. The truth of this observation cannot be denied, but it should be noted that, although he effectively dismisses the realistic approach to literature, Seerveld fails to point out that art differs from reality in a further important respect: the poet deliberately exploits this symbolic mode of reality; he foregrounds and actualizes any and every potential that the raw materials of reality may have.

#### Pseudo-Christian art

Seerveld points out two fallacies in a moralist approach to literature: if the artist is a Christian, it does not imply that the work is so; if the subject matter is biblical, the literary work is not automatically Christian. (Cf. p. 47). "Indeed, much so-called

'Christian literature' is neither literature nor Christian, because of its cliché-ridden style, vagueness and muddle of thought, unctuousness of tone or piety of sentiment, all of which deny the vitality, vigour and purity which is implicit in the Christian understanding of art" (Etchells, 1969, p. 15).

Roper (1979) also states that just as the despairing realism in 20th century literature may be called unChristian, the shallow sentimentality that seeks to counteract it is unacceptable to the Christian, and that "Christian art should steer clear of depicting virtue and vice in moralistic terms" (p. 21).

Another aspect of the concept of Christian art is that of quality. T.S. Eliot points out that *religious poetry* is usually synonymous with *minor poetry* (1962, p. 45).

Rookmaker's argument on artistic quality also applies to literature, and deserves to be quoted in full:

"Christian art is nothing special. It is sound, healthy, good art. It is art that is in line with the God-given structures of art, one which has a loving and free view of reality, one which is good and true. In a way there is no specifically Christian art. One can distinguish only good and bad art, art which is sound and good from art which is false or weird in its insight into reality. This is so whether it is painting or drama or music. Christians, however full of faith they may be, can still make bad art. They may be sinful and weak, or they might not have much talent. On the other hand a non-Christian can make a thing of beauty, a joy for ever — provided that he remains within the scope of the norms for art, provided that he works out of the fullness of his humanity, and does not glory in the depraved or in iniquity or glorify the devil. So a work of art is not good when we know that the artist was a Christian: it is good when we perceive it to be good" (1970, p. 228).

#### **Marxist literature and criticism**

Marxist criticism may be defined as an attempt to analyse literature in terms of the historical conditions in which it has been produced (cf. Eagleton, 1976, p vi). The outstanding characteristic of Marxist criticism is that it is prescriptive: it calls on the literary artist to commit his art to the Marxist cause. Marxist prescriptivism in criticism is the direct result of its "reflectionism" (Eagleton, p. 48).

The English branch of Marxist criticism is characterized by Eagleton as follows: "Much English Marxist criticism seems to subscribe simultaneously to a mechanistic view of art as the passive 'reflex' of the economic base, and to a Romantic belief in art as projecting an ideal world and stirring men to new values" (p. 54).

This kind of moralism, the subordination of literature to a pragmatic cause, as an instrument of propaganda, spells critical suicide. Watson states that "subjectivism is trivialising as well as philosophically incoherent" (1978, p. 51).

## **THE PURPOSE OF POETRY**

Wellek and Warren (1942) summarize the dichotomy in the conception of the purpose of literature throughout literary history in the words of Horace: *dulce et utile*: art has an aesthetic function, it is an end in itself, but it also has a pragmatic function, an instrumental value (cf. Chapter 18).

A Christian approach to literature does not isolate a single function of literature, but comprises and also extends Horace.

### **Literature as propaganda**

The futility of the Marxist approach to literature, that the literary work should be utilized as propaganda, serves as a warning to the Christian critic. Roper (1979) uses expressions which resemble this approach, like: "a revitalization of the arts in the power of the Gospel" (p. 1). Although the "terribly influential power of especially literature" (Seerveld, 1968, p. 120) does exist, it is not the first concern of the critic to discover or estimate this power. Just as the literary critic is not a politician, as the Marxist would have him, so the critic is not a missionary.

### **The theory of Christian organization in all areas of human activity**

The previous paragraph is not meant as a denial of the fact that man as a whole, as a religious being, is involved in literature.

"Though we may read literature merely for pleasure, of entertainment, or of aesthetic enjoyment, this reading never affects simply a sort of special sense: it affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence" (Eliot, 1962, p. 51).

A Christian approach to literature will accept that the Word of the Lord is absolute, that "God's Word is the law that orders and structures the whole creation ...[and that] no sphere of life can be divorced from the service of God" (Roper, 1979, pp. 5 and 6), but instead of leading to prescriptivism, a truly Christian approach will, by virtue of the acceptance of the totalitarian character of the Word of God, lead to unbiased productivity in the field of criticism, because no single critical concept will threaten to turn into an absolute which may distort the critical approach.

### **The autonomy of the literary work**

There is a subtle but crucial difference between the view of the literary work as an autonomous structure and the Christian approach. It is true that "men ought to value literature for being what it is; they ought to evaluate it in terms and in degrees of its literary value" (Wellek and Warren, 1942, p. 238).

The Christian critic is pre-eminently in the position to account for the unique

qualities of the literary work, because he is able to consider the literary work from the perspective of real freedom of thought.

A Christian approach to literature does not imply the opposite of an intrinsic approach. Rookmaker says that "Art needs no justification" (1970, p. 229). It is not the primary function of art or literature to promote Christianity; it has its own validity. Rookmaker explains the validity of art in terms of all created things, like mountains, birds or flowers: "Their meaning is that they have been created by God and are sustained by Him. So art has a meaning as art because God thought it good to give art and beauty to humanity" (p. 230).

#### **Objectivity in criticism**

Seerveld (1968) shows that the extreme of the *gustibus non disputandum est* is an untenable attitude in criticism, but also rejects absolute critical objectivity, which is traditionally seen as the alternative to a personal and subjectivist attitude. He states that the "postulation of specifically Christian (not universally Absolute!) canons for art and for literary criticism are urgent" (p. 101). Such canons for criticism should be *objective* in a modified sense: in focussing attention upon literature as literature.

The Christian critic would do well to take T.S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry as his point of departure (cf. Eliot, 1975, pp. 50 ff), which acknowledges the separateness of the literary work as a valid and independent part of human life. In Eliot's critical theory, the literary work may be evaluated by its degree of complexity: the diversity of its materials and the extent to which coherence has been achieved among them, but judgment may not be based upon extra-literary information.

### **CHRISTIAN CRITICISM**

So far I have discussed various points that should be taken into consideration in a Christian approach to literature. I shall proceed to give a critical account of a few attempts to produce a theory of Christian criticism, as well as a brief comparison with a representative ontological theory of literature.

#### **T.S. Eliot in *Religion and Literature***

In T.S. Eliot's essay, *The Function of Criticism*, he places the following emphasis upon critical objectivity:

"The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks — tares to which we are all subject — and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgment" (1975, p. 69).

In *Religion and Literature*, he is concerned with “the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature” (1962, p. 44). This is a complementary statement to that made in *The Function of Criticism*, although it superficially appears to be a contradiction. This becomes evident in the light of Eliot’s qualification of his concern with the relation of religion and literature: “What I want is a literature which should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian” (1962, p. 46).

A Christian approach to literature is necessary, according to Eliot, because neutrality in criticism does not exist, and also because “the author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not” (1962, p. 48).

Unfortunately, Eliot’s argument is marred by an untenable dichotomy. He suggests that literary criticism should be conducted by means of purely literary criteria, but completed by extra-literary criteria:

“What I believe to be incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards everything that we read must be tested” (1962, p. 53).

It would be more profitable for the Christian critic to look into literature itself for standards of judgment concerning literary greatness. The Christian is no super-critic, but like other critics engaged in the pursuit of true judgment. Although he believes the Word of God to be the illuminating power in all spheres of existence, he can only arrive at true insight into literature by way of critical humility.

It should be pointed out at this stage that the concept of the common grace of God has significance for literary criticism. It has been mentioned earlier in the essay that the fact of the literary artist’s being a Christian or an unbeliever does not yield any information about the literary quality of his art. This is also true of the literary critic, which is not observed by Eliot. The Christian critic is not automatically a better critic than any other, but the critical objectivity is uniquely possible within the framework of a Christian approach.

#### **Calvin Seerveld**

In *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (1968) Seerveld asks: “Are there any specifically Christian canons of criticism?” (p. 62).

His Christian guidelines for literary criticism are based on a Christian philosophy. Two preliminary operations are: the process of establishing whether a given text is literature and historiographic exegesis or contextual illumination. Criticism itself consists of “scientific analysis defined aesthetically” (p. 105) in terms of three main questions.

Seerveld proceeds to make a practical analysis of the work of Tennessee Williams along the lines of his philosophical scheme, which leads to the classification of Williams' work as part of "secularly spirited contemporary literature" (p. 117).

I am not in the position to comment upon Seerveld's philosophical competence, although I might venture to point out that he does not provide for literary criticism in terms of the lingual dimension of the literary work (cf. Olthuis' provisional scheme). However, from the point of view of the discipline of literary criticism, Seerveld's practical analysis is inadequate. It does not deal with the literary work as literature, but as a collection of thoughts and ideas.

Olthuis' provisional scheme has not yet been applied in practice, but seems to promise better results than this exercise in what may hesitantly be called moralist criticism. The crucial difference in the two views of criticism lies in Olthuis' conception of the movement in critical operation. Seerveld's criticism is directed from the certitudinal dimension towards the aesthetic, but not in the opposite direction, which causes his criticism to become an exclusively extrinsic approach to literature.

#### **H.R. Rookmaker**

A more satisfactory approach in terms of practical applicability is that of Rookmaker in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970). His principles of art criticism are general artistic truths which also apply to literary works.

His answer to Eliot's *impasse* resulting from the application of two sets of norms: the purely literary and the extra-literary criteria, is as follows:

"The question poses a false problem. A work of art is much more than can be analysed by these two concepts of the aesthetic and the moral: if it is a great work of art, it is a unity in which very many elements can be discovered" (1970, p. 232).

He perceives a number of norms and structures in art. The first of these is the concept of artistic *truth*. This raises the traditional dichotomy of the relation of beauty and truth, to which Rookmaker answers that *Christ is the truth*, and also points out that truth in art does not mean representational truth, but interpretative truth.

Rookmaker holds an optimistic and truly Christian view of the purpose of art and the possibility of establishing a Christian approach to art is accepted as a reality by him:

"Beauty of course is something given by God as a gift to all to create. It is not limited to Christians. But because Christians have been made new in Christ, they are now in a position to appreciate God's true intention for man and the world, and create beauty in art as a result ... Our art, as everything else, must be from Him, through Him and to Him" (p. 244).



### René Wellek

Wellek acknowledges the fact that the aesthetic and the lingual dimensions of the literary work are not its only dimensions, and that these do not offer complete grounds for literary evaluation:

“We have to become literally critics to see the function of style within a totality which inevitably will appeal to extralinguistic and extrastylistic values, to the harmony and coherence of a work of art, to its relation to reality, to its insight into its meaning, and hence to its social and generally human import” (1970, p. 342).

Wellek’s criterion for the evaluation of the literary work is *inclusiveness*. This involves the evaluation of literary works in terms of the *diversity of material integrated* in the work (*material* includes both the aesthetic and the lingual dimensions): in other words, an evaluation in terms of the complexity of the literary work. “The value of the poem rises in direct ratio to the diversity of its materials” (Wellek and Warren, 1942, p. 243). The greatness of a literary work may be evaluated in terms of the resistance in the raw materials to be transformed into art.

The similarity between Wellek’s formulation of criteria for the evaluation of the literary work and Rookmaker’s conception of art as a complex structure suggests that a Christian approach to art and to literature and the ontological approach to the literary work do not part company.

### CONCLUSION

From the consideration of various attempts to systematically formulate a Christian approach to literature and art, as well as the consideration of an ontological approach to literature, it may be concluded that Christian criticism may not diverge from a firmly *literary* course in dealing with literature: it should be based on intensive study of the object of its concern by means of rigorously literary principles, in the pursuit of true judgment.

The question is not whether it is possible to appreciate the literary products of man’s creativity as a result of the grace of God and at the same time to concentrate upon the unique qualities of these products, but *how* such a Christian approach should be realized in practical terms. The final justification for Christian criticism would be to practise it. This is the task not of the philosopher, but of the literary critic.

I would suggest that a profitable direction for Christian criticism is along the lines of a modification of Olthuis’ scheme, extended with the aid of insight achieved through the ontological approach to literature.

The distinctive feature of the Christian approach to literature is *freedom*. Rookmaker’s following statement should serve as a warning against prescriptivism and

critical arrogance:

“Freedom is only truly possible ... within the norms and structures and laws which God has made us. It is for the Christian to distinguish between a false legalism and a true freedom to be what God intends us to be, for without this freedom art will wither” (1970, p. 244).

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