Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 287

Volume 287

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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PROJECT EDITOR

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Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction,* edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Contents

Hayden Carruth
1921-2008

American poet, essayist, critic, novelist, and editor.

The following entry presents an overview of Carruth's career through 2008. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC,* Volumes 4, 7, 10, 18, and 84.

INTRODUCTION

Carruth is respected for his expansive poetic range, superior technical abilities, and avoidance of artifice in his poetry. A recluse much of his life, Carruth eschewed publicity efforts for his works and saw little income from publication; his poetry became critically respected but not well-known to the reading public. Scholars observed a steadily growing confidence and exuberance in Carruth's writing over the course of his career, and his later works are considered to be among his best. He received both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for Poetry in 1996 for the collection *Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey: Poems 1991-1995* (1996), published almost forty years after his first collection, *The Crow and the Heart, 1946-1959* (1959).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Carruth was born and raised in Connecticut. He described his family as emotionally distant and expressed the hope that writing would help him to connect with others. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1943 from the University of North Carolina, where he discovered poetry, particularly that of W. B. Yeats, then served in the military during the last two years of World War II. After discharge, he attended the University of Chicago on the G.I. Bill, earning an M.A. in English in 1948 and beginning what would become a career-spanning love of jazz and blues music. Carruth showed early promise in the literary world, taking the editorship of *Poetry* magazine at age twenty-eight and publishing his own poems in other literary magazines. However, his rise was interrupted by a nervous breakdown for which he was hospitalized for fifteen months beginning in 1953 and he underwent multiple rounds of electroconvulsive therapy which were deemed unsuccessful. The poetry he wrote as a psychiatric inpatient was published as *The Bloomingdale Papers* (1975).

Upon his release from the hospital, Carruth took up residence in his parents' attic and, paralyzed by agoraphobia, emerged rarely over the next five years. During this time, he discovered the writings of Albert Camus which inspired the essay collection *After "The Stranger": Imaginary Dialogues with Camus* (1964). For the rest of his life, Carruth often referenced his appreciation for Camus and the cathartic effect of the French philosopher's writings. Carruth eventually resumed his editorial work and served as poetry editor of *Harper's* from 1977 to 1983 and consulting editor to the *Hudson Review* from 1971 until his death. He largely avoided academia, instead living a spartan existence as a farmer and freelance editor in the northern Vermont wilderness, but he did serve on the faculties of the University of Vermont from 1975 to 1978 and Syracuse University from 1978 to 1991. Over the years, his poetry earned literary awards including Guggenheim fellowships in 1965 and 1977, the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award in 1968, a National Endowment for the Arts senior fellowship in 1988, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in 1990, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992, in addition to the Pulitzer and National Book Award in 1996.

Although he gradually assembled a life that surpassed his psychiatrists' prognoses, Carruth continued to struggle with depression, anxiety, alcoholism, insomnia, and isolation and endured the death of his adult daughter from cancer. He attempted suicide twice, and three of his four marriages ended in divorce. His fourth marriage, to the poet Joe-Anne McLaughlin, brought Carruth an unprecedented measure of happiness, as reflected in his poetry of the time. He died on September 29, 2008, after a series of strokes and is survived by his wife and son, David, from his third marriage.

MAJOR WORKS

Carruth published thirty poetry collections over a career of almost fifty years. In that time, he explored a variety of styles and invented some new forms, including the "paragraph," a fifteen-line construction remini-

scent of the sonnet, written in iambic pentameter with one central tetrameter couplet, which first appeared in the book-length sequence *Contra Mortem* (1967). Carruth described *Contra Mortem* as experimental, inspired by his immersion in European existentialism combined with his desire for technical precision, and noted that it was his first intentionally written poem. *The Sleeping Beauty,* first published as a book-length poem in 1983 and revised in 1990, again featured the paragraph form. In this work Carruth ranged over topics including love and war, myth and reality, history and the present, framed loosely by the fable of the title. *Asphalt Georgics* (1985) marked a change in tone and another new poetic form, which some reviewers attributed to Carruth's move from the wilderness to an urban setting when he accepted the professorship at Syracuse University. Brian Henry remarked that the poet's "asphalt georgics" "update the traditionally didactic form by using a colloquial manner reminiscent of Robert Frost's New England monologues, going farther in their colloquialism than Frost did while adhering to *ABAB* quatrains with lines alternating between eight and six syllables." With *Sitting In* (1986), a collection of poetry and essays, Carruth gave center-stage to his love of jazz and blues music. In this collection, Anthony Robbins noted, Carruth "writes extensively about the relationships among jazz, poetry, cultural optimism, and individual freedom—an excellent history of twentieth-century American poetry." *Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey,* a collection of poems from the years 1991 to 1995, presents a level of exuberance and confidence previously unseen in Carruth's writing. Among the themes of these poems are the death of the author's daughter and his awareness of his own dwindling years, contrasted with the joy and awe he derives from his marriage to a much younger woman.

In addition to his poetry, Carruth published some essays and autobiographical pieces, notably the 1998 autobiographical essay collection *Reluctantly*; compiled and edited an important anthology, *The Voice That Is Great within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (1970); and contributed many reviews as a literary critic, a role he approached with humility. Carruth once remarked, "Reviewers who use the space assigned them primarily for slopping out their own temperamentalities or for buttering up editors and readers by displaying their own cleverness at the expense of the authors whose works they are supposed to be considering, have no place—I emphasize, no place at all—in a responsible culture." Carruth also wrote one novel, *Appendix A* (1963), at a time when publishing companies often required poets to produce longer works to accompany their poetry collections. In an interview in 1993, Carruth expressed some regret that he had not written more prose, noting that he envied those of his author-friends who were free to write without the constraints of the poetic form.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

In Carruth's poetry, critics found the commentary of a vast intellect considering its place in an indifferent universe. Reviews of his earliest collections identified flashes of brilliance amid otherwise tentative and uneven work; over the decades, reviewers tracked the development of both consistency and eloquent restraint in Carruth's poetry. Discussing Carruth's first collection, *The Crow and the Heart,* in his book *Babel to Byzantium,* author James Dickey observed "a carefulness which bursts, once or twice or three times, into a kind of frenzied eloquence, a near-hysteria, and in these frightening places sloughing off a set of mannerisms which in the rest of the book seems determined to reduce Carruth to the level of a thousand other poets." Dickey described Carruth as producing his best work, "pushing past limit after limit, only in the grip of recalling some overpowering experience. When he does not have such a subject at hand, Carruth amuses himself by being playfully skillful with internal rhyme, inventing bizarre Sitwellian images, being witty and professionally sharp." *Contra Mortem,* which appeared eight years later, became a benchmark in critical assessment of Carruth's poetry. In a retrospective essay published thirty-seven years after the poem's first appearance, Christian Thompson described it as "a poem of wonder, gratitude and celebration expressed by a man whose expectations of the life he would live were decimated by mental illness. *Contra Mortem* is the foundation of a new life Carruth built through poetry after being told by doctors in an asylum he would never live anything which would approach a normal existence." Over time, Carruth became known for his experimentation, especially as inspired by his love of jazz music; reviewers praised the poet for continuing to honor form and rhyme amid his free-wheeling improvisations. In an essay on the influence of blues and jazz music on Carruth's writing, Henry asserted, "Carruth's determination to express grief, rage, and other emotions in his poetry reminds us that he is much more than a poet of technical skill. When he combines these emotional expressions with formal improvisation and downplays his consciousness of the improvisation itself, his work most resembles the blues." In 1993, writing for *American Poetry Review,* Robbins remarked that Carruth "has written in such a variety of poetic modes as to be atopic, unclassifiable, in conventional critical and academic categories. . . . Carruth's poetry is astonishing for both its depth and range."

The publication of collections of Carruth's selected and sometimes revised poems gave critics the opportunity for a broader perspective on his work. Reviewing *Collected Longer Poems* (1993) in 1996, Ben Howard observed, "With the publication, three years ago, of his *Collected Shorter Poems* (1992) . . . , the emotional and intellectual tensions in Carruth's work came more clearly into focus. Spanning some fifty years, that collection revealed the copious variety of the poet's oeuvre, as well as its scope and integrity. The present volume performs a similar function." Describing *Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey,* reviewer John Taylor found that Carruth "writes with candor, warmth, humor, sometimes outrage, always with sympathy. His language is so clear and his emotions so sincere that they disarm." Obituaries reflected the stature to which Carruth had ascended by the time of his death. William Grimes described him as "one of the most wide-ranging and intellectually ambitious poets of his generation"; fellow poet Galway Kinnell remarked, "He had a greater variety of poems than almost anybody. He was interested—superinterested—in everything and could write about anything."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Crow and the Heart, 1946-1959 (poetry) 1959
Journey to a Known Place (poetry) 1961
The Norfolk Poems: 1 June to 1 September 1961 (poetry) 1962
Appendix A (novel) 1963
After "The Stranger": Imaginary Dialogues with Camus (essays) 1964
North Winter (poetry) 1964
Nothing for Tigers: Poems, 1959-1964 (poetry) 1965
Contra Mortem (poetry) 1967
The Clay Hill Anthology (poetry) 1970
**For You: Poems* (poetry) 1970
The Voice That Is Great within Us: American Poetry of the Twentieth Century [editor] (poetry anthology) 1970
From Snow and Rock, from Chaos: Poems, 1965-1972 (poetry) 1973
Dark World (poetry) 1974
The Bloomingdale Papers (poetry) 1975
Loneliness: An Outburst of Hexasyllables (poetry) 1976
Aura (poetry) 1977
Brothers, I Loved You All: Poems, 1969-1977 (poetry) 1978
Almanach du printemps vivarois (poetry) 1979
The Mythology of Darkness and Light (poetry) 1982
Working Papers: Selected Essays and Reviews (criticism) 1982
Effluences from the Sacred Caves: More Selected Essays and Reviews (criticism) 1983
If You Call This Cry a Song (poetry) 1983
The Sleeping Beauty (poetry) 1983; revised edition, 1990
Asphalt Georgics (poetry) 1985
Lighter than Air Craft (poetry) 1985
The Oldest Killed Lake in North America (poetry) 1985
Mother (poetry) 1986
The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth (poetry) 1986
Sitting In: Selected Writings on Jazz, Blues, and Related Topics (essays and poetry) 1986; expanded edition, 1993
Sonnets (poetry) 1989
Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises and Flies across the Nacreous River at Twilight toward the Distant Islands (poetry) 1989
Collected Shorter Poems, 1946-1991 (poetry) 1992
Suicides and Jazzers (criticism) 1992
Collected Longer Poems (poetry) 1993
Selected Essays and Reviews (essays and criticism) 1995
Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey: Poems, 1991-1995 (poetry) 1996
Reluctantly: Autobiographical Essays (autobiography) 1998
Doctor Jazz: Poems, 1996-2000 (poetry) 2001
Letters to Jane (letters) 2004
Toward the Distant Islands: New and Selected Poems (poetry) 2006

*This volume contains revised versions of the previously published long poems "The Asylum" (which first appeared in *The Crow and the Heart*); "Journey to a Known Place," "North Winter," "Contra Mortem," and "My Father's Face."

CRITICISM

Hayden Carruth and Anthony Robbins (interview date September-October 1993)

SOURCE: Carruth, Hayden, and Anthony Robbins. "Hayden Carruth: An Interview by Anthony Robbins." *American Poetry Review* 22, no. 5 (September-October 1993): 47-55.

[*In the following interview, Carruth discusses his satisfaction with his career as a poet, despite its lack of financial reward, and reflects on his favorite writers.*]

Hayden Carruth (b. 1921) has reached an advanced stage in his distinguished career as a poet, critic, and editor without having received the critical attention which he deserves and which has been accorded many of his less able contemporaries. Lyrically gifted and philosophically acute, Carruth is one of the finest

American poets of this century. Perhaps one reason for neglect has been Carruth's relative lack of self-promotion. He lived in northern Vermont for twenty years, and during that time he neither taught nor gave readings until 1978, when he went to work at Syracuse University, where he taught until he retired in 1991. He has written in such a variety of poetic modes as to be atopic, unclassifiable, in conventional critical and academic categories. He has published twenty-two books of poetry, a novel, and four collections of criticism, as well as editing the influential anthology of twentieth-century American poetry, ***The Voice That Is Great within Us.*** Once editor of *Poetry* and poetry editor for *Harper's* and a current and long-standing member of the editorial board of *The Hudson Review,* he has also received nearly every major award and grant, including an NEA senior achievement award in 1988, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Award in 1989, and the 1992 Book Critics' Circle Award for his ***Shorter Poems*** (Copper Canyon).

Carruth's poetry is astonishing for both its depth and range. His first book, ***The Crow and the Heart,*** is written mostly in the characteristic mode of the late fifties, highly formal, but verbally dense, bedizened with strange words from Carruth's huge vocabulary. In the early sixties, Carruth's books ***Journey to a Known Place, The Norfolk Poems, North Winter,*** and ***Nothing for Tigers,*** all superlative in their lyric accomplishments, were followed by the first long poem in which Carruth found his full voice, a sequence of thirty fifteen-line sonnets, ***Contra Mortem.***

Carruth is a Yankee who has given us some of our most severely negative criticisms of Thoreau. He is an existentialist who has heard voices speaking to him from out of the air. He is a romantic who has spent a lifetime exploring the destructive consequences of that impulse. He is a pragmatist who has made his living as a poet, a poet who has given us—in his collections of essays and reviews, ***Working Papers, Effluences from the Sacred Caves,*** and ***Sitting In,*** where he writes extensively about the relationships among jazz, poetry, cultural optimism, and individual freedom—an excellent history of twentieth-century American poetry.

His book on Camus, ***After The Stranger,*** is somewhat autobiographical in regard to the genesis of his own existentialism, and the primary importance of his most encompassing poem, ***The Sleeping Beauty*** (1982), is its existential discursion on the paradox of the Romantic impulse: that the drive to be good, heroic, noble, to achieve the ideal, and the impulse to love generously and thereby possess freedom, have led to murder and domination; "passion / In romance must be love in action, / Lust for the ideal . . . O, murderous." In his most recent collections, ***Asphalt Georgics, The Oldest Killed Lake in North America, Lighter than Air Craft, Sonnets,*** and ***Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises at Twilight and Flies across the Distant River toward the Nacreous Islands,*** Carruth continues to make poems of great beauty and force.

I talked with Carruth first in a deli on Wescott Street in Syracuse while we were waiting for a friend to drive into town for dinner, and then the next day at his home in Munnsville, New York. Carruth has always been candid about his literary influences. We began with a discussion of some of his heroes.

[*Robbins*]: *In an essay on the jazz clarinetist Pee Wee Russell and Yeats, you wrote that Pee Wee Russell's work is as self-contained as that of any artist you can think of in any medium, and for that reason he was not a Modernist. What did you mean by that?*

[Carruth]: I can't recall what I had in mind. I think what I felt in that was that, in terms of style and personality and imaginative attitudes (and gestalt), Russell is remarkably liberated, and it all comes out of himself—almost all comes out of himself. Or course, he had influences, and he influenced other people, and like any musician he had to depend on other musicians for what he was doing at any particular time. That's what I think I meant. I've always been interested in voice, in what people call persona, whatever it is that distinguishes one artist from another.

Style?

It used to be called style, but I don't know if they use that term any more although it used to be used. It's whatever embodies the personality of the artist. As far as Modernism goes, I think it ended when I was young, basically. By the end of the war, a lot of the ideas that went with Modernism in the beginning of the century, obviously, became obsolete and no longer useful.

I think what ended Modernism was the discovery that there really isn't any difference between the life of the imagination and the life of the real world. That's what a lot of the people who preceded us were trying to insist on. They were trying to insist that since life on the ordinary plane of reality was unbearable, the artist creates another plane of reality that is better and bearable. And some people said this explicitly. Others not. But I think it was basic to the Modernist movement, the idea of the masterpiece, the idea of *Finnegans Wake,* the idea of artistic autonomy, the idea of the artist as somebody different from the rest of the human race, all that sort of thing. There were plenty of people still doing this, and still believing in it after the war. But I think that attitude is gone. I think that writ-

ers of my generation began thinking differently than the Modernists had thought. What we didn't do was to find ways in actual writing, in our poetry, to make the distinction between our poetry and the Modernist poetry, I think of my poetry as being informed by an aesthetic impetus probably not much different from that of the Modernists, in spite of the fact that I repudiate many of the things that they thought. I think it has taken the younger poets now to make a real change in the kind of poetry that is written in America. I think that poets like Sharon Olds and Stephen Dobyns and so on are consciously writing poetry that is not Modernist in itself, in the poem. They want accessibility; they want clarity; they want a good lively surface. They don't care much about Symbolism or Objectivism or any of those things we argued about in the earlier period.

In an essay on the Resistance fighter Rene Leynaud, Camus wrote that he and Leynaud agreed about "the impatience [he] felt when faced with the short poem, the fleeting notion cultivated by so many moderns." Isn't this strange? Was Camus a Modernist?

It's hard to make generalizations about him, about what he was or what he wanted to do. He certainly was not a precious writer. He was reacting against the French writers like Valery and Gide of the early part of the century, who had been super-aesthetes. He didn't want that. He claimed that he was a dramatist, that he liked to write plays better than anything else, although I think myself that his plays are the least successful of his works. Some of his short works are really remarkably good. There are at least two or three short stories that are really wonderful. He also wrote some very fine short essays, those geographical essays about the Mediterranean.

I don't know if anyone ever asked Camus whether he was a Modernist or not. During his lifetime the question hadn't even arisen. He might have considered himself in the same line of development as earlier writers like Malraux and other French novelists. He certainly broke with a lot of Modernist ideas that the people between the wars had expressed. He knew he was doing that. It was reading of him that made me feel the same way.

I think of my own writing as being of all kinds. I've always wanted to do everything. I never really did very much fiction and I regret that now. I wish I'd concentrated on it more. But in poetry I've used long forms and short forms and lots of in-between forms and everything I could do I wanted to do. I think partly in me that is an expression of my own sense of insecurity as a person. I wasn't able to develop myself as a public figure in my poems. I used other people's voices, imitated other people a lot. I've kept changing things to break up any kind of exposure that I as a person might get through the writing. But that's just an accident of personality.

When Camus says that he doesn't have any patience with shorter poems, one almost has the feeling that it is a moral judgment.

It is, but on the other hand I think Camus, like any writer, is not consistent. I don't think he meant that to be as harsh as it sounds. I'm sure he liked some of the short poems of Rene Char, for instance. There's no question in my mind but that he liked those poems. I think he was just saying something to be saying something; that's what we all do. You can't trust a poet's theoretical statements because they often vary from what he has done in his poetry.

And they are inevitably programmatic.

That's right. And that applies to me as much as anybody although I have always tried to avoid that because I don't think of myself as being a theorist or a critic as much as an editor and a reviewer who responds to questions in a very practical way. I certainly grew up in the Modernist, the tail-end of the Modernist, period. Metaphor was a big thing. There was a book I was trying to read by Eudora Welty last summer or sometime recently, a book called *Losing Battles.* And in the first five pages I was becoming sick. Everything was a simile. I had the feeling that I had been lied to; I felt somehow dirty, unclean. And I get that feeling when I read a lot of stuff from that period.

Why did you write only one novel, **Appendix A***? Why did you write one in the first place, and then why did you only write one?*

I did the novel in the first place because that was the only way I could get my first book of poems published. I had put together a manuscript of poetry, and I sent out letters of inquiry to quite a few publishers. Most of them were not interested, or if they were I sent them the manuscript and they turned it down. Emile Capouya at Macmillan liked the book and wanted to publish it, but he said that it would be necessary to have a novel to go along with it. This was pretty common in those days. I had already written a long story, which I didn't know what to do with, about a kid in France during World War II, who had been orphaned and adopted as a sort of a mascot by a German unit. And this was based on something that I knew from real life in my own family. So when Emile said he had to have a novel, I said I'll expand the story into a novel, and basically that's what I did. I added three

other sections to the book, making it cover a longer period. When the novel was published, Macmillan gave me an option on a second novel, and they paid me some money. And I wrote a book called ***Malloway.*** That's the name of the principal character. He was a black American who had suffered a great deal in the civil rights disturbances in the late sixties and had emigrated to a mythological Pacific island. The story was about his relationship with the local people on this island. It was totally fanciful, whereas my first novel had been largely autobiographical. I wrote the first draft, and I revised about half of the second draft, and then I quit. I was unhappy with it. I didn't feel that it was a good enough piece of work to put any more time and effort into. I still remember, though, the character of Malloway and other people in the book and some of the scenes, and I wonder if I was right to do that. It's too late now to do anything about it, but it was not a bad idea. Plenty of times I've had the feeling that the natural art form for the twentieth century is the novel, prose fiction. And I admire and envy my friends who are novelists and short-story writers. I rather wish I had done more of it. But I didn't, so there's no point in lamenting it now. I'm not unhappy with what I did in poetry, as far as that goes. But I do think that you can reach more people, you have more flexibility in prose fiction than you do in a poem, even a long poem. You can write in little scenes, you don't have to worry so much about compactness and density, things that you are supposed to worry about in poetry.

I enjoyed writing the novel that I wrote. It was a very anxious experience for me because I didn't really think I knew anything about writing novels. In fact I didn't. And I was self-conscious, and it shows in the book itself. It shows. It is over-written in places. When I got to the end of the novel, I was so anxious that I wrote the last six chapters in one night. I just had to get the damn thing done. It was a terrible long hard night, but I did it. It is all long ago. I wish I had written more fiction.

In an interview in 1951, Camus said, "The era of ideologies is over, and the force of resistance, together with the value of freedom, gives us new reasons for living." That sounds optimistic. Do you think that is impossible now, and if so, does that have something to do with the fate of existentialism?

Yes, it does.

Existentialism has met its fate already?

I don't think it has in the longer term. I think that it is still active, is still having an influence, and that there will be a new wave of existential writing in the future, but they probably won't use those words, won't use that vocabulary. But Camus was mistaken when he said that the time of ideology was over. We all hoped it would be over, and we thought that the Second World War and the atrocities committed in the name of ideology during those mid-century years would have taught people not to trust ideological ways of thinking and acting. But that clearly is not the case. In the English Department of Syracuse University, for instance, the Marxist ideologists have become quite strong again, and their views of literature are very ideological, very programmatic. They use the term humanism as a pejorative, and they apply it to me, they apply it to Camus and a great many others of that period, almost in the same way we used to use "humanism" to put down the older, the "New Humanists," so called, who were active during the period between the two wars—"new Humanist movement." So things are always changing, and that's all you can say. I think that the strict Marxist, neo-Marxist, Leninist ideologies of literary theorists are kind of a game. They don't seem to be saying anything really important politically. And I'm not sure how much they are changing the ways of thought of the young people.

What is it doing to writers? David Ignatow has said that he always resented the Marxists, what the Marxists tried to do in the thirties, because he thought it tended to take away what was individual from a writer, to insist that writers speak for a group of people instead of for themselves. And he resented that and thought it was dangerous. Do you agree?

It's a danger. There's no doubt about that. I can't say about any place except Syracuse, but in the creative writing program at Syracuse the writers resist a lot of the parts of theory that tend to put the writer's imagination in an equivocal position.

They don't like it, and the struggle in the English Department has an effect on the young people. And in some cases they have gone into the classes in theory in order to learn what they can and get what they can out of it. And absorb it. It's a good idea, I think. The theorists are not off the wall, by any means. The things that they say about language and about the sociology of literature are things that need to be said. But I think that the strict neo-Marxist theorists—and there aren't so many of them, there are only two or three of them at Syracuse, and I don't now how many there are elsewhere—they certainly do tend to take literature away from the writer and to suppress the interests of the writer and the literary process, and they don't even consider what we have always considered literature—for them it is some kind of class text that has to be gotten rid of. And they prefer to talk about comic books and science fiction and that kind of thing, which in some ways is O.K. but in other ways is damaging. I

don't like it. And I've resisted it myself even though I listen to theorists and argue with them, and accept some of the things they say. I try not to be ideological on either side. There are traditionalists on the faculty who are as ideological as the theorists. And when they get together in a committee meeting it is a battle. I don't think anybody gains anything from it. So I tend not to join in. To me, in my own writing and thinking all my life—I think since I was a high school kid—ideology has been a dirty word.

Yeats wrote that rhetoric comes out of a quarrel with the world and poetry comes out of a quarrel with oneself.

Yeats was very influential on me. And I would agree with him in that. I think you can also get poetry from a quarrel with the world. It's more difficult to get than from the quarrel with yourself because the topic is so massive, but it can be done. *The Divine Comedy* is a good example of a combined poem that comes from both quarrels, and it is a great affirmation, which is hard for us to do. Sometimes I feel it is impossible. But we can get our poetry from both sources. Yeats was an Irishman, and he liked to make statements and I don't blame him for that at all. I like to make them myself at time. Though I admire Yeats the poet more than anyone else, I think. When I was young I read his stuff over and over and imitated it and copied it. I never had much respect for his intellectual attainments. I don't think very many people do. He was a great offender. He had a wonderful imagination, and that was why he was able to absorb so many cultural strands and points of reference. He loved history. He loved art. He loved different ways of making feeling. He loved the folk history of Irish literature, the legends and myths, and in that sense he was a great poet and a very influential twentieth-century poet, but as to the gyres and the rest of it, and the spirit rapping . . . I read his autobiography once, and I stopped reading about halfway through it I got so sick of it.

Speaking about forebears, your father was a socialist.

Yes, he was. I believe he was a member of the Socialist Party when he was young. I can't say that for sure, about him or my grandfather, but they were socialists. They voted the Socialist ticket. I have always been told that my grandfather was involved in socialist politics. In the period before World War II he worked for Debs's organization doing some kind of writing, speechwriting or something like that. He also ran, partly in a facetious way, he ran on the Socialist ticket to be dog catcher in the town of Tarrytown, New York. I think it was in 1908 or 1912, I can't remember. He wrote letters to the editor of the local paper saying what he would do as a socialist dog catcher. He was a comedian.

They've all disappeared, of course. The Socialist Party went to pieces as a result of the war, and during the twenties the Socialists didn't have much to do. Then when the New Deal came along in 1932 many of them switched, and my father did too and became a Democrat. Roosevelt had adopted about ninety percent of the Socialist Party platform for the Democratic platform in that election. So many people who had been Socialists became Democrats, and that's what sustained Roosevelt during the Depression years, basically.

The fact that my father and grandfather were socialists had only a minimal association to my political feelings. I don't think I ever talked politics with my father very much—a little bit when I was in high school, perhaps. My relationship with my father was so difficult and strained that, in fact, we did not talk seriously about anything. We never talked seriously about literature. At least I can't remember anything. And my early political feelings came from my own reading, which was kind of haphazard, in the library. I would go and find rather obscure books that were not catalogued in the library. There was a place at the top of the old library in the town where I was living where you could find a lot of old pamphlets and books that had been donated but had never been put into circulation. I used to raid that thing.

Also, I had some teachers in high school. This might seem rather strange today, but I had a couple of teachers in high school, during the Depression, who were socialists, and we discussed anarchism and we discussed Marxism in our classes. And we discussed them quite objectively. We discussed capitalism and democracy and all the rest of it. I was lucky because there were a number of teachers who were Ph.D.'s—you couldn't get a job in the universities—and were working in the high schools during the Depression to support themselves—in my town we had an excellent high school. I often think that my four years in high school gave me more for my time than any studying I ever did.

It was a very good secondary education. Then when I went to college in Chapel Hill, which used to be called by the ordinary people in North Carolina and by the press "Pink Hill," there were a lot of old socialists around. We even had a communist book store on Franklin Street run by a guy named Ben. He had Marxist pamphlets and tracts and Leninist pamphlets and tracts and all kinds of things like that.

Back in the thirties there were a group of Marxists, well, left-leaning faculty in the Sociology Department at Chapel Hill. Fred Hobson talks about them in Tell About the South.