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The end of literature: Reflections on literature and ethics[1]

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> "The immediate contingency overtook him, pulled him back from the edge of the theoretical abyss."
> – F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Abstract

The end of literature: reflections on literature and ethics

Metaphysical scepticism and historical consciousness have sharpened our awareness of the limitations of language and rational discourse. This emphasis in critical theory offers a challenge to the Christian literary critic. Reflection on the nature and importance of teleology provides a way of refocusing criticism on the centrality of ethics rather than on truth claims in the study of literature. Using Ricoeur as a counter to the scepticism of Derrida, Christian literary theory can find a way to situate itself in the postmodern world. By understanding teleology in the context of narrative theory, as opposed to the contexts of eschatology and utopia, Christian theory can find a way of recovering the place of religion and ethics in literary criticism.

1. Definitions: Teleology, eschatology, utopia

In this essay I will be reflecting on the teleology of literature from the vantage point of the Christian tradition. Before I develop my main thesis, it will be

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1 Reworked version of a paper originally presented at the International Conference on "Christianity and literature at the turn of the twentieth century" – Potchefstroom, August 1995.

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helpful to clarify my use of the term *teleology*. First, teleology does not require an Aristotelian conception of an ideal or universal telos or end or goal. It does not even require that the telos be a certain or determinate good. It does imply, however, that living in time entails some sense of purposeful movement toward desired goals. As Jeffrey Stout (1988:237) writes in *Ethics after Babel*, the telos or end need not be "a fixed conception of the good, derived once and for all from a philosophical view of the human essence"; "the *telos* that matters is one actually achievable under our social-historical circumstances by acceptable means" (Stout, 1988:226).

Second, teleology should not be identified with eschatology conceived of narrowly as a view or theory of the the nature of life and society in the "end times," that is, after the end history as human beings experience and know it. The Christian belief in the "hereafter" does not provide in culturally specific terms the teleological goals of human beings living in history. The nature of the "afterlife" is only obscurely suggested even in Scripture, and although the images of heaven that are given in Scripture may be an important source for reflection on human life in the here and now, the images of the hereafter provide no programmatic blueprints for constructing historical societies. Understood in a broader sense, however, as theological interpretation of the moral and social implications of biblical teachings about the future, eschatology is close to, if not identical with, teleology. Conceived in this way, as, for example, in Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, eschatology is of great importance for Christian understanding of social and historical life. Moltmann (1967:16) writes,

> From first to last, and not merely in epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element *of* Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set ...

Third, teleology is not to be confused with utopian thinking. As Paul Ricoeur (1986:16, 310-14) points out in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, utopian reflection is an essential part of our living in history. But while utopian visions or models of ideal societies are useful and even necessary for teleological thinking, teleology encompasses much more than utopian projections. Utopian thinking imagines a future society that is relatively complete and coherent in its social institutions, whereas teleology pertains to any and every action in time, whether actual or imagined. As David Carr (1986:39) observes, "In a significant sense, when we are absorbed in an action the *focus* or direction of our attention, the center of our concern, lies not in the present but in the future ...". Every action has a goal whether or not it projects or implies a

utopian end. For Christian thinking in particular, it is important to distinguish the closely related concepts of eschatology, utopia, and teleology. The Christian concept of the afterlife offers no detailed program for a Christian utopia, and neither concept encompasses all of the problems of teleological thinking about the historically and culturally specific actions that daily engage all human beings.

Thus, the notion of teleology that I want to use is a general and historicized one that is related to but not identical with the concepts of eschatology and utopia. This use of the term – the concern for future possibilities that attend all of our actions – will draw our attention to the historical character of human understanding, and that will enable us to see more clearly the scope and aim of literary criticism and the contours of a Christian perspective on criticism. Our contemporary theoretical environment makes it necessary for Christian critics as well as other critics to acknowledge in new ways the temporal and historical contingencies of human experience and understanding.

2. Truths and actions

Traditionally, Christian criticism has tended to concentrate on the importance of transhistorical dimensions of truth more than the historical limits of understanding. When pressed to speak about the ultimate value of literature, Christians tend to appeal to the notion of universal truths that enrich life because these truths transcend historical limitations. Literature gains its enduring value from such truths, the argument goes, and thus great literature enables us to transcend our social and historical particularity. In contrast to this notion, I want to explore the view that the *primary* end of literature is *not* the expression of universal truths or the representation of universal moral values. Though universal truths and values may be important for the study of literature, the primary purpose of literature is not to convey or represent such truths or values but to explore the possibilities and consequences of specific human actions and thoughts in a narrative situation. Whatever we may mean by universal truths and values in literature, they are qualities that serve the end of literature and are not themselves the end. The end is the narration of actions that have ethical significance. While we as readers cannot apprehend the ethical significance of actions without cognitive analysis and understanding, the literature itself aims to explore by narrative means the moral dynamics of human action and does not have as its primary aim the direct statement of the cognitive truths that may be implied by the narrative. Actions that are narrated in literature are often taken as illustrations of universal truths and values rather than as what they are – the uncertain and often stumbling efforts of characters to find a way to act in a confusing world. Literature dramatizes for us the teleological searching of people who are faced with conflicts and choices. Even

if a literary work in the end implies the affirmation of some truth or value, the narrative focuses our interest on the dynamics of the quest rather than on the implied truth or value. It is the teleological searching for meaning and direction more than the reaffirmation of familiar universal values that interests us in literary narratives.

The question of truth in the arts, however, is not one to pass over lightly. The notion that literature offers instruction as well as delight has continued to be an important topic in literary discussions since Plato and Aristotle placed it in the forefront of literary theory. Instruction and delight have been defined and interpreted in many different ways, of course, and in our century the concept of instruction has become a particularly controversial one because of increasing scepticism about whether anyone can speak about truth in the traditional sense of absolute rational certainty. In an era in which Cartesian doubt leads to more doubt rather than to certainty, what happens to definitions of truth? Anti-foundationalism has pretty much carried the day among contemporary philosophers and cultural theorists, and it has left us with new questions about the nature and significance of truth. And if truth in philosophy has had a great fall, how can we speak of truth in the arts and literature?

Perhaps Christians tend to be more persistent than others in clinging to traditional ideas about the importance of truth in literature because concern about truth has always been so central in Christianity. After all, don't Christians begin with the belief that Christianity is true? And if Christianity is true, does not everything else follow from that? Do twentieth-century Christians have to abandon their concern with truth because of postmodern scepticism? I do not wish to obscure the importance of truth claims for Christians, but I do wish to refocus the lenses, to see in a contemporaneous way how truth fits into the total enterprise of literary criticism. If the concern with truth assists in our understanding of literature but is not the primary end of literary study, then we need to alter the angle of vision appropriately.

My objection to putting truth at the centre of our concerns or making universal truth the primary end of literary criticism is that our conception of truth as a universal or transhistorical standard tends to make us underestimate the historical nature of understanding. A fully transhistorical stance is possible only for the deity; for human beings understanding is always conditioned by finite and historical limitations. The concept of truth in literature is an important concept, but we must also take into account the conditions that history imposes on human understanding of truth. A historicized conception of teleology may help us to see these conditions more clearly.

Let me try to illustrate the implications of this point with two examples, the first one taken from the realm of ethics. If I take the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and then on that basis alone condemn a person for killing another person, I am adopting a nonhistorical, nonteleological view of moral value. I am not considering why the killing took place or for what purpose it was perpetrated. And if I judge in a purely abstract way that a given action is contrary to the law, I am also adopting a nonbiblical view, for the Bible often allows for killing even while it holds to the commandment forbidding killing. Killing in warfare, in capital punishment, and in self-defense are biblically condoned forms of killing, and killing in these circumstances has generally been considered not to be contrary to the sixth commandment. Judgments about justifiable and unjustifiable killing can be discerned only if we take into account the context of particular historical circumstances, and our understanding of these circumstances cannot be made without the notion of teleology.

A second example is more directly related to the issue of truth as doctrine. The notion of the sinfulness or fallenness of human beings is one of the cardinal truths of Christianity. But it is also clear that this truth and its implications have been construed in diverse ways. In the Reformed tradition, for instance, much intellectual energy has been spent on questions about the consequences of the fall: are all natural human actions totally sinful or partially sinful? Are human beings by nature totally incapable of good or are they inclined to both good and evil? What is the relationship between sin and grace? Is there common grace as well as saving grace, and if so, to what extent does common grace affect the fallen nature of human beings? The complexity of the distinctions and arguments over such issues often baffles the minds of nontheologians, particularly since advocates of all positions claim to be explicating fundamental biblical truths. Difficulties in explaining doctrinal principles occur because such explanations are always made in response to particular historical and cultural issues that require interpretation. Our understanding of truth is coloured by the occasions that motivate our search for the truth and the ends for which we use it. Our judgments are never divorced from pragmatic ends and consequences. Teleology places us in the thick of our historical and cultural situations.

If Christian interpretations of truth, like all other interpretations, are influenced by historical and cultural situations, the relationship between literature and truth can be construed as an interactive one. We may look at literature in the light of truth, but literature also may make us reexamine and even adjust or refine our understanding of truth. And that complicates Christian criticism and theory considerably. It forces Christians to abandon rationalistic Archimedean assumptions about truth and to adopt a more open and historically realistic

stance. Truth is always in the process of being interpreted, and while we do examine literature in the light of our present understanding of truth, we also seek to find in literature ways in which we can develop and enhance our understanding of truth.

If we adopt this interactive model of literature and truth, we also, I think, are better able to see that the aim of literature is not first of all to convey truth in the sense of universal unchanging principles. Literature may imply or even give allegiance to certain universal truths or principles, but literature is essentially story; and since stories are made up of actions, they aim to dramatize moral conflicts and choices rather than to convey universal truths. The focus of literature is on moral action more than on conceptual systems; literature focuses on ethics more than on truth claims. That is the primary thesis that I want to explore.

3. Teleology in contemporary literary theory: Derrida and Ricoeur

The need to rethink Christian literary criticism is in large part occasioned by current movements in literary theory. Much of the burden of this theory is that literary criticism must be taken out of the ivory tower and must address the issues of authority and freedom, of identity and community, of race, class, and gender. From the viewpoint of most contemporary critics, a literary criticism that focuses its attention on the search for universal truths and values is out of touch with the cultural and intellectual crosscurrents of our age. Behind much of contemporary literary theory is a call for ethics, a call for the understanding of the moral implications of reading. A Christian approach to literature must also address social and moral issues.

To develop my thesis about literature and ethics, I begin with a very general point: the ultimate purpose or end of Christian faith is the expression of that faith in Christian living, individually and communally. That, of course, entails many other things since living takes place only through social practices and institutions. Thus, the development of a theology, or the formation of social and political institutions, or the establishment of ecclesiastical forms of governance are important tasks within Christianity. All of these tasks, however, serve the ultimate goal of cultivating in Christian believers the practice of Christian living. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1989:53) writes, explaining the rationale for advocating a certain curricular model for college education, "the ultimate goal of Christian collegiate education [is] a Christian life, not just Christian thought". If that is the goal of Christian faith in general, then the reading and study of literature, like all other enterprises, should ultimately, for Christians at least, serve the purpose of developing the Christian life, however

that purpose is explicated. Only if this larger goal is kept in mind can Christian critics maintain proper perspective on more specific problems in literary theory and criticism.

If the ultimate goal is the living of a Christian life, then Christian critics will be concerned in the final analysis with ethical issues, ethical in the broad sense of having to do with the nature and dynamics of human actions. Their concern ultimately is with the question of how literature affects or contributes to the goal of Christian living. John Crowe Ransom (1991:476) put his finger on the pulse of much of mid-century thinking when he said that "Art is post-ethical" and that literary criticism should concern itself with aesthetic matters rather than ethical ones. The opposite is the case today: we need to rethink how aesthetic criticism contributes to our understanding of broader ethical concerns.

The issues pertinent to ethical criticism are numerous, and I want to digress for a moment to acknowledge this complexity. Here are six interrelated issues that I glean primarily from the writings of Stanley Hauerwas, a prominent American voice in the area of Christian ethics. In *Resident Aliens* (1989) Hauerwas emphasizes the importance of the biblical basis for Christian ethics, of the need for stories that explore the issues of life in narrative form, the nurturing influences of a Christian community, the need for a vital tradition, the beneficial effects of exemplary models of moral living, and finally a strong teleological view of history. All of these points would be important in a full Christian theory, but it is only the last of these topics – teleology – that I am focusing on in this essay.

To see more fully the implications of teleological thinking for literary criticism, we will take a brief look at the viewpoints of Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's influence on literary criticism has not been as pervasive as Derrida's, but his views embody a strong alternative to Derrida's deconstructive criticism. Though I am concerned here with ends, I will examine what Derrida says about beginnings or origins because that will help us to understand what he implies about ends. I will also, at the risk of oversimplifying his thinking, attempt to put his ideas into less technical language than he uses.

For Derrida, language and meaning are based on the principle of difference. Only by distinguishing one word or concept from others can we arrive at understanding. Because of this logical requirement of thought and language, we can never discover a prior unity on which difference is based, for when we attempt to do so we uncover concepts that we can understand only in terms of their differences from other concepts. In our search for an originary unity from which differences arise, we discover only more differences. In our metaphysical ponderings, we have a concept of an ultimate origin as a unity prior to the

emergence of differences, but that concept of an originary source of meaning and difference fades forever from us into the infinite recesses of thought. The ultimate origin of thought is irrecoverable and therefore undefmable.

The source of what is prior to meaning and thought and language Derrida calls the *trace*, and the ultimate origin he sometimes calls the *archetrace*. This archetrace, however, cannot be defined or described; it is the elusive origin prior to thought and language. Thus, while the trace is "the origin of origin," it is also "the disappearance of origin". Since the ultimate origin is unknowable, it is empty of meaning; it is "nothing". The trace is a necessary logical concept, but we must also say that metaphysically speaking "there is no originary trace" (Derrida, 1976:61). All metaphysical theories, according to Derrida, are efforts to give substance to the trace, but all such efforts are finally ineffectual: a metaphysical description of the trace remains ultimately beyond the bounds of thought and language.

What Derrida says about the concept of origins applies equally to the concept of ends. Just as there is no archeology of *origins* that leads to an ontology of being, so there is no teleology of *ends* that leads to an ontology of being. We cannot know the ultimate end of thought or language just as we cannot know the ultimate origin. Yet because the structure of thought and meaning is grounded in the structure of time, of the relation of past, present, and future, we cannot escape the concern with origins and ends. The differences that make thought and language possible are temporal as well as spatial, and the temporal order therefore structures the possibilities of thought. Thus, although the concepts of origin and end which have shaped Western metaphysics are necessary concepts, all of our efforts to understand them reveal our inability to give them substantive meaning. Our deep human need to seek out the origins and ends of our thinking leads us only to the radical indeterminacy of both the ultimate origin and the ultimate end. We live in the middle ground of history, whose beginning and ending are beyond our knowing.

In one of his narrative poems Robert Frost (1964) tells the story of a married couple who are moving to a new farm. The husband is worried about why they are moving and what will happen. He wonders why they ever considered moving. He says to his wife,

> 'I don't want to find out what can't be known.
> But who first said the word to come?'

His wife tries to reassure him by saying:

> 'My dear,
> It's who first thought the thought. You're searching, Joe,

For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings – there are no such things.
There are only middles.
("In the Home Stretch")

The poem has a kind of Derridean irony: in our philosophies we cannot know beginnings and ends but only middles. Yet we cannot escape our centuries-old quest to tease out some knowledge of both origins and ends.

I will not pursue Derrida's arguments further than this. I want now simply to say that on the points that I have broached I think that Derrida is right. On these points Derrida's analysis should not be considered a threat to Christian thinking, for while Christianity celebrates the proclamation of the Lamb who sits on the throne in Revelation: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Rev. 22:13), it does not claim to establish that message on the basis of philosophical argumentation. Derrida's demonstration of the limits of language and the limits of ontological argumentation does not undermine Christian theory but coincides with it. This is not to say that Derrida suddenly becomes a Christian apologist – that is far from the truth. It is simply to say that the biblical revelation of the Lamb as Alpha and Omega is to be explicated from the starting point of faith rather than of reason. Christianity fills the concepts of origin and end with the substance of faith even while Enlightenment reason and Derridean theory empty them of rationally grounded meaning.

But affirmations of faith do need to be explained and interpreted and defended. In this task the work of Paul Ricoeur provides what Charles Altieri (1990:28) calls a "contrastive strategy" to the strategy of Derrida. Ricoeur attempts to establish a basis for ontological thinking by considering the importance of ends (or teleology) for hermeneutical philosophy. In his essay "Existence and hermeneutics" Ricoeur posits three concerns or movements in a philosophy of interpretation. The first concern focuses on origins and on psychoanalytical analysis of the archeology of desire; the second concern focuses on ends or purposes and on phenomenological analysis of the teleology of the spirit; and the third concern focuses on signs of the sacred and on the phenomenology of religion (Ricoeur, 1974:21). It is the second of these concerns – the teleological – that I will examine briefly.

Ricoeur assumes that an understanding of teleology must be based on analysis of texts and is not provided directly by authorial intention. Nor is our understanding of a text to be based on our own *a priori* beliefs about the nature of existence. Texts exist independently of authors and readers; they are thus distantiated from *a priori* or originary assumptions about meaning. An under-

standing of the teleology or purpose of texts, therefore, depends on description and analysis of what is available to us in the texts we scrutinize. In this process, comparative studies of texts are important, for meanings are not self-contained in single isolated texts. The meaning of a single isolated text can be determined only if we can interpret its relationships to things outside the text. Meaning and understanding are dependent on the hermeneutical process of interpreting these relationships. Now, Ricoeur argues, if we make a leap from analysis of the teleology of texts to reflections on the teleology of all existence, we would require a comparable method. Thus, philosophical reflections on the end or purpose of existence as a whole would require the interpreter (philosopher) to engage in comparative studies of cultural life, for teleology "is constituted only in the movement of interpretation, which understands one figure through another figure" (Ricoeur, 1974:22). At the broadest level the understanding of teleology would lead to a full-scale enterprise involving the interpretation of all cultural texts. Ricoeur (1974:22) writes:

> It is the task of this [philosophical] hermeneutics to show that existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the signification that comes to light in the world of culture. Existence becomes a self – human and adult – only by appropriating this meaning, which first resides 'outside', in works, institutions, and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is objectified.

Completing this global task of interpretation is, of course, impossible, but Ricoeur is suggesting that through comparative studies of texts we at least have a means for significant reflection on origins and ends. If ultimate origins and ends elude the efforts of speculative reason, they are nevertheless important concepts in the interpretation of our literary and cultural texts.

Whereas Derrida wants to call into question all ontological descriptions of existence by showing that language prevents us from resolving the differences in our views of origins and ends, Ricoeur wants to take one step toward the development of an ontology of existence by arguing that our language nevertheless does enable us to reflect hermeneutically on our differences. He writes in "Creativity in language": "The stategy of metaphor [and we can add of narrative fictions and myth, i.e., literature] is heuristic fiction for the sake of redescribing reality. With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality" (Ricoeur, 1978:133). Ricoeur's full argument about how teleological analyses contribute to a conception of reality (or an ontology of existence) is complex and is not necessary for my purpose. I give this glimpse into Ricoeur only to say that his alternative to postmodern skepticism offers a direction for Christian thinking in a postmodern era and also suggests that reflections on teleology are an important part of such thinking

So much for the more abstract and philosophical contexts for our discussion of teleology. I return now to my effort to explore the implications of these ideas for literary criticism. Christian thinking, I said earlier, is teleological but not utopian, for we cannot know what the distant future has in store and we cannot achieve an ideal social order. The fallenness (sinfulness) of humanity is and always will be an inescapable condition of human life in a Christian view of human history. It has become clear to most thinkers today that Christian theology gives no support to the Enlightenment idea of progress that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sander Griffioen (1987:27) asserts in his essay *The Problem of Progress* that although we do need a theory of historical change and development, that theory must be freed from a false trust in the progress of Western culture. In all cultures, he observes, the opposition between good and evil (Jerusalem and Babylon) "is all-pervasive, so as to leave no room for cumulative progress". Christian teleology is not linked to the idea of progress that emerged from an idealized view of Western culture in prior centuries but to a set of ethical norms and beliefs that serve to guide Christian believers in their unending struggle against evil. Christianity holds implicitly to an open-ended view of history. It is intent on exploring possibilities of living in a world that is historically indeterminate, that is to say, indeterminate in the sense that the future cannot be known and in the sense that a definitive model for social and historical life cannot be detailed as a specific and realizable goal. What Christianity offers in this voyage into the unknown future is the guidance of a tradition and a coherent set of principles, principles that serve as directional signs both theoretically and practically.

This is the situation of all theories that are open-ended. No one lives in a cultural and historical vacuum, and all open-ended theories of history and time are accompanied with some conception of experience and history. Even post-modern skeptics who view all philosophical or religious worldviews with suspicion base their thinking about open-endedness on the temporal process of living, that is to say, experience, that is to say, history. The most common view of history among those who currently subscribe to open-endedness and indeterminacy is that the history of culture is a dialectic of power and liberation, of oppression and the struggle against oppression. But this principle itself functions as a teleological criterion for understanding history. No post-modernist as far as I am aware advocates more oppression or condemns movements toward liberation. There is, we may conclude, no view of life and history that is not teleological. Open-endedness and indeterminacy are not concepts opposed to teleology, and they are not *per se* concepts that are intrinsically opposed to Christian forms of thinking. If there are differences between Christian thought and many forms of postmodern thought, the

differences are to be found in the definitions and ramifications of open-endedness and indeterminacy, not in the concepts as such.

4. Teleology and story

In order to explore these differences, I would like to turn our attention now more specifically to the nature of stories. Stories are necessarily teleological. They begin with a situation within which characters must act. And since action moves forward in time, stories, in Frank Kermode's happy phrase, "educe the forms of a future" (1982:83). There is in every story a sense of an ending, a point toward which the action of the story moves. In a good story the ending seems to be inevitable, not in the sense that only one ending is possible but in the sense that the actions of the story emerge credibly from preceding actions. Stories, in other words, explore possibilities of action. At any point the action could go in several ways, though every action necessarily cuts off some of the possiblities for future actions. Every action both closes some possibilities and opens others. As a story grows, we want actions to grow believeably out of previous actions and situations, and we want new actions to fall within the range of believeable actions. And this pattern is the pattern of teleology: a sequencing of actions such that the story "educes the forms of a future" in a way that is credible. At any point the ending may not be determinate or predictable or knowable, but it must fall within the pattern that previous actions have established. In all stories open-endedness and teleology are companions.

I want now to insist a little more strongly that a Christian view of history is teleological in the sense that I am trying to clarify. I like to think of history as an exploration of possibilities. It is sometimes suggested that Christians can be confident about whatever happens because they know how history will end, namely with the second coming of Christ and the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth. But the term *end* is ambivalent here. We speak of end as conclusion and end as purpose, and these two meanings do not always coincide. One concerned with the "doctrine of the last things" would use the term *end* in the sense of conclusion whereas one concerned with teleology in general would use the term *end* in the sense of purpose. The second coming may be seen as the conclusion of history, but it need not be thought of as the purpose of history. In a certain theological sense, of course, the eschaton might be seen as the purpose of history, that is to say, the purpose of history is the final restoration of the creation order. But if we conflate eschatology (in the narrow sense) and teleology (in the sense of conclusion and purpose) and then as a consequence view the historical quest for a Christian life and society as a quest to emulate or realize the conditions of the "life hereafter", we create the possibility for a kind of escapism from history, a looking beyond to something that cannot happen in the here and now. In a Christian view, historical life can never achieve the

equivalent of the "life hereafter", and our need for historical realism, therefore, should not be obscured by a Christian idealism that places undue emphasis on the life hereafter.

If we use the term *purpose* in a more realistic and specific way to refer to human intentions and actions, then the purpose of history must be understood in the context of human actions within history as a pattern or projection of real historical possibilities. Certainly Christians can speak of God's purposes (revealed in Scripture as well as in nature and history) and of the end times, but the second coming and the life hereafter are not possibilities for life within history. From a human point of view, then, Christian teleology is concerned with future possibilites that are historical and therefore indeterminate and open-ended. A Christian view of history does not engage in predictions or programmatic images of the future, and it does not believe that an utopian society is a realizable ideal. It seeks to explore possibilities of action in relation to what is known about the past. This knowledge, of course, for Christians, involves the understanding of the past that comes through Scripture as well as through experience, but it is contained within and functions within the bounds of historical experience.

This teleological view of history, we may now say, conceives of history as a story – as the story that men and women create as they explore the possibilities of action in a world that God has made for them. The structure of history is the structure of a story. The difference between history and the stories we tell is that the story of history is always in process, never finished. It is a story therefore whose final ending in a teleological sense is not and cannot be known. We have a "sense of an ending" and we have a long sequence of previous actions to think about, but we do not know specifically what the state of human life will be like before the eschaton. As a matter of fact we cannot even project very far into the future.

Of course, we do try to see as far as we can into the future. As we live out the story of history, we "educe the forms of a future" according to our best judgments. We envision possibilities of action, and our living is an exploration of these possibilities. But we are left with exploration rather than certainty about historical possibilities. Christians can see into the immediate future no better than anyone else; they only look at history through different glasses, as John Calvin intimates (1949 [1559:I]:80).

While this view of teleology and history may seem less than confident about Christian action and judgment in the world, it is I believe a vigorous and hopeful application of the doctrine of creation. It infuses into this doctrine the energy of discovery and exploration and creativity; it welcomes participation in

the cultures of the world rather than denial or escape; it encourages us to continually create and explore new stories rather than to live as sardonic jurors or prosecutors of all stories other than our own. To explore the creation is to explore the possibilities that God has placed within the creation order, and to explore these possibilities is to explore the infinite ways for relating to and finding fellowship with the God of creation. If in creation God reveals himself and communes with his people, then all of history will not be long enough to exhaust the possiblities for knowing this God through his creation. The finite can never exhaust the infinite. Thus, the open-endedness of history is not a threat to Christian thinking; rather, it offers the opportunity to explore without end the world God gives us.

Unfortunately human beings after the fall are inclined to explore all of the dark and evil possibilities as well as the possibilities for light and goodness, and these explorations are the material of literature as well as of life. We learn from stories that explore the evils within our fallen and depraved selves and within the fallen creation as well as from the stories that envision the possibilities of goodness. But in spite of the potential for evil in life and literature, the open-endedness of history may be regarded first and foremost for Christians as an invitation to explore the inexhaustible wonders of God and his creation.

How do stories contribute to this end? In a story we envision a situation in which characters act, and in following a course of action we are in effect considering the plausibility and desirability of the characters' choices. Stories imagine, or project, ways of acting in given situations. As Wayne Booth (1988:71) writes in *The Company We Keep*, "Every appraisal of narrative is implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and what we have known before". We are drawn to stories because they enable us to reflect on possibilities of action, and we respond to them favourably when they open up for us new ways of imagining and thinking about human action. The value of stories (literature) is in the final analysis that they help us to reflect on possible directions for our own actions in our own historical stories.

Telling stories in literature is but a sophisticated, complex, and aesthetically pleasing way of doing what we all do throughout our lives. As Carr (1986:61) writes:

> The actions and sufferings of life can be viewed as a process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories, and acting them out or living them through. And here I am thinking only of living one's own life, quite

apart from the social dimension, both cooperative and antagonistic, of our action, which is even more obviously intertwined with narration.

Our communications with one another consist primarily of the stories we tell, whether they narrate actual, imagined, or dreamed events, or whether they interpret past events. Often we tell the same story in different ways (as in a court of law) so that we can decide what to think or what to do about given situations. But more often perhaps we store up the stories we hear so that when certain situations arise we can recall the stories and use them as guides for the decisions or actions we need to take. When it is time to act, we refer to the stories we have heard. How do I change a flat tire? How do I apply for a passport? What is the best way to catch rainbow trout? Almost all of our actions are guided by our memory of stories we have heard. And if we are uncertain about what to do, we go out looking for stories from people who have gone through the same circumstances or have performed similar actions. What is the best way to travel from the U.S. to South Africa? What is it like for an American to spend time at an Afrikaans-speaking university? Through hearing the stories of others, we envision possibilities for our own lives; from these stories we "educe the forms for a future".

The stories that we call literature are not, to be sure, as immediately practical as the ordinary stories of everyday life, but their purpose and value are fundamentally the same. The teleology implicit in stories helps us to deal with the teleology of our own lives, not in a prescriptive way and perhaps not in ways that are characterized by immediate application and finality. But our actions and questions range from the immediacy of traveling to a new place to the broad issues of relating to other people, to nature, and to God. Somewhere in the range of these actions and questions stories speak to us, offering possibilities for thinking and acting in our own situations. Consciously or not, we are in effect asking the following question: Given these stories, what are the possible and desirable ways of acting in similar situations?

The stories we tell and hear do not, of course, "move" us to action in the way that Sir Philip Sidney believed (1991:123). That assumption is the basic fallacy of Sidney's position. If stories really did compel or determine actions, then, like Sidney, we would have to be very much concerned about developing and praising only those stories that promote virtue. But stories offer possibilities, not directives. Through the telling of stories we envision possibilities for action, and through the comparisons we make among stories we gain insight into our own stories.

If we think about stories in this way, a way that brings together the teleology of stories and the teleology of our own lives in history, a way of viewing the ethics

of literary study is evident. The end of literature is not the discovery of universal moral truths and values; it is the exploration of possible ways of acting in historically specific situations.

5. Implications for Christian literary theory

The implications of this view need to be drawn out a bit further for a Christian theory of literature. And so I conclude with three points.

First, Christian readers can be as open as anyone else to all stories. This point can be put even more emphatically: Christians need to be open to all stories because they are engaged in exploring the possibilities of living in history. To read and imaginatively empathize with nonchristian stories is important, because in order to develop and enrich their own stories, Christians need to know and reflect on all the stories that human beings imagine. This openness is also important because Christians need to listen to and assess the stories of others. All human beings participate in constant cultural interactions with other members of society, and critical evaluations of and responses to literature are of value only if readers are truly hearing and understanding the stories they encounter.

Second, if stories serve the ends that I have been discussing, then it is important for a Christian critic to think religiously about stories and, even more strongly, to let religious thinking be the basis for literary judgments. If stories grow out of experiences in real life and if they serve the purpose of "educing the forms of a future", they are contained within the larger story of history. At the end of his novel *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren (1959:438) writes that Jack Burden and Anne Stanton, now married, go "out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time". The burden of all stories is that they create situations and characters out of the materials of life (history) and project possibilities for acting that are relevant to our own exploration of life. The study and evaluation of literature cannot at its most significant point be separated from the responsibilities of time. And since for the Christian critic the perspective on history and the responsibilities of time are profoundly religious, the ultimate framework for literary understanding, too, is the religious perspective of Christian faith. Even though propositional truth may not be the primary end of literature, Christian literary critics need to be religiously and theologically astute, since the religious story is the large story of history within which our smaller stories occur. As Hans Frei (1974:130) argues, our stories must fit into the world that the Bible describes. The way we interpret our smaller stories is dependent on how we interpret the larger one. The smaller stories also of course influence how we think about the larger one,

but it is still the case that we do not understand our smaller literary stories apart from our understanding of the larger religious one.

Third, though I have been advocating and offering a basis for the Christian critic's concern with religious and ethical values in the study of literature, I have attempted to avoid dogmatism and censorship. These two weaknesses in what passes for Christian criticism grow out of and imply a closed view of history, a view that wants to believe that universal Christian values can be fully packaged and accompanied with a set of easy instructions for use. I hope that these reflections on the end or teleology of literature on the one hand offer a basis for being open in the fullest sense to the reading and study of literature and on the other hand reveal the need for doing literary criticism within the bounds of religion (cf., Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* – 1976). To paraphrase (and reverse the thought of) Matthew Arnold's (1991:358-59) famous statement about literature and religion: *We may need to think of Christian literary criticism more worthily than we have done so far, for more and more people should discover that we have to turn to religion to interpret life and literature for us. Without religion, our literary criticism will seem to be incomplete. Literary criticism as we know it can be enriched and made more useful by a truly Christian criticism.*

A Christian criticism that is principial and internally coherent needs a theory that accounts for the relationship of literature to life; and that points, among other things, to the need to rethink the nature and implications of teleology as a historical and ethical concept. The need is for an ethical criticism that is based on a teleological understanding of historical life. The challenge for Christian critics is to acknowledge the contributions of postmodern thinkers to the philosophical debates about time and history, language and rationality, truth and ethics, while at the same time maintaining the coherence of a historical Christianity. To do that may require a refurbished understanding of history and ethics and an exploration of how that understanding can refocus the aims of Christian literary criticism.

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