

Literary Friendship, Dinosaurs, and Retrieving Our Literary Legacy

by Donald T. Williams

"Use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs."¹

When I was in seminary in the mid-seventies (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), I had the privilege of sitting at the feet of the great J. I. Packer. He gave a church-history course on Puritanism where we received in oral form the notes that eventually became the book *A Quest for Godliness* (2022).² I remember thinking to myself, "Our professor speaks of Jonathan Edwards, Richard Baxter, John Owen, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Boston, and William Perkins as if they were his personal friends—and he knows them well enough to do so!" And I said to myself, "I want to be like that—with these men, and with Luther and Calvin, and with Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton too!" I would later add Homer, Sophocles, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Virgil to the list. It has kept growing ever since.

It is a metaphor, of course. One cannot literally be personal friends with people who died centuries before one's own life. But what Packer had done, and what I wanted to do, was to absorb their works, in the context of their times, so truly and thoroughly and sympathetically that it would be an *appropriate* metaphor. My life has been enriched beyond measure to the extent that I have succeeded in that quest.

From this experience emerge three theses about literary friendship. One: I cannot think of any other approach to literary study that is worth taking. Two: Therefore, any ideology, any "critical theory" that tells you it is impossible is to be rejected out of hand as a betrayal of writers and their readers. Three: Therefore, the Old Western Men and dinosaurs who can help you pursue it are the teachers you want to follow above all others.

Literary Friendship

One: I cannot think of any other approach to literary study that is worth taking. My first conscious awareness of the phenomenon that Packer brought into focus as literary friendship was the result of my high-school English teachers' best efforts to prevent any such thing from ever happening. In fairness to them, they taught me English grammar very thoroughly, something their successors somehow neglected to do for my college freshmen. But, on the other hand, they did their level best to make me conceive of reading literature as an effete exercise in pointless puzzle solving. Fortunately for me, Robert Frost had gotten to me first.³

In my sophomore year of high school, a sequence of events played out for which I have been forever grateful. There was a weekend hike in the woods of the Northeast Georgia mountains that set me up for my first reading of Frost's "The Road not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which set me up for the discussion of those poems that took place in class on Monday. My most fundamental ideas about the nature, purpose, and study of literature were etched on my mind that day.

It was a perfect fall morning with the bright sun glinting off the yellow leaves that were sifting through the air like snowflakes. I was hiking the trail that follows the Tallulah River up ever deeper into the hills, utterly enchanted by the beauty that surrounded me and drawn on by the lure of what lay around the

next bend—for the hills and the creek leaping down them were steeper and wilder and more compelling with each step.

But I was under strict parental orders to be back to our campsite by a set time so we could get back home in time for my dad to make it to second shift on his job. So there came that moment when, though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I had to turn around and head back. And I became aware in a new way in that moment of the finitude of time, of how it makes choices matter, and how the limits it places on our enjoyment of nature and its beauty make them all the more valuable. I became aware in a new way of the mystery of life.

Step two in the sequence was doing my English prep when I got back, which providentially was to read the two poems of Frost—those precise two poems! The roads in his yellow wood diverged to right or left, while mine presented the choice of going onward or back. The choice and the difference it makes, though, were potently parallel. The speaker in the snowy wood and I in my yellow one both wanted to stay longer, but we both had promises to keep. I knew nothing about Robert Frost, not even that he had just died a few years earlier. But I knew that if we ever met and got to talking about walking in the woods, we would understand each other. The insight I had groped for but could not then put into words, he had put into words.

A budding literary friendship: The nodded heads of mutual understanding

were there.⁴ And they provided as a bedrock foundation the conviction that poetry could be an act of communication from author to reader that made literary friendship an appropriate metaphor.

Why is literary friendship an appropriate metaphor? For me, the answer goes like this: If in meeting you I say to myself, “This person loves the right things for the right reasons and can therefore help me love them better,” I will want you as a friend. What are the right things? Truth, goodness, and beauty. If you love them and can help me see more of them, I want to be your friend. And if you lived years ago and you can only do that through a book you left behind—well, I’m not going to make you an exception for a trivial reason like *that!* I will make as much of a friend of you as I can.

Step three was English class the next day. Our teacher wanted us not to be satisfied with a surface understanding. In this she did well. But her approach had unintended consequences deadly to the very possibility of the kind of literary friendship that can make someone a lifelong reader. “Stopping by Woods,” she said, looks like a simple poem about nature. But it’s *really* about . . . a death wish. The woods are lovely, dark, and deep. And the speaker has miles to go before he sleeps. So the wood represents death and its freedom from the hassles (“promises”) of life. Right. Most of us could not see it at that point, but we had to pretend to if we wanted a good grade. You see the problem?

Now, I want it to be clear that I have no issue with the teacher’s interpretation. It is not without merit. My problem is with the way she presented it. The poem looks like it is about A, but it is really about B? I could not yet explain why, but thanks to Frost I already knew better. No, the poem really is about watching the snow fall in the woods. If you get no more out of it than that, you have gotten something real and important—indeed, the most real and important thing that is there. If the poem is also about anything else, it is so by virtue of what it says about the snow and the woods; if there is another meaning, we reach it legitimately only by attending to the snow and the woods as if they were there for their own sake—not as a mere disguise for something else. Probably without intending to, our teacher was asking us to treat the poem as a puzzle we had to solve, not as a medium of shared experience that might have implications, as many experiences do, for something beyond itself. The nodded head, the shared experience, the metaphorical literary friendship disappears and is replaced by an imposed exercise in puzzle solving. It is no surprise that most of my classmates, who had not been protected against this bait and switch by the sequence of events I had just been through, became people to whom poetry was pretty much irrelevant for the rest of their lives.

Yes: literary friendship is the only approach to the study of literature worth taking. It allows for all the analysis, all the pursuit of symbolism into which our

teacher wanted to initiate us, but keeps it healthy and humane. And it gives us a good way of evaluating that analysis. If analysis of structure, context, resonance, symbolism, or what have you deepens the friendship, that is a good sign; if it leads away from it and turns the shared experience into a mere puzzle, not so much.

Critical Theory

Thesis two: Literary friendship is the only approach worth taking. Therefore, any ideology, any “critical theory” that tells you such literary friendship is impossible is to be rejected out of hand as a betrayal of writers and their readers. There was a disconnect between the good my English teacher wanted to do with her teaching and its actual effect. Why? Because she had a theory of what literature is and how it works that did not completely match the reality. Yes, our contemporary critics are right: theory matters. But they are horribly wrong about the theories they hold, and just as wrong when they classify as “resistance to theory” any position that thinks they have the wrong ones.⁵

The theory my high-school teachers followed was called “New Criticism.” New Criticism dominated the study of English and American literature in this country from the 1930s through the 1970s. Starting in the 1980s, it began to give way to Deconstruction and the other forms of postmodern “critical theory” that have dominated since and all but destroyed the humane value of literary study. New Criticism was vastly superi-

or to what replaced it, but we will not fully understand it or the current ideology unless we see that it opened the door to the destruction that followed.

The virtue of New Criticism was that it was based on a real truth: A literary text is a work of art and ought to be studied as such. Its weakness was the way it pushed that truth to an extreme that caused it to buckle into a self-contradictory lie.

“English” was a relatively new subject in Britain and America at the end of the nineteenth century. Before that, you studied Latin and Greek, or maybe French and German literature in college. It was felt that nobody needed to go to school to study his *own* literature—educated people would naturally do that on their own! When British and American literature became a school subject, its teachers floundered around for a while trying to figure out what to do with it. There was much concentration on the life of the author or his philosophy—important and interesting things, no doubt, but were they what literature is about? The New Critics argued that literature needed to be studied *as literature*, as a collection of works of art that had their own techniques and rules that needed to be understood to fully appreciate them. The focus was on aesthetic experience more than ideas, on structure and technique more than content. The New Critics also defended literature as a legitimate source of its own kind of knowledge, different from but not inferior to science. In all of this, as far as it goes, they told the truth.

Two key contributions of New Criticism have remained influential. First is the technique of “close reading,” minute analysis of the details of a text in terms of its structure, figures of speech, etc. This was the legitimate application of New Criticism’s valid insight that literature is an art form. Unfortunately, its influence did not stop there. Second is the concept of the “Intentional Fallacy.” Overreacting to the equation of literary study with knowledge of the author’s biography in the previous period, the New Critics insisted that the work of literary art be studied as an artifact in itself, an aesthetic structure independent of its author once created. Looking for the author’s “intention” was held to be an irrelevant distraction in the process of interpretation. It became a “fallacy” of interpretation even to consider what the author’s intention might have been.

But wait: Did New Critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley,⁶ John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks *intend* for us to ignore the author’s intention when they wrote their own works advising us to do so? Ahem. They certainly did, and we as their readers know that they did. This self-contradiction at the heart of one of their key dogmas should have told them that something was amiss: they had pushed their valid insight a step too far. Yes, the text is an artifact with a life of its own; yes, only its own language and structure can tell us what it means. But to act as if the person who wrote those words and created those structures is irrelevant to why they are there and what they are trying to do is to undermine our

own ability to talk about them—because then the meaning we intend when we write about them can’t count either. And that is what ultimately reduces a poem to a puzzle.

Apart from the points at which they overreacted to previous errors, the New Critics made a permanent valuable contribution in reminding us that literature is an art form. It may be more, but it is never less. Unfortunately, their error had at least as much influence on the next generation as their sound teaching did. The intentional fallacy acted as a catalyst to intensify the chemical reactions of anti-didacticism and anti-authoritarianism that were already going on in the modern world and completely poisoned the literary well.

The modern world became the post-modern world when the wall erected by New Criticism between text and author kept growing taller and thicker until it fell over and killed both the text and the author. Our current critics take as a *fait accompli* “the death of the author.”⁷ Postmodern critics believe with Derrida that language leads only to other language and never connects with the objective world (“There is nothing outside the text”), and with Foucault that, since objective truth is no longer conceivable, truth claims are and can be nothing more than disguised attempts to assert power over others.⁸ Because literature cannot have an objective meaning given to it by its author, it becomes just one more political battleground where Dead White European Males (DWEMS) try to impose their antiquated and oppressive

values on unsuspecting readers and are resisted by the brave, revolutionary Deconstructionist with his liberating Feminist/Marxist agenda.

Now, here's something about this constellation of approaches that has not been sufficiently noticed. It makes literary friendship impossible. How can you be friends with someone who is trying to impose outmoded values on you and ensnare you in false consciousness? We call it the "hermeneutic of suspicion" for a reason. Suspicion and friendship are incompatible. Your friends are not now the writers who invite you into a shared experience of truth, goodness, and beauty which their literary skill has preserved from their past. Now they must be your contemporaries, your allies in the revolution, the rebellion against all of that.

This mentality undermines the study of literature as literature on multiple levels. Not only does it make the kind of literary friendship I've been talking about inconceivable; it makes even textual analysis pointless and impossible. A century and a half ago Matthew Arnold said that the purpose of criticism was to "see the object as in itself it really is," and on the basis of that vision to "learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."⁹ If these goals are quaint and naïve because they are out of reach by their very nature, as current theory would tell you, then textual analysis is pointless. It is just a meaningless word game that can never take you closer to hearing your friend accurately and understanding him faithfully. Well, isn't

that what deconstruction does—supposedly shows how the language itself undercuts its own meaning?

Anyone who tells you that you cannot get closer to hearing your friend accurately and understanding him faithfully because it's a moving target (since meaning is endlessly deferred, as Derrida put it), anyone who discourages you from even attempting it in those terms, is your enemy. He is the enemy of sound learning and good letters. He has abandoned the search for truth by building everything on the self-contradiction that goes all the way back to the intentional fallacy. Do not listen to him except to expose his perfidy.

We need to rally to our friends, the authors who loved truth, goodness, and beauty and our contemporaries who are their friends. How can we do so? That is where dinosaurs come in.

Dinosaurs

All right, then. Literary friendship is worth pursuing; don't let anyone tell you that you can't pursue it. Thesis three: Therefore, the Old Western Men and dinosaurs who can help you pursue literary friendship are the teachers you want to follow above all others. Dinosaurs? Where does that metaphor come from?

C. S. Lewis compared himself to a dinosaur in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. As an "Old Western Man," he was a throwback, able to help moderns understand the ancients because in many ways he himself was still native to the world they had in-

habited. Even back then, he recognized himself as a member of a dying breed. His description of himself was accurate on more than one level. “We have lived to see the second death of ancient learning,” he wrote. “If one were looking for a man who could not read Virgil though his father could, he might be found more easily in the twentieth century than the fifth.”¹⁰

Lewis read *The Aeneid* in Latin for pleasure right up to the time of his death. I can struggle through Virgil’s Latin profitably, but for extended reading I am dependent on translations. The next generation of English professors probably won’t give you that much familiarity with the foundational background texts. But it is not just familiarity with texts. The ability sympathetically to imagine foreign ways of seeing the world is also a victim of our current system. Lewis noted that “Christians and pagans had much more in common with each other than either has with a post-Christian.”¹¹

Lewis, in other words, was a person who could stand in the gap. He could introduce you to literary friends you might otherwise have missed, and he could help you to a relationship with them that might otherwise have been out of reach. He had laid the foundation of literary friendship in his own life. He had done supremely well what I defined as that life in the beginning of this essay: He had absorbed authors’ works, in the context of their times, truly and thoroughly and sympathetically. He had done the academic work required to put him in a position to do that, and he had

reaped the fruits of that work and made them available to others as skillfully as it can be done. It made him a dinosaur in his own day. Now that English Professors no longer even think of such things as their job, he is doubly a dinosaur in ours. And that is exactly why we want him and others like him as our friends.

Our two metaphors—friends and dinosaurs—come together in terms of the chapter on friendship in Lewis’s book *The Four Loves*. Two may be the ideal number for Eros, he writes, but not necessarily for friendship. Lovers look at each other, standing face to face, but friends stand side by side looking together at something else, something that they both love in common. If of three friends, A, B, and C, A dies, then “B loses not only A but A’s part in C.”¹² With Charles gone, Lewis will never again see Ronald’s response to Charles. As a result, he has, not more, but less, of Ronald. Mutual friendships based on the same shared love are enriching in ways that transcend the math of adding the third or the fourth person. It is more like multiplication than addition. Anyone who has had the privilege of knowing a really good *group* of friends will appreciate the truth in these observations.

They apply to literary friendships too. We not only want to get to know great writers as literary friends; we also want contemporary friends (shall we call them “literal friends”?) who share that relationship with us. Just listen to the conversation whenever two great lovers of *The Lord of the Rings* get together!¹³ If some of these friends have real expertise

and can become our best teachers and professors, all the better. And we also want a third kind: friends like Lewis who are themselves literary, not literal, friends, but who can also introduce us to their own literary friends and help us to pursue those relationships. Then I can enjoy, say, Milton's part in Jack, and Jack's in Milton, and how all of that is reflected in you, my literal friend.

This is why you cannot read a great book without wanting to talk about it and why talking about it with the right people is so important. Let the conversations not be broken. Let them continue and let them deepen. What else are friends for?¹⁴

Donald T. Williams is Professor Emeritus of Toccoa Falls College. A border dweller, he stays permanently camped out on the borders between serious scholarship and pastoral ministry, theology and literature, Narnia and Middle-Earth. He is the author of fourteen books, including *Answers from Aslan: The Winsome Apologetics of C. S. Lewis* (DeWard, 2023).

1. C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969): 14.
2. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990).
3. The story is told in more detail in my book *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters*, 2nd ed. (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2012): 6-11, cf. 173-84.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955), 130.
5. See Paul DeMan, "Resistance to Theory," 1982; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, Leroy Searle. (Boston: Thompson, Wadsworth, 2005): 1317-27.

6. W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," 1966; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, Leroy Searle, 1026-34.
7. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1977; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, 1255-58.
8. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," 1977; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, Leroy Searle, 1269-79.
9. Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," 1867; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, 3rd ed., ed. Hazard Adams, Leroy Searle (Boston: Wadsworth, 2005), 587, 98.
10. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 5.
12. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1960), 92.
13. For more of that conversation, see Donald T. Williams, *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2018).
14. For more on the joys and fruits of reading, see Donald T. Williams, *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Reading*, 2nd ed., op. cit.