

James Moffett's Lit Crit and Holy Writ

Edited by Charles Suhor

James Moffett, a major figure in educational and rhetorical theory and a co-founder of AEPL, died in 1996. One of his last appearances was at the first annual AEPL conference in Estes Park, Colorado, in August 1995. At that time he brought new perspectives to the influential ideas articulated in works like Teaching the Universe of Discourse, the Active Voices series, and Coming on Center. With the encouragement of AEPL leaders and Jim's wife Jan, I worked from transcriptions of the keynote session to produce this record of his ever-evolving ideas. I did not try to recast the informal presentation into an academic style. Readers who knew the gentle cadence of James Moffett's speech will be warmly reminded of his presence as they read the text. Those who were not fortunate enough to know him might get a sense of the spirit of the man from the rhythm of his talk.

—CS

Well, what I would start today is something called “Literature and Holy Writ,” or sometimes, “Lit Crit and Holy Writ.” Anyway, we’ll focus on literature, or on literary criticism. I’m going to start with some similarities that have occurred to me, and maybe they’ve occurred to you, between literature and spirituality and the role of English teachers. I’ve always felt that English teachers were the soul-tenders of the curriculum. I’m not saying there aren’t soul-tenders in other subjects; to be sure there are. But this is more; it goes with the territory, perhaps, of English teaching.

It’s interesting that somewhere in the 19th century, in American schools English came in as a separate subject—it wasn’t a separate subject before—and religion as a subject went out. It wouldn’t be quite accurate to think of one supplanting the other. We would say it was a coincidence. But, in any case, what happened is that English came in about the time religion went out.

It’s interesting that church services and English classes have certain things in common. You’re all laughing, aren’t you? Well, I’ll see if this fits with what’s in your mind. Both use a liturgy. That is, the liturgy in the English classroom is

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the performing of texts—vocalizing texts out loud, which caricatures, if you want, or parallels, some of the church services where there are antiphonal things going on between the minister or reader and the congregation; or simply, they're all together vocalizing, either reciting or reading or singing. All right, so there's something liturgical that goes on in English classrooms, from taking texts to vocalizing them, performing them, whether it's poetry reading or reading of plays or whatever.

The other main thing that goes on in both is exegesis—typical commentary, analysis, interpretation, construing of the texts. In the church, of course, the minister does a lot of that, takes the sermons for the day and interprets the passage, sometimes in great detail. And the literary hierophants do something like that—teachers who tell you what the passage is about, or the short story—the explication of text. So I'm saying there's a direct connection between exegesis, which is the explanation and interpretation of holy writ, and the interpretation that's traditional with literary texts—a very direct parallel. I think that people good at one tend to be good at the other one.

Also, I think there are some direct parallels in kinds of lessons, concepts of lessons. I started teaching in prep school back East. In the old times there, if you asked them how many times a week their classes met, they said, "We have three recitations a week." *Recitation* was a synonym for *class*. The whole concept of memorizing and reciting, I think, goes back to church techniques of teaching. There were people who virtually memorized the Bible or long passages of it and recited it.

The whole concept of themes goes back, I think, to the assignment of writing topics called themes. I know you don't assign these anymore, but we know that's in our tradition, where the teacher decides what you're to write on or what's an assignment. There's a book, a Buddhist book, of meditation themes. The Jesuits in the Christian tradition had a whole series of themes that was appropriate to meditate on involving the phases of the life of Christ. [. . .] So I think the idea of themes was somewhat preconceived by the establishment, either the Church or the school. It's sort of a design for meditation; for the writer, the assignment is a parallel. I think we took over some of these things very consciously.

In certain concepts of "canon" there's another similarity—what's in and what's out—literary canon. I mean, why did we pick that term? Say, you are the hierophants of literature: we are to literature as they are to religion. Of course, there's a canon that's apocryphal—all the stuff that's left out as being unworthy. Well, most of the world's writing is apocryphal, as far as that goes.

Those are some parallels that occur to me between the teaching of literature and the teaching of holy writ. And both are basically incantatory. The first Vedas are really poems. There's a lot of poetry certainly, in the Bible, in the original particularly. I think this kind of writing is meant to be incantatory: it's meant to be literally *entranced*. We use terms now in a romantic vocabulary like *entrancing*, *spellbinding*, and so on. Those all had a literal meaning which we've romanticized and trivialized—part of a natural, sort of, debasing process.

But I think the reason that both holy writ and literature acquire so much exegesis is that they are multi-leveled texts, working on many different levels, one of which is incantatory (as well as semantic), dealing with their rhythm, their

poetry in a rather basic sense. In fact, the first holy writ, it seems to me, is always poetic.

You get more into the poetry as you get more into exegesis. I don't know Jewish traditions very well, but my understanding is that the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, is basic holy writ. And the Talmud consists of a sort of exegesis on the Torah, and the Midrashim, a sort of exegesis on both the Talmud and the Torah. And the Vedas had the Upanishads later—they take the Vedas and explicate. And later on you had the Mahabharata and things like that which are still working over basic material, going back to the Vedas.

Or you can take whatever holy writ you want. For the Greeks, it's got to be mythology, genealogy of the gods [. . .] and then Homer. Of course, Plato himself became the subject of exegesis. The Neo-Platonists regarded him as holy writ. When we say all philosophy footnotes Plato, we're saying what they were saying—we're in a way regarding it as holy writ, which needs to be enhanced; all the seed ideas have to be explicated through exegesis. But that's because these texts, literature and holy writ, are what they are. The nature of them is different from other texts—they are multi-leveled.

Moving now to the lit-crit-holy-writ, I think you could see an outsider from another planet coming onto what we call literary criticism and wondering—what's so literary about it? It seems to me it's cultural criticism, social criticism. It's theological, sometimes. And my understanding from people that are far more into lit crit than I am is that its modernness sort of dates from Nietzsche, who was a great cultural critic—but also on all planes at once psychological, cultural, theological, and metaphysical—who said “God is dead.” Well, once God is dead, you can't fool around with holy writ any more. What are you going to work with? What secular version?—Literature. And so, from then on, it's not overtly theological or religious, it's literary -critical.

Then you have Freud coming along interpreting literature in his way, the unconscious. And he tried hard to be a really good materialist—poignantly hard. Outwardly, he succeeded. [But] I think he was a very spiritual person. And to me his insights were from his literature and from a kind of spiritual understanding. [. . .] But his reading of literature is a big part of modern literary criticism.

But what I'm saying is that [lit crit] is really a kind of secular continuation of what used to be religious, theological, metaphysical, cosmological concerns. And, once God is dead, the modern person has to do this through other texts, in other ways. And this, in a way, has elevated literature in modern consciousness to a place superseding holy writ.

The art of hermeneutics has made much today, rightly, out of very sophisticated, subtle, exquisite kinds of analysis and interpretation, really grounded in Alexandria, the first century or so. There was a tremendous ferment of this great multicultural seat where there was Philo Judaeus, who's really the father of this subtle, metaphysical hermeneutics. He was interpreting the Old Testament, Jewish traditions, in very far-out ways, very extreme, radical interpretations, of the Old Testament.

At the same time, the New Testament was being written—first and second century. In this atmosphere the Gnostics were very active in Alexandria [. . .] Hellenistic thinking, Neo-Platonists; and Origen, the great Christian theologian

of the second century, was going to the same school as Plotinus, which is stemming again from Philo Judaeus—a very subtle, sophisticated, metaphysical, hermeneutic interpretation of text.

So you had these pagan Hellenistic exegetes, the Jewish exegetes, and the Christian writing. The New Testament you can regard as an exegesis on the Old Testament. You know Christ and others in there referred to things in the Old Testament. And then in between the two essentially is holy writ, maybe, but it's holy writ bordering on itself being exegesis.

I think of two of our great literary critics in our era who recognized part of what I'm trying to say. One was Northrop Frye whose culminating work was *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. (He's an ordained minister, by the way, did you know that?); and Kenneth Burke—*The Rhetoric of Religion*—which I touched on briefly in *Harmonic Learning*. With all his complicated analogies between literature and holy writ, Frye is offering the scripture as a basic way to understand the literature and the notion of holy writ as a master code by which to understand language and literature. Now that's exactly the way the Muslims have always regarded the Koran. Everything goes back to the Koran in [their] literature and language, not just the religion.

Kenneth Burke said the best way to understand verbalization is to look to theology, the supreme model, because, through words referring to the natural world, it manages to refer to the supernatural world. And this is why he's saying the rhetoric of religion has the most to teach us about any language or literature. So I want to remind you of those critics.

And what I'm saying is there's a code, the code that Northrop Frye is talking about. He's absolutely right: it's in the scripture. But that scripture's generally understood exoterically, and it's difficult to understand entirely what it's about. You have to bring in the esoteric dimension, and I think, if we understand the esoteric literature, we have the “code to the code.”

I'll get personal for a moment—my own literary way of getting onto the spiritual path. I grew up in Mississippi among Southern Baptists. They weren't the most fundamental kind. We were in the city of Jackson; out in the country they were really far out. But, anyway, I grew up a Southern Baptist. Later, when I got into college, none of that made any sense to me. I turned my back on all of it. And, of course, down there it was mixed with racism and all sorts of things, and I could begin to see the contradictions, and so I just rejected all of it. Then later, I was a young teacher, and I was reading Salinger in *The New Yorker*, back in the days before most of you can remember, when Salinger was writing routinely in *The New Yorker*. And “Franny and Zooey” and those stories were coming out. And we waited breathlessly, we intellectuals in the fifties, for the next issue of *The New Yorker*.

Anyway, he was dealing in a very popular literature, very vernacular in style, and so on. He was dealing with real spiritual issues in a way I hadn't run into before in my time. It was not called religion, and so, you know, I could accept that. [Franny was] repeating this prayer of the heart, which she got from a book called *The Way of the Pilgrim*, which is repeating an old Christian mantra, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

He was in touch, Salinger was. He had a way of understanding spiritual is-

sues and how they come up for contemporary folk. She [Franny] is throwing up in the ladies' room, and the readers are wondering, "Is she pregnant or not?" See the next issue of *The New Yorker*. Or, "Is she throwing up because of the awful things this guy's saying to her during dinner?" But he related these contemporary behaviors to real spiritual issues, and he brought in Zen. I had never heard of Zen before. So I got to reading Zen from reading Salinger.

Okay, so we see the progression from literature, sort of, back to spiritual sources. And I didn't really understand. Zen, of course, itself means literally "meditation." But I didn't know what meditation was, so I didn't know what Zen was. And I read it for years. But it improved me, I think; it was worth it. But this is one way in which, through literature as a secular holy writ, I got interested again (despite my earlier youth) in the spiritual path and spiritual issues.

Another way—this is going to involve a handout I'm giving (See Appendix A). When I was teaching at Exeter prep school—I was there for ten years at the beginning of my career—there was no curriculum. There was nothing I had to do. I was teaching my first year; I could do anything I wanted. Private school, no state curriculum. There wasn't even a departmental curriculum. They just said, "Look, if you read Julius Caesar do it second year, because we don't want kids reading it two years in a row." I mean, THAT'S the departmental policy. And there were no textbooks, no grammar books. And this was great tremendous freedom, except that also you are really scrambling in your first year of teaching—though I could get help when I wanted it.

But, anyway, I was trying to work out a lot of teaching—of short stories, fiction, and teaching writing and literature at the same time. There were all boys at Exeter in those days; it's gone coed since. I was trying to work on some way of structuring the course a little bit so there'd be some sense to the order in which we did things. And I thought, "Well, you're going to have them read a lot of fiction; should it be totally random?"

I eschewed completely thematic connections—that's predigesting the literature for them. And I didn't want only plot, theme, character. I was trying to find some way to get continuity for them without relying on things that I didn't believe in. So I started arranging short stories by point of view, first and third person and the like. At the same time, and this was part of it, I was writing fiction and playing around with points of view considerably. [. . .]

I was trying to use writing in my life, so I was very interested in the differences between coming on something first-person or third-person—or theatre, no narrator at all. So I was interested in that for personal reasons, but also as a professional trying to find good ways of teaching the students. So over a number of years I evolved this kind of spectrum of points of view, which you have there in schematic form (Appendix A). Some of you may be familiar with the anthology, *Points of View*. The only reason I'm going back to this is that I have some new overlays in recent times that are more germane to the subject today. The spectrum—what you have there—is a table of contents of a revision of an anthology of short stories, *Points of View*, which Ken McElheny and I brought out in 1966. It's been going since. We revised it recently because it very badly needed a more multicultural representation.

The arrangement of the stories was meant to be itself an experience beyond

the great experience of each story individually. And this goes back to trying to find a way to put things in some sort of relationship, instead of just ending up reading samples of fiction randomly. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with randomness, but I was a young teacher trying to find some way to order them.

This is a spectrum, it turns out, delineating more things than I knew at the time. I'll tell you about what I was thinking of when we first put the book out. The stories start with interior and dramatic monologue. It's rather hard, as a matter of fact to find short stories that attempt these because they really belong to the theatre. Interior monologue, the soliloquy, dramatic monologue is very common in theatre, you know, going back to Greek drama which routinely alternated soliloquies, colloquies, dramatic monologues, and so on. In interior monologue you are simply overhearing somebody's thoughts.

Dramatic monologue—you're overhearing one person talking uninterruptedly to another. And those have been ways to tell short stories, but fairly rarely because they tend to be claustrophobic. And there have been authors who sustained entire novels. In fact, one that suggested interior monologue to James Joyce was a French novel, about 1887, Edouard Dujardin, an entire novel very expertly done with interior monologue; Joyce knew of that. He translated this "We'll to the Woods No More." A literal translation is "The laurel trees have been cut down" (*Les Lauriers Sont Coupés*). But that's a kind of *Cherry Orchard* symbolizing. You might want to know about this because very rarely do authors attempt whole novels in interior monologue.

Dramatic monologue—Eudora Welty did one called *The Ponder Heart*. Camus' *The Fall* is entirely dramatic monologue. But they are sort of rare. From hereon in the spectrum, these purport to be documents, purport to be letters, series of letters, an exchange of letters, or to be a series of entries in a journal or a diary. These are a lot more commonly found as short stories or whole books.

Then a segue from that on into a first person narration that you can call "subjective." That is, most readers would agree—of course you're in a gray area—would agree that the narrator herself's conversation is missing something, that is, telling a story other than what she really thinks, which is of course true of all of them up to now, all of these called subjective narrative. That is, we're not sure we can rely on what the narrator is saying, or the narrator's interpretation. It may be biased. Incidentally, it's interesting that in looking for stories in that category, we found most of them (the narrations) are by teenagers, adolescents. [. . .]

Okay, with detached autobiography you're into what's the most common first-person technique, where you have a narrator that you regard as reliable. Now cases of cultural bias of course are found: you never get a really reliable narrator—depending on what depth you want to go. But it's generally assumed this narrator's telling you everything the author knows or understands. Now the author may be biased—that's another thing. So this is one of the more commonly used techniques to tell a story—I'd say the second most popular, because you have a reliable guide and you have a personal focus.

There is one other third-person technique, memoir, which is a hinge between first- and third-person. It's a very interesting technique where some "I" is telling you about some "he" or "she"—not "I" about me, like autobiography. With memoir the author's talking about someone else. Why would somebody use that technique? Look

at *The Great Gatsby* or *Lord Jim*. Look at the titles—the GREAT Gatsby and LORD Jim. It mythifies the person you're talking about. There are great issues of empathy and resonance between the "I" and the person that the "I" is telling the story about. It's a very interesting resonance, and you have that state of transition between the "I" and the "he" or "she," the first and third person.

From here on, my distinction, which I found worthwhile making, I call "anonymous narration." This is where the narrator does not identify himself or herself—a so-called third-person story, third because there's no "I." But there are a lot of differences in third-person stories, and it seemed to me you could sort them out by how many characters' minds you're allowed to go into—points of view, in that sense. And this turns out to be very significant.

Now the first one is the single character point of view. I'd say this is the most popular fictional technique, the one most often used, I think because you have a host—a guiding narrator who explains, guides you around to everything, puts it all together for you. If you have the focus on only one person, then people seem to like that, for obvious reasons. So you focus on one individual that is fully explained—or guided, not necessarily fully explained, but you have a mediator, a host between you and that character.

Then there's dual character point of view—all of the stories there—you go in the minds of two people, and the whole question is, "Why are we going into these two people's minds?" And it's almost always because there's a play-off of tension and contrast. Margaret Atwood's "Uglypuss," for example, is a classic discrepancy between male and female lovers' points of view. But in T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Sinking House" it's an older and a younger woman. There's always a reason why the author goes in only two minds, or in one.

Then, the multiple character point of views—three as opposed to anything beyond three. Once you're up to three points of view, it's just multiple. And authors don't very often, in short stories particularly, go into that. Something like Katherine Ann Porter's novel, *Ship of Fools*—taken from a Breughel painting—in itself tells you this is about a whole society. But, in short stories, it's rarer.

My logic here is in counting one, two, three, zero. In the last category, there are no personal points-of-view of characters that you enter in. This makes it much more impersonal or transpersonal, depending on how the story's aimed. And it's rarer, because most people want a personal point of view, and they don't want a lot of peoples' points of view because it breaks up identification. It's hard to identify with a lot of characters at once.

See now, that's the basic way I laid out the spectrum originally, and I saw it as doing a number of things at once. But in arraying storytelling techniques this way, these stages also correspond with stages of discourse development and human development. That is, children start off with a kind of inner speech babbled outward, without any distinction between inner and outer speech. They also begin to distinguish the listener as a separate person. "You" is born from the rib of "I" is the way I would put it, and the subject gradually distinguishes itself. In other words, a small child's play prattle is about oneself and the objects, and it's to oneself and maybe to other people. In other words, there's no clear distinction between "I" and you for them—first, second, and third person, which is the whole basis of this spectrum.

If you follow child development and discourse development, now, with letters and diaries [there's] a transition from oral language use into writing. The first kind of writing is informal, and then more formal writing is there with subjective narration, on into more objective third person—writing more for publication.

I'm going very sketchily here. But what I'm calling discursive development goes along with a kind of decentering, that is, a sort of broadening of the egocentric point of view. Piaget was using "decentering"—to gradually become aware of one's egocentric point of view, to gradually sort of overcome it, not sort of becoming less of an ego, but more aware of an egocentric point of view. Egocentricity is a really big issue here because the first narrators, as I say, the first five [on the spectrum], are not necessarily reliable. And as readers, we have to sort things out for ourselves. We have to decide what the story is and what the truth is.

And that's part of the fun. For example, in dramatic monologue, often the author's intention is to let the speaker hang himself, just talk until you decide, "Oh, well!" You match your perspective against that of the speaker's, then decide. But in any case, there's a real issue of decentering. In the letters and diaries the person is telling events that just recently happened, and so they didn't have much perspective. Whereas in detached autobiography you often have a much older narrator, like in *David Copperfield*. He's a middle-aged person by the time he's telling the story of little Davey. There is tremendous time span, and that's a big issue. There's also a kind of "levels of abstraction," regarded as a realistic sort of reporting. The narrator of each of these has to subsume greater and greater material over time and space in order to tell the story about it. By the time you get to the last one [anonymous narration], which tends toward the mythic or the whole cultural point of view, a lot of digesting or abstracting is going on compared with those at the beginning [of the spectrum].

Now in more recent times for me, the spectrum tends to move from passion—the hot-blooded interior and dramatic monologues, and the journals and the diaries, still very close to the heat of experience, not much time-space separation. Passion moves to compassion, [. . .] like the memoir narrative, where you have this empathy and identification. Somebody's telling somebody else's story. Why? Because there's tremendous resonance—compassion with a resonance. And that's how they're able and want to tell this other person's story.

And then on into third person, ending with the last one, which tends to be used for sort of mythic purposes, like the Eudora Welty story "Powerhouse"—a wonderful kind of mythological story in modern fiction form. And she doesn't go into the minds of any people. There's no need to; everything comes out of their behavior, so they are sort of types. But they don't need any explicating; you don't need to know their thoughts, because they're universal, they're mythical. And there's where I think you have the transpersonal focus—passion, compassion, dispassion—that's the way I see this now, toward the end.

Question from audience: Does the spectrum parallel the maturing of the individual's development of narrative voice? And also, does reading the stories in sequence help students make that maturing and development?

I fooled around with this a lot with my own students, and I felt it important not to be too rigid about the sequence. It's good for them to maybe read some

stories in the sequence, not everything. You experience something reading this sequence you wouldn't any other way, but it's not the way to read all the time. I think it helps make, say, adolescents aware that not everybody's head is like theirs. I haven't fully learned that yet, either; they say it's a life-long continuing adult education.

For example, in reading stories that are subjective, some students see them as subjective and some don't because they're still into [the narrator's] point of view. And other students in the same class are beyond that point of view, and so they see things that the subjective narrator doesn't. And those make for great discussions. I would, say, read those along with "Dear Abby" letters, where somebody says, "My problem is my wife." When you hear that sentence, you know what you're in for—subjective narration. So it's fun to read real life confessions or real kinds of problems like that; the sort you get in these advice columns are good stories of this kind. Then thrash out the discrepancies rather than making it a generation gap of "you see something, ha-ha, that they don't" [in a short story], which is a real turnoff.

Question for audience: The way you explained it, it seems as though there is some sort of emotional or developmental movement throughout this sequence as a whole. And since you end up with dispassionate, I wonder if there is some sort of implicit privileging of compassion as a compassionate stance one should take or one is more sophisticated in taking?

Yes, it's as if this fictional spectrum describes in its own way a kind of consciousness development or evolution. And in order to arrive at a really dispassionate rather than an indifferent state, one would have to have gone through presumably something like the stages here—that is, hot involvement and then some distance on this, and some resonance with other people's experience, and hearing a lot of other points of view. Part of what Piaget was saying—we decenter by incorporating others' points of view. Assimilation and accommodation is a two-way process: as we accommodate to the outside, we assimilate what I call "hearing out the world." You hear out what everybody has to say, and if you do enough of this, it swells your point of view. It becomes cosmopolitan and maybe even cosmic. But it's a lot of incorporation, and I feel that's kind of embodied in the spectrum. [. . .]

I want to invite you now to run backwards in the spectrum. This I did not have in the original book. These were thoughts that occurred to me that have gone into the revision. If you go backward, you have a kind of a recapitulation of literary history. It's very helpful here to refer again to Northrop Frye. You know, he has five stages in describing the history of literature in terms of genres, shifting genres. And the shifting genres correspond to the shifting concepts of the hero or protagonist. I'm not going to attempt to use his language exactly, but this is the raw material.

I'd say the first is myth and the subject is divine—gods, originally. Now, of course you also have mixtures in the myth—demigods and demimortals; those are kind of transitional to epic. In going down on the five stages—myth, totally divine—[then] epic, [where] you have human heroes who have divine connections, and they may even be semi-divine. Or they have the ear of, they have a

hotline to one of the gods. They may be superhuman; they're human but they are beyond ordinary mortals—the epic. Think of any epic of any culture you want.

Folk literature—this is all, I think, part of what Frye calls the romance. But his folk tales, all narratives of that sort—it might include parables and fables—they keep open the connection between the spirit world and the human world. So you may have mostly mortal figures, but you have magicians mixed in there. And the supernatural is playing in and out, and there are supernatural events. They're not excluded, they're all a part of it, mixed together. So you may have a fairly realistic thing about peasants and so on, but then suddenly something magical happens. And the connections are definitely still open between the spirit world and the human world.

The fourth one going down, that is going toward us and our bourgeois realism, is the rise of fiction and the novel in the 17th and 18th centuries, out of prose epics, mock prose epics. And here you have a disconnection from the spirit world. Even though looking back, we might say some of those early novels were not terribly realistic, still the connections are cut, and it's a cultural world, a totally human world. The divine comedy is shifted to the human comedy.

The last one is the anti-hero, underground. Dostoyevsky—he and Poe, they were first. Dostoyevsky was first—*Notes From Underground*—the anti-hero; and then Kafka picks him up and then Celine, and they have a whole literature now. It's not only human, but it's sort of subhuman, a metamorphosis—a bug.

This is the scale of five stages sort of roughly that Northrop Frye dealt with, and they seem to me to apply [to the spectrum] very well, but I didn't realize this until later. I wasn't thinking literary history when I did this, and it's reading backwards that you get to it. I'm not bothering to work this out. I think you can do that for yourself if you start at the back [of the spectrum] with those transpersonal stories that have no inner point of view. But they're the closest modern fiction can get to something like myth or epic or legend. And you need to move forward toward interior monologue, which is often used, say, to show up dramatic monologue, and it's claustrophobic.

Also, following back-to-front in this sequence—it's kind of evolution of consciousness, from what I read, in trying to describe the evolution of human consciousness, and Richard Bucke is one [whose work I've read]. *Cosmic Consciousness* is the book. He knew Walt Whitman and he considered Walt Whitman a fully realized person who achieved cosmic consciousness. He describes it kind of classically, as you get it in esoteric literature. It's a consciousness in three stages. First is animal consciousness that all the creatures have. That is, they are sensorily aware of the environment and themselves. Then there is a human kind that includes self-consciousness of the sort animals don't have. You're aware of who you are in your existence and of your separateness. And the third one is cosmic consciousness, which he says a few individuals have achieved in the past, and he names Christ, Buddha, and so on, and Walt Whitman. He says more and more people are achieving this.

This is the general esoteric view, I think, that moves from a group soul—say, animals have a group soul as a species. Humans may also have that, but they have personal individual souls. But at the beginning, human consciousness is like a herd mind; it's a collective consciousness. You can see that history, cer-

tainly in the West, has been a history of the development of the individual—through Protestantism, capitalism and all sorts of ways—to the point where we now speak of the modern individual as being alienated. And so there is some sort of movement away from the original unity, a harmony of human consciousness, toward greater and greater individualization and fragmentation and alienation. And modern neuroses, and so on, come from that.

But it may be part of the growing pains of individuating. It seems to me the spectrum here, if I read backwards, is following that development of consciousness. We have a splintering off in these stories, particularly if you get into journals, diaries, and monologues. Consciousness is splintered off. We have these individual solo voices, as if there were some sort of common or communal voice in the beginning that got fractionated through this, and along with that, increasing self-consciousness, increasing sense of isolation. To begin, when the child first becomes aware at some point that they're separate from everybody else and separate from the world, they lose that original sort of mystic community which is totally spontaneous and unconscious. They lose that and become increasingly, themselves, conscious.

There's a kind of evolution of consciousness in that direction. And it's creating difficult problems, but they're not necessarily bad. We have a very difficult period of growth, where you have selfishness as a result. Everybody says, "Oh, let's go back to collective consciousness. We'll have a core curriculum. We'll have Great Books. We're falling apart; let's go back to a community." And we want to get it in a cheap fascist way, which you can't do, can't possibly do. You've got to go forward, only through; there's no other way. When evolutionary development has started, you have to go all the way through. You can't get scared in the middle and backtrack, which is what people are doing now. They're getting scared, and they want to go back, and they can't go back.

Question from audience: Are you familiar with Ken Wilber's book Sex, Creativity, and Spirituality? The subject of that book is spiritual evolution. It's pretty challenging.

Right, he's one of the people who would be among those operating from an esoteric point of view. So I'm partly offering this and my later thoughts on it, because they do go more with the subject of the conference, spirituality and literature. [Earlier] I thought I was dealing with levels of abstraction. I had been under the influence of the general semanticists who worked a lot with that back in the 50s and 60s, and they were very, very far ahead of their time. But they helped my thinking when I was working with fiction to translate levels of abstraction in *Points of View*.

Anyway, that's the way I was thinking at the time. Since then, I realize I feel there was a spiritual impulse working through—that I was working with Jacob's ladder, maybe as much as a ladder of abstraction. I see Jacob's ladder, by the way, as one of those efforts to put into metaphor this kind of spectrum of multiple realities, multiple levels we talked about; to put it in the simple form of a ladder, up which and down which is a lot of traffic and angels and so on. I think that's a very esoteric image, Jacob's ladder. And again, it gets you away from mere dichotomy—it's a spectrum.

Anyway, I think I was working more with that than I realized, and I think maybe this happens with a lot with people who are in literature, of strong literary consciousness, and then into the spiritual aspect of it, but haven't quite surfaced a lot. It was surfacing more with myself. So, in writing the Afterword to *Points of View* this time, I brought in some things I hadn't before. It is as if this [spectrum] also moves from the Tree of Life, which is at that original unity, the one the child has with the world, and maybe the one that earlier in our consciousness we had.

What Rudolph Steiner [*Occult History*] was talking about, and Manley Hall [*The Secret Teachings of All Ages*], was that in earlier times we hardly knew we were in the physical realm and we were naturally clairvoyant. This is why I value this earlier art. You can see clairvoyance leaves after awhile as we incarnate more fully and materialize more. We lose this initial affinity or resonance that gave us this clairvoyant vision.

Children may be clairvoyant. There was a teacher, Jim Peterson, in the San Francisco Bay area, who was working with children. He had Rudolph Steiner training, including teaching how to draw in a vibratory way. His kids were drawing pictures of people, including him, with lights coming out of their bodies, auras, and he hadn't taught them that. All he had taught them was to draw what they saw. Some of these pictures were on the cover of *Learning* magazine back in the 70s.

I'm just saying children may recapitulate some of that early state of total attunement with the world about us, and this naturally gives you the clairvoyance. And we gradually lost that attunement, as Yeats saw—the falcon no longer hears the falconer—the image he had there, and in a lot of Yeats, who had this esoteric background. He was very deep into it, this sense of loss, that whole mythology of lost paradises, no longer hearing the voices of the gods.

So you have to go to some rare sybil or seer, a prophet who still has that attunement. He or she can tell you; but we don't always have it anymore. And then there are freaky psychics, who have no control over it whatsoever, [and they] may tune into it every now and then. But they are not particularly spiritual; they don't know what they are doing, and they are atavistic throwbacks. Spiritual teachers like mine [Sivalingam]—they don't get involved with mediums.

Okay, so this is the sense of where human community moved from, toward the splintering and so-called modern alienation—where there is no longer a shared consciousness, not only with each other, but also no longer with the rest of the world. And so they don't tune into the consciousness around them anymore. So there was a movement that way, and I would say the original was the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge is the dispersal and fragmentation of the individual consciousness straying off in different directions.

Comment from audience: There is a Howard Gardner book, Artful Scribbles, where he shows that in all cultures youngsters write circles with spokes out from them and spirals and so on. This is characteristic of children in all countries.

How does Gardner interpret that?

He doesn't [. . .][though] it's part of his multiple intelligence theory.

Gardner is someone who has experimented with a lot of children's drawings.

It would be interesting to try to talk with Gardner sometime in the context where you try to draw him out about some of that. How do you think he would react to the esoteric point of view? Would he be turned off?

Well, I'm still curious whether he would, because I got him to speak at a conference [. . .] and one of my students asked if he didn't see some parallels between his work and some of Joseph Campbell's. Gardner said, "I didn't come here to talk nonsense."

I think that answers my question. That's too bad, because he's somebody with such an enormous experience, and he's interesting. It's a shame. And in the matter of reading minds, children very often seem to read minds. Freud, interestingly, came around to believing that. He wrote papers on it, but Ernest Jones wouldn't let him deliver them. [. . .] So they were published posthumously. Freud didn't want to believe that sort of thing at all, but he felt it was the experience of his patients. He ultimately decided there was a psychic communication that explained that.

Well, if you read the spectrum both ways, I came to looking at it backwards and both ways at once. People have to develop in a narrowing direction, which is from back to front, ending with interior monologue, the most narrow perspective.

The other direction is the expanding. Once you're incarnated here, life is kind of a succession of commitments—material commitments, you know. Commitment as you grow to mate, to work, so on, all these commitments. So in a way you become more deeply involved in matter. And that has to happen. But at the same time, there has to happen—if one is going to survive psychically and spiritually—this expansion that [moves outward], in the other direction. [. . .] After awhile, you know, the ego becomes more located in the center of communal consciousness and then eventually, in cosmic consciousness.[. . .] [Oliver Wendell Holmes} was really tuned into these things with his wonderful image of the chambered nautilus. "Build thee more stately mansions, oh, my soul." The metaphor and the knowledge keep building, a little bit bigger chambers. You get one, slice it through and there's a marvelous pattern. "Build thee yet more stately mansions"—I think that's what is going on from the front to back of the spectrum.

At the same time the narrowing of material commitments is going the other way, which recalls the esoteric concept. They say that first there is involution, and then there is evolution. Involution is a disembodied spirit incarnate that gets entangled in materiality more and more deeply. [. . .] The involution is the process of becoming involved in the material world—the spirit being drawn in more deeply.

And in terms of cultural evolution, it's as if we reach a nadir, a point of greatest materialism. I'm sure we all say that's where we are right now. It's like a swimmer diving down holding breath. This is my image. You reach a certain point where the buoyancy of the air you're holding in [causes] a loss of momentum, and the increasing pressure sort of forces you to come back up. [. . .] This is the evolution, coming back up; the involution, down to the nadir and then, evolution. And people writing on spiritual evolution say we've reached the nadir, and we're turning around. And so it's a difficult time.

But I see, again, the spectrum as going in both directions at once. Back-to-front is the spirit sort of drawn in and then, in a more and more narrow way, increasing involution. And then back out is the evolution, back out to a more

communal and more cosmic involvement. In a sense we return to a communal consciousness, but it's not the original herd mind which was totally instinctive and totally dictated. But we go back to a communal consciousness with an awareness of our consciousness that's quite different from where we started. ☺

Appendix A: James Moffett's Spectrum—*Points of View*

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

Dorothy Parker, "A Telephone Call"

Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing"

DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

John O'Hara, "Straight Pool"

Katherine Mansfield, "The Lady's Maid"

Joyce Carol Oates, "...& Answers"

LETTER NARRATION

Rosellen Brown, "Inter-Office"

Henry James, "A Bundle of Letters"

Alice Munro, "A Wilderness Station"

Ambrose Bierce, "Jupiter Doke, Brigadier General"

DIARY NARRATION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

V.S. Naipal, "The Night Watchman's Occurrence Book"

Lorrie Moore, "Amahl and the Night Visitors"

SUBJECTIVE NARRATION

Danny Santiago, "The Somebody"

Truman Capote, "My Side of the Matter"

Cynthia Marshall Rich, "My Sister's Marriage"

Langston Hughes, "Why, You Reckon?"

John Updike, "A & P"

Grace Paley, "Distance"

DETACHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Toni Cade Bambara, "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods"

Francisco Jimenez, "The Circuit"

Frank O'Connor, "First Confession"

Ralph Ellison, "A Coupla Scalped Indians"

David Wong Louie, "Birthday"

Durango Mendoza, "The Passing"

MEMOIR, OR OBSERVER NARRATION

Amy Tan, "The Voice from the Wall"

Jayne Ann Phillips, "Country"

Louise Erdrich, "Scales"

Raymond Carver, "The Bridle"

Toshio Mory, "The Eggs of the World"

ANONYMOUS NARRATION—SINGLE CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW

John Cheever, "The Five Forty-Eight"

Gina Berriault, "The Stone Boy"

Ann Petry, "Doby's Gone"

Irwin Shaw, "Act of Faith"

James Baldwin, "Come out the Wilderness"

ANONYMOUS NARRATION—DUAL CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW

T. Coraghessan Boyle, "Sinking House"

Sarah Orne Jewett, "The Only Rose"

Alice Walker, "Strong Horse Tea"

Margaret Atwood, "Uglypuss"

ANONYMOUS NARRATION—MULTIPLE CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW

Shirley Ann Grau, "Fever Flower"

James Moffett, "The Suicides of Private Greaves"

Merle Hodge, "Inez"

ANONYMOUS NARRATION—NO CHARACTER POINT OF VIEW

Nicholosa Mohr, "A New Window Display"

Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"

Eudora Welty, "Powerhouse"