Beginning with the Word

Modern Literature and the Question of Belief

Roger Lundin
To Sue,

for all things,

once again,

and forever
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Acknowledgments

This book grows out of a long experience of reading, teaching, and writing about literature and theology, and my debts are many and varied to the guides who have helped along the way. As an undergraduate, I learned the joys of theology from Morris Inch and the late Bob Webber; in seminary, the late Stuart Barton Babbage showed me how bring that theology together with my love of literature; and in the graduate study of English, the late Milton Stern provided an incomparable model of dynamic teaching and reflection.

Early in my career, my student Mark Walhout introduced me to the work of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and I have spent the past three decades trying to bring those theorists together with Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the one hand, and the likes of Emily Dickinson, Frederick Douglass, and William Faulkner on the other.

I wish to pay special thanks to four former colleagues: to Alan Jacobs, for rollicking conversations marked by flights of metaphor and arresting discoveries; to Ashley Woodiwiss, for loyalty and laughter in a friendship that has ranged widely over the political, cultural, and theological landscape; to Mark Husbands, for his perceptive understanding and his joyful articulation of the importance of Karl Barth’s theology; and to Mark Noll, for his friendship and unstinting encouragement, his sustained and stimulating engagement with my work, and his exemplary commitment to the life of the mind under the lordship of Christ.

Two pastors in particular—let me call them pastoral teams—trained me in the ways of faithful obedience to Christ and the gospel: JoAnn Harvey and the late Bob Harvey (Wheaton) and John and Hazel Timmer (Grand Rapids). And for more than three decades, Paul Heidebrecht has been a source
of wisdom, hilarity, and insight as a fellow parishioner, former pastor, and lifelong friend.

Beyond my local provinces, I owe a great deal to friends and colleagues from around the world. Three of them, all from the British Isles, head the list: Jeremy Begbie, David Livingstone, and Tony Thiselton. I also have in mind Katherine Clay Bassard, Andrew Delbanco, Denis Donoghue, Jim Dougherty, Tracy Fessenden, John Gatta, Stanley Hauerwas, Harold Heie, David Jeffrey, George Marsden, the late Barbara Packer, Manfred Siebald, Jim Turner, Clare Walhout, John Webster, Ralph Wood, and Nick Wolterstorff.

At Wheaton College, during the years that I have worked on this book, Provost Stan Jones, Dean Jill Baumgaertner, and my department chair, Sharon Coolidge, have consistently provided tangible support and a steady stream of encouragement. I am grateful to the donors who have funded the chair I currently hold as the Arthur F. Holmes Professor of Faith and Learning, just as I am thankful to God for all I learned from Art Holmes over the course of more than four decades as his student, colleague, and friend.

And finally, I want to thank two student assistants at Wheaton who provided remarkable help, one at the beginning of this project and one at its close. At the start, Annie Erhardt Reed faithfully took and transcribed notes from my lectures in two different courses, and those notes provided the seeds from which this book eventually flowered. At the close, Benjamin Holland was equally diligent in the proofreading and fact-checking he did on the page proofs. Like Annie, he was a quick learner, a painstakingly careful worker, and a person of consistent good cheer.

At Baker Academic, I thank Bob Hosack for his perseverance and Lisa Ann Cockrel for her proficiency. For years, Bob waited patiently for this manuscript, and in a matter of months, Lisa shepherded it through a complex production process.

I want to close by giving my deepest word of thanks to Sue Lundin. For the whole of our adult lives, Sue and I have shared in the building of a household, the raising of our family, and the fellowship and service of the church. We’ve delighted together in mutual friendships, shared a love of the arts, embraced robust rounds of activity—from tennis to mountain climbing to cycling without end—and found endless encouragement and challenges in the life of the mind. Sue is my most perceptive critic and receptive reader, and although my debt to her is endless, nothing in life gives me greater joy than trying to repay it.
Introduction

When our three children were very young, I happily spent countless evenings playing zany games we had invented. Many involved physical comedy and stunts of some kind—I had been raised, after all, on a solid diet of Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and the Three Stooges. My children and I came up with Burger Bumpers, for example, in which we strapped pillows to ourselves and gently careened into one another in the wide open spaces of our living room; Sea Drop involved my lifting two of them bundled together in a blanket and carrying them around the house, until I dropped them onto a mattress or cushioned chair; and then there was Daddy Mountain, in which I stood and assumed a craggy pose as each one in succession grappled his or her way up my 6-foot-6½-inch frame, only to be dislodged from the mountain by rumbling tremors.

These were great games, but they could be exhausting, so I looked forward each night to the way we brought our play to a close, just before the kids went to bed. At this point we turned from the slapstick of the Stooges to verbal games inspired by the likes of Ogden Nash and Dr. Seuss. My favorite was one in which I would begin a story of some kind by making up two lines of quasi-poetry, with the last word in the second line left blank. Any one of the children was free to slap down a rhyme to complete the line, and we would go on from there, as I scrambled to weave a story with the thread of those unforeseen rhymes.

What a delight I took in those games! Our verbal escapades brought back memories of my own childhood fascination with the shapes of letters and the sounds of words, even as they tapped into a vein of pleasure and perplexity that I was mining in my new job as a college English professor. “The sound is the gold in the ore,” Robert Frost once wrote in an effort to describe poetry’s
uniqueness. The “mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same
time a subject that shall be fulfilled.” The heart of this mystery, he concludes,
is “the figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom” (776–77).

This book is an effort on my part to think, along with you, about words—
about what we do with them, how we think of them, what we make of them,
and what they make of us. It is an effort at thinking rooted in the spirit and
practice of playfulness that marked my childhood musings, that inspired my
play as a father with my children, and that continues to energize my teach-
ing and research. Throughout Beginning with the Word I seek to keep alive a
sense of delight by anchoring our search for wisdom in personal experience
and the infinite play of possibilities that literature opens before us. To that
end, the argument that unfolds in these chapters will be replete with images,
characters, and episodes from poetry and fiction along with a few key incidents
from my own past.

The Task of Thinking and the Joy of Theology

For all its emphasis on the delights of language, this book remains unapolo-
getically a search for wisdom and an exercise in thinking. Several years after
Emily Dickinson died in 1886, her sister Lavinia tried to explain the seclusion
that had marked the last two decades of the poet’s life. “As for Emily,” Lavinia
observed, “she was not withdrawn or exclusive really. She was always watching
for the rewarding person to come, but she was a very busy person herself. She
had to think—she was the only one of us who had that to do.”

In describing her sister’s calling, Vinnie Dickinson got it right, for thinking
is a vital kind of work, a genuine form of human action. To think creatively,
to struggle with an opaque text or confounding idea, to seek connections
between periods of history or disciplines of thought, and to search for the
precise word or the right rhythm for a single sentence—these are human ac-
tions every bit as worthy as the wielding of a hammer, the manipulation of a
surgical scalpel, or the making of a courtroom argument.

To be a Christian means to be something of an idealist about such work,
since the Gospel says of Jesus Christ, “In the beginning was the Word, and the
Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being
through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1–3).
Or as the Letter to the Colossians says of Christ, “he is himself is before all
things, and in him all things hold together” (1:17).

Confidence of this kind—confidence in the connection between the majesty
of Christ and the power of language and thought—is not always easy to come
across, for suspicions about the value of thought are deeply embedded within American culture in general and the evangelical church in particular. Such suspicions are as old as fundamentalism and as fresh as the therapeutic moralism that permeates the culture of today. As I was writing this introduction, for example, the evangelical Protestant magazine *Christianity Today* posted an online interview with a popular author and gave it the title, “You Can’t Think Your Way to God.” The interviewer, a former editor of the magazine, introduced his subject by saying flatly that “when we try to think our way” out of “the inconsistencies between what we think and what we do,” we find ourselves stymied. “Our behavior keeps coming back to bite us. That’s because behavior is not driven by ideas. It is a bodily thing that reflects the way we order—or disorder—our loves and desires.”

This sweeping claim points to a need for us to think creatively and rigorously about what I term the *tacit creed* of contemporary intellectual life. This creed, which is a version of philosophical naturalism, provides the key elements for a master narrative that claims to explain all natural phenomena and human experience. David Brooks paid tribute to the ruthless efficiency and comprehensive sweep of that narrative in a column published several years ago in the *New York Times*. “Once the Bible shaped all conversation, then Marx, then Freud, but today Darwin is everywhere,” Brooks argued. “Confident and exhilarated, evolutionary theorists believe they have a universal framework to explain human behavior.” In this narrative, humans are like any other living organism; they are simply “machines for passing along genetic code.” We are, the naturalist creed asserts, “jerry-built creatures” crammed with “sophisticated faculties . . . piled on top of primitive earlier ones.” And the purpose of it all is as simple as it is sobering. None of us has a particular destiny, for all of us live and die merely to propagate the general species.

Given the power of naturalism’s account of human nature and destiny, it would seem to matter what the Scriptures say about these things and what Christians from St. Paul to Flannery O’Connor have believed about them. Yet here again, we encounter skepticism about the relevance of belief for an understanding of faith, and this is as true outside the church as it is within its walls. As a case in point, just days after “You Can’t Think Your Way to God” appeared, the *New York Times* published an opinion piece titled “Belief Is the Least Part of Faith.” It was written by T. M. Luhrmann, a distinguished anthropologist who has closely studied evangelical Christianity and “the puzzle of belief.” Her study has led Luhrmann to conclude that “the deep questions” about faith—“Why do people believe in God?” or “What is our evidence for the existence of God?”—are the ones that “university-educated liberals ask.” She says such “abstract and intellectual” issues do not interest evangelicals,
for they are concerned with “fundamentally practical questions” that have to do with feeling God’s love and being aware of God’s presence. Indeed, Luhrmann says, not all evangelicals have even “made up their minds whether God exists or how God exists.” Many, perhaps most, of them “put to one side” the question of belief, and in doing so, they confirm something social scientists discovered more than a century ago:

The role of belief in religion is greatly overstated, as anthropologists have long known. In 1912, Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern social science, argued that religion arose as a way for social groups to experience themselves as groups. . . . Religious ideas arose to make sense of this experience of being part of something greater. Durkheim thought that belief was more like a flag than a philosophical position: You don’t go to church because you believe in God; rather, you believe in God because you go to church.

Luhrmann suggests that we should “think about faith as the questions people focus on, rather than the propositions observers think they must hold.” If we look at faith this way, she promises, we will see that “the evangelical view of the world is full of joy. God is good. The world is good. Things will be good, even if they don’t seem good now.” Because they take the life of the mind seriously and seek rational and empirical grounds for their own beliefs, “it is understandably hard for secular observers to sidestep the problem of belief.” Yet Luhrmann says the secularists must set this problem aside if they are to understand that, for evangelicals, belief is nothing more and nothing less than “the reach for joy.”

Luhrmann’s is a lucid formulation of the tacit creed of contemporary naturalism. According to it, the world is a closed system governed by impersonal laws. To be human is to live within the system while remaining slightly askew from it due to the accident of consciousness and the mystery of language. As both Durkheim and Luhrmann assert, we employ that language to devise beliefs that can “make sense of [our] experience of being part of something greater.” To them, the key to sensible living and intellectual respectability appears to involve remembering that whatever therapeutic power such beliefs may have, they have nothing to do with values that endure or truths that transcend the moment of their usefulness.

As I have thought over the years about how a Christian might engage the naturalist creed both charitably and cogently, I have been guided by the invigorating example of Karl Barth. Near the close of Evangelical Theology, a book written at the end of his storied career, the theologian explains what it means to think about the modern world through the category of Christian
hope. “They build on a firm foundation if they work in profound happiness as well as in profound terror,” Barth writes of those who think of the world in theological terms. We live and die in communion with Christ, through whose resurrection “the glory of the children of God” has already been revealed. Through this person and this power, we are enabled to endure and bear all that is before us “with alacrity, hilarity, and spiritual joy.”

In explaining his unapologetic approach to Christian belief, Barth observes that for several centuries, “theology has taken too many pains to justify its own existence.” The result has been to make theology “hesitant and halfhearted,” yet in return for all its self-abasing tentativeness, it has “received no more respect for its achievements than a very modest tip of the hat.” Barth urges Christian thinkers to set themselves on firmer ground by letting theology act “according to the law of its own being” and “to follow this law without lengthy explanations and excuses.”

To that end, I have sought to have Beginning with the Word develop in the same manner as my two most recent books on literature, theology, and modern culture. My guiding principle is a simple one. It is to engage modern culture with confidence and a degree of brio. The goal of this book in particular is to reflect upon questions of literature, language, and belief by engaging a wide array of modern theorists and imaginative writers—from Ferdinand de Saussure to Frederick Douglass, Jean-François Lyotard to Emily Dickinson, and Hans-Georg Gadamer to Flannery O’Connor—and to do so by treating these dialogical partners with the respect they deserve.

At the same time, without hesitation or defensiveness, I deliberately wish to introduce strong theological voices into the conversation about language and belief. I do so in an effort to break the silence that so often seems to surround literary theory and cultural studies when it comes to the question of theology. The reason for this silence cannot be that the partners are so woefully mismatched that a genuine dialogue between the theorists and the theologians would be unthinkable. It is not as though Ferdinand de Saussure, Richard Rorty, and Frank Kermode are tilling some lofty plateaus of the intellect, while Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and John Paul II toil away out of sight on barren landscape in the valleys far below.

I suspect the lack of a theory and theology dialogue is largely due to the simple fact that those who embrace the naturalist creed find it difficult to fathom the sincerity or authenticity of those who recite the Apostles’ Creed. Pastor and author Timothy Keller made this point in a pitch-perfect way recently in a discussion with mainstream journalists. He told them that whatever else conservative Protestantism entails at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it contains an element of “supernatural Christianity.” When asked, “Did the
resurrection really happen?” the conservative “says ‘Yes.’ And other people say, ‘Well, that depends on how you look at it.’”

At that point in the conversation Keller mentioned a distinguished secular professor of the humanities with whom he had served on a panel at a symposium. The professor was trying to determine just where Keller stood on religious matters. Then it came to him: “Oh, I get it,” he told the pastor. “You don’t take the Apostles’ and Nicene Creed metaphorically, do you?” To which Keller replied, “Bingo. That’s it.”

There are, to say the least, great differences between critics who take religious claims metaphorically and believers who place their trust in them—or even stake their lives on them. As I will argue in Beginning with the Word, a great number of literary and cultural critics join with T. M. Luhrmann in defining religious belief as a matter of personal formation and social aspiration rather than as an endeavor to know and obey the truth. To give but one example of what I mean, I quote from the introduction to a superb work of contemporary literary criticism:

The question for the writers I take up in these central chapters is not what they believe about God or any other supernatural being or world order—a question that isn’t answerable for most of them—or how their religious beliefs and practices are reflected in their writing, but what they believe about literature.

Try telling that to David Kern, a boy in his early teens who undergoes a mid-twentieth-century crisis of faith in John Updike’s “Pigeon Feathers.” Deeply troubled by a naturalistic account of the life of Jesus that he has read in H. G. Wells’s The Outline of History, David finds his faith in God and his confidence in life shaken deeply. To Wells, Jesus was little more than a “hobo” from a “minor colony of the Roman Empire,” and twenty centuries of credulous Christian history had been set in motion by the “freakish” fact that Jesus had somehow survived his crucifixion and thus inspired his followers to found a religion. “Had Christ ever come to him, David Kern, and said, ‘Here. Feel the wound in My side?’ No.” Indeed, the facts of nature and the incidents of history seem instead to have “proved the enemy’s point: hope bases vast premises on foolish accidents, and reads a word where in fact only a scribble exists” (14–15).

David undergoes several more trials, including a terrifying vision of death and a dishearteningly awkward encounter with his unbelieving pastor. The latter confrontation unfolds during a Sunday afternoon catechetical class at the Lutheran church. They are discussing the third and final section of the Apostles’ Creed, and David has a question for Pastor Dobson about the
resurrection of the body. He wants to know, “Are we conscious between the
time when we die and the Day of Judgment?” In response, Dobson blinks,
and “the faces of the other students went blank, as if an indiscretion had been
committed.” When Dobson says, “no,” David shoots back, “Well, where is
our soul, then, in this gap?”

As the sense grows of a “naughtiness occurring,” with one girl giggling and
others on edge, “all he [David] wanted was to hear Dobson repeat the words
he said every Sunday morning. This he would not do. As if these words were
unworthy of the conversational voice.” Instead the pastor puts his heaven-
denying, death-embracing point as bluntly as he can to David: “You might
think of Heaven this way: as the way in which the goodness Abraham Lincoln
did lives after him.” When David counters with yet another question—“But is
Lincoln conscious of it living on?”—Dobson closes off the conversation with
“a coward’s firmness”: “I would have to say no. But I don’t think it matters”
(22–23).

Yet such questions—about the meaning of the creeds, the nature of the
truths they claim to encompass, and the likelihood of the resurrection whose
victory over death they trumpet—matter to young David Kern, as they have for
almost two millennia. But they matter, not simply because they provide “a way for social groups to experience themselves as groups” and
“make sense of this experience of being part of something greater.”

No, such questions make a difference today, as they have for the centuries,
because they speak directly to our nature and destiny as creatures who sense,
feel, and think. In the justly famous opening paragraph of Confessions, St.
Augustine addresses God and says that “man, a little piece of your creation,
desires to praise you,” for “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is rest-
less until it rests in you.” Following the lead of Augustine, the contemporary
Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre describes self-knowledge as a process
of coming to understand “the true objects of our desires.” Augustine, he says,
believes “that I cannot be in error about the fact that I love, but that I may
always be in error about what it is that I love.” Like St. Augustine, in other
words, young David Kern is desperate to learn whether there are any “true
objects” for his desires and whether there is any place, person, or everlasting
state in which his fearful and longing heart may find its rest.

Christ and the Modern Creed

The questions posed by the David Kern of fiction and the St. Augustine of
history have to do with language and its relationship to truth. All David
wants, after all, is for Pastor Dobson to repeat in private—“I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”—what he proclaims in public each Sunday. But this the pastor “would not do. As if these words were unworthy of the conversational voice” (23).

It is a guiding conviction of Beginning with the Word that the gospel is the story of a God who seeks, embraces, and gives himself over to the conversational voice. The prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1–14) and the Pauline hymn to Christ (Phil. 2:5–11) serve as the touchstones of this book’s argument. John declares that “in the beginning was the Word,” that “all things came into being through him,” and that in due season “the Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 3, 14). And to the Apostle Paul, the remarkable fact about Jesus Christ is that “though he was in the form of God,” he did not regard his “equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil. 2:6–7).

To comprehend what such affirmations might mean to us today, the book’s first four chapters focus on language and the nature of the word. Language is a many-faceted gem, and these chapters look at it from distinctly different, yet ultimately adjacent, angles. Scripture provides guidance and a framework. My own experiences of loss enter into the discussion, as do experiences and images put forth in plays by Shakespeare, novels by William Faulkner, and passages from several modern poets. In turn, these literary and experiential accounts set the background for a discussion of naturalism, modern theories of language, and Christian thought.

In the early chapters, I offer a critique of naturalism and what I call the structuralist paradigm of contemporary language theory. My analysis here is deeply indebted to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Truth and Method, a work that shows the profound imprint of the history of Christian thought even though its author made no claim to profess the Christian faith. What Gadamer’s work demonstrates, however, is the difference that Christian belief—in particular, the doctrine of the Incarnation—can make in the way we think about the nature, scope, and power of words. That difference is made explicit in the theology of Karl Barth, whose voice first enters fully into the discussion in chapters 3 and 4.

In the second half of Beginning with the Word, our attention shifts from the building blocks of words to the structures made by stories. In these chapters a number of writers and their works from the past two centuries make their way into the discussion. We hear from the contemporary Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch and the incomparable Fyodor Dostoevsky; Emily Dickinson weaves her way in and out of several chapters, while Don DeLillo’s White Noise and a
story by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) illuminate the argument; and discussions of Frederick Douglass’s autobiography and the stories of Flannery O’Connor play essential parts in the closing arguments of the book.

In the two final chapters, literature’s play of possibilities comes to the fore. It does so in the case of Douglass, through his extraordinary account of his struggle to learn how to read. Throughout the slaveholding states, laws forbade teaching black men, women, and children to read. To be a slave, Douglass said, was to be “within the circle” and to have no idea of the possibility of liberty or justice, and as he discovered, it was through reading and through the alternate worlds it opened to him, that young Frederick came, in his words, to understand “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (*Narrative*, 37–38).

The closing chapter extends the reach of this play of possibilities by setting it within a dynamic of nineteenth-century cultural questions and twentieth-century theological responses. In the nineteenth century the citizens of the industrialized world began to take the full measure of the callous indifference of modernity’s engines of power, be they natural or social. In the poetry of Dickinson and the fiction of Herman Melville, in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and the novels of Dostoevsky, we encounter sharp, sometimes devastating questions about the justice, silence, and very existence of God.

One place these questions received a robust response in the twentieth century was in the church’s vigorous renewal of the doctrine of Christology. In his *Church Dogmatics* Barth both summarizes and advances that renewal in a remarkable section titled “The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country.” In his treatment of the Incarnation, Barth speaks of the “unnecessary and extravagant” choice made by God to become flesh and travel to our far country, so that we might be saved from the folly and ravages of our “own devices” (*CD*, IV.1.158).

The journey through nineteenth-century literature and twentieth-century theology brings us back at the end of the book to the point at which it began. A personal experience (involving death and birth), a work of art (Roland Hayes’s song-cycle of African American spirituals), and a passage of Scripture (Phil. 2:5–8, once more) come together to bear witness to the grace and truth of the Word made flesh.

That last sentence contains a phrase—“to bear witness”—that beguiles me and sums up as well as anything could the approach I seek to take to the literature and theory of modern culture and to the Christian faith I practice *and* believe. Near the end of chapter 4, I quote a passage from Richard Wilbur’s “Lying,” one of the great modern poems on language and belief. In it the poet stresses the need for us to remain humble as we think about language and our self-constituting powers. We may believe that the truth is something
we invent in order to make sense of our experience and cushion the blows a seemingly indifferent universe deals out to us, yet Wilbur begs to differ. “In the strict sense, of course,” he writes, “we invent nothing, merely bearing witness / To what each morning brings again to light” (83).

The French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote several decades ago that we in the modern world “must choose between philosophy of absolute knowledge and the hermeneutics of testimony.”13 In Beginning with the Word, I side with Ricoeur in choosing the latter. From the serendipitous discoveries we make in the wordplay of childhood, to the wonders we come upon in the world around us and in the depths within us, to the miracle of the Word “through whom all things came into being,” there is more than we could imagine to bear witness to and so much, so abundantly much, for which to give thanks.

In a book-length study of Martin Heidegger, critic George Steiner notes that the philosopher was fond of the seventeenth-century German Pietist saying, Denken ist Danken, “to think is to thank.” Steiner goes on to say that conceiving of thinking as thanking “may well be indispensable if we are to carry on as articulate and moral beings.”14 I wholeheartedly agree. So, let us begin to think together. And may we never cease to give thanks.
Beginning with the Word

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:1–5, 14

’Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

—William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet
A Word dropped careless on a Page
May consecrate an Eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Author lie
Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria—
—Emily Dickinson, #1268

We begin with words. Without them, there would be no literature. We would have no poems or plays, no lyrics or stories, no memories or dreams, not even any names. With words, we pledge our love to one another, we rail against wrongs in our homes and injustices across the seas, we chart the course of the past, we map the contours of the future, and we remember what—and whom—we have lost.

But what are these things we know as words? What strength do they possess? What is the source of their power to “breed Infection” and make us “inhale Despair” centuries after they have been written or printed? What weaknesses might words reveal? What do they have to do with the gritty realities of our lives or the glittering visions we imagine for the future?

That words have power of some sort, virtually everyone would agree, including St. John, William Shakespeare, and Emily Dickinson. But beyond that point, out in the vast universe of language usage, the disputes begin and the battles are fought over the nature and meaning of words.

According to the Gospel of John, the Triune God provides the secret to the source and power of words. “In the beginning was the Word,” John announces, “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” For John, the Word is personal and powerful beyond imagining. From the nucleus of the smallest cell to the edge of the farthest galaxy, at the heights of joy and in the depths of sorrow, the Word abides. Before “heaven and earth were created, there was the Word of God, already existing in closest association with God and partaking of the essence of God.”

To describe the Incarnation and “its connection to all the past and all the future,” John used the Greek word Logos. This term can only be “faintly and partially imaged by ‘the Word,’” argues the eminent Victorian biblical scholar Brooke Foss Westcott, for “as far as the term Logos expresses a revelation, it is not an isolated utterance, but a connected story, a whole and not a part, perfect in itself, and including the notions of design and completion.”
In addition to pointing to a given revelation, the concept of the Logos also speaks of a redemptive purpose that has been revealed in human history and that was present “in the depths of the Divine Being before creation.” Yet until the Gospel of John was written, “no one had dared to form such a sentence as that which declares the central fact of Redemption, in connection with time and eternity, with action and with being: ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’”

From the beginning of the Christian era, the theologians of the church found in the Logos crucial resources for describing how God relates to creation and what the beautiful order of this world may reveal to us about him. “God is good,” St. Athanasius wrote in the fourth century, and “because he does not begrudge being to anything, he made all things from non-being through his own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ.” From among all the things he created, God chose to be “especially merciful toward the human race.” Since by the logic of our origin, we lack the power to live forever, God “granted [us] a further gift” to distinguish us from the rest of creation. In an act of charity, he created us “according to his own Image, and shared” with us “the power of his own Word, so that having a kind of reflection of the Word,” we might “be enabled to remain in blessedness and live the true life of the saints in paradise.”

The Word secures the blessedness of the saints, and through its power God also binds, strengthens, and supports the structures of creation and imparts to human life the purposeful dignity it requires if it is to prosper and flourish. Through the power of the Word, we are made, sustained, and reconciled to God, and through the agency of words, we hear of God’s faithfulness in the past, God’s power in the present, and God’s promises for the future. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,” Colossians says of Christ, “for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1:15–17). Astonishingly, according to John’s Gospel, the One through whom all things came into being was not content to leave the world he had made to its own devices. So, “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

All this is to say that the Scriptures, creeds, and early church councils bore witness to the intimate bond between the power and personality of God, as they are embodied and revealed in the Logos, the Word made flesh. Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that from the beginning, Christianity challenged paganism to recognize all that the “personal God-Logos” had accomplished through his incarnate life, sacrificial death, and
miraculous resurrection. All “the ancient world’s unifying principles” have been redeemed by the God who “has drawn close to the world” through the history of Israel and the Incarnation of the Word. “The world was created in this Logos, the true ‘place of the ideas,’ and can therefore be understood only in the light of this Logos.” In the words of an eminent twentieth-century historian, “history in terms of the embodied logos means history in terms of personality.”

Yet unlike God’s Word, our own words cannot create something out of nothing and do not have the power to live forever. Indeed, as Shakespeare’s Juliet realizes, it is hard for us to pin down just what it is that our words can do. Consider the case of the two lovers. With the force of nature and the pulse of passion running through them, who or what can stand against them? No one. Nothing, that is, but their names. She is a Capulet, he a Montague, and for generations a deadly feud has poisoned the relationship between their families.

Knowing that her family’s history of hatreds imperils her future as well as that of Romeo, Juliet asks a simple question. What does the name Montague have to do with the man she loves? After all, this name “is nor hand, nor foot, / Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part / Belonging to a man.” To Juliet a name may point to something—or someone—of incomparable value, but the name itself is of little worth. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet” (II.ii., 40–44).

Or would it? A part of what it means to smell a rose has to do with everything we carry within us as we draw near to it. Equipped with language and animated by memories, we stoop to a rose with myriad associations already in mind. As we see and smell it, our experience slips into a continuum of contrasts and discriminations, and this enables us to know and name the thing for what it is. We recognize that it is a flower, a living thing, and not an inert object like a stone; in its usual state, it is sweet and not pungent, soft rather than abrasive, and it is red, white, or yellow rather than dark violet or black. We can situate the rose within a field of understanding because we have words to name our experiences, and when we find ourselves at a loss for words, we may turn to metaphor to open new worlds before us.

Still, Juliet’s question remains: “What’s in a name?” Before we can venture an answer, we need to stand back and take a wider view of the historical, theoretical, and theological dimensions of the question. For although that answer bears on literature, it has broad implications as well, and one of our ongoing concerns in this book will be to explore the myriad ways in which language, literature, and Christian thought mingle and mix in the life of the spirit and the culture of today.
What’s in a Name?

As she ponders the meaning of names, Juliet Capulet in many ways sounds like a dutiful graduate student wending her way through the labyrinthine paths of contemporary theories of language and interpretation. To her, a name is an arbitrary sign. It may point to a real person or an actual state of affairs, but it should never be accepted as a sufficient substitute for the real thing. Knowing that names carry with them a history of power and prejudice, Juliet is suspicious of the associations that cling to them, and she regrets how readily names can become markers in conflicts that have nothing to do with those who bear them. In turn, she believes it to be within her rights to rebel against those who might seek to define and limit her through the power of naming.

That is to say, Juliet is a lot like us; for when she asks, “What’s in a name?” Shakespeare is raising through her character in the late sixteenth century a concern about language that was to grow ever more pressing in the centuries to come. In simple terms, it is the question as to whether words somehow belong to reality and embody truths about God and the world or whether they are primarily signs employed by the powerful to order the world according to their purposes. We come upon debates about this matter in ancient Greek philosophy, we find them renewed in a provocative form with the rise of nominalism in late medieval thought, and in the past century, those arguments—driven by a new variant of nominalism—have resurfaced in powerful ways within the theory of language and the culture at large.

In speaking of nominalism, I am referring to a philosophical theory whose roots reach back to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century arguments about the laws of nature, the workings of the mind, and the power of God. At the heart of these arguments was a dramatic contrast between the laws of nature seen as something imposed upon the universe and those laws being seen as immanent within the structure of reality itself. The latter view was anchored in Stoic thought and the theory of the Logos. It held, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, “that the order of nature expresses the characters of the real things which jointly compose the existences to be found in nature.” When we understand those things in their essences, we also are enabled to see them in their mutual relations to one another. This understanding of natural law, which took the world to be “impregnated with reason,” dominated the Aristotelian science that was promoted by the early medieval church and its centers of learning.

What came to be known as nominalism first surfaced in the late thirteenth century and became fully developed in the thought of William of Ockham. As historian Francis Oakley explains, Ockham grounded natural law solely on the arbitrary, unobliged will of God; as a result, that law ceased to be a
“dictate of reason” built into the creation and became instead “a divine command” addressed to it. By grounding natural law and ethics in the divine will, Ockham and other nominalists believed they were vindicating and preserving the “freedom and omnipotence of God.” Yet the price to be paid was steep, for their defense of the divine will came “at the expense of the ultimate intelligibility of the world.” Order could no longer be discerned as being immanent within the structures and relationships of creation; instead, it was assumed to have been imposed upon creation as a result of “the peremptory mandate of an autonomous divine will.”

The nominalists considered “all real being” to be individual and particular (as Juliet does when she dwells on the “dear perfection” of Romeo). They took universals to be fictions because “words did not point to real universal entities but were merely signs useful for human understanding. Creation was radically particular and thus not teleological.” This meant that the ends of human life—the goals, virtues, and visions to which men and women aspire—are not embedded within the creation and its interlocking relationships. Instead, they have been imparted to the world by a transcendent God whose will remains mystifyingly obscure.

To see the link between this medieval philosophical movement and contemporary theories of language, we can turn to a provocative essay by philosopher Richard Rorty. Titled “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” this work opens with a bold declaration: “In the last [nineteenth] century there were philosophers who argued that nothing exists but ideas. In our [twentieth] century there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts.” According to Rorty, the idealists believed that all of life and human experience were embedded within a realm of transcendent ideals; the textualists assume that same experience to be entangled in an infinite web of words, beyond which there is nothing at all.

To explain how we moved from the one—idealism—to the other—textualism—Rorty zeros in on the antagonism that marks the stance both movements assume toward natural science and its claims to intellectual certainty and supremacy. Both idealism and textualism “insist that there is a point of view other than, and somehow higher than, that of science.” And each believes that it—idealism in the nineteenth century, textualism in the late twentieth—is the worthy and rightful cultural successor to science. To Rorty, textualism is nominalism shorn of its transcendent God, who has been supplanted by the dynamic human will.

A second similarity between idealism and textualism “is that both insist that we can never compare human thought or language with bare, unmediated reality,” and they use this point “to put natural science in its place.” The idealists of the nineteenth century tried to limit science by following the lead
of Immanuel Kant, who claimed that scientific concepts were “merely instruments” used by the mind to organize sense-impressions. To the textualists, Kant’s insight turned into the claim that scientific language is only one of many language games we might play; they take it to be something “handy” for “predicting and controlling nature.” Science is hardly “Nature’s Own Vocabulary,” and for the idealist and textualist alike, art represents our deepest experiences more fully than science could ever do.\(^{12}\)

To Rorty, the difference between idealism and textualism is that the former seeks to replace one form of science (natural) with another (philosophy). Textualism, on the other hand, proposes to do away with the concept of science altogether by treating both philosophy and the natural sciences “as, at best, literary genres.” In their place, textualism plants literature at the center of the cultural stage, with science, philosophy, and theology banished to the wings.\(^{13}\)

Having declared the triumph of textualism in the late twentieth century, Rorty devotes the remainder of his essay to defining and defending his terms. He does so by offering a close reading of idealist philosophy from Bishop Berkeley in the mid-eighteenth century to Hegel in the early nineteenth. Rorty reads that history as the story of a gradual decline of the belief that idealism could deliver through language a true picture of “ultimate reality.” With the collapse of “metaphysical idealism,” what survived was “literary romanticism,” which he defines as “the thesis that the one thing needful [is] to discover not which propositions are true but rather what vocabulary we should use.” The main legacy of idealism proved to be the ability of literary culture to stand on its own, apart from and superior to science, and “to claim to embody what is most important for human beings.”\(^{14}\)

Rorty says the final step in securing “the autonomy and supremacy of the literary culture” was taken by Friedrich Nietzsche and William James at the close of the nineteenth century. They accomplished that task by replacing romanticism with pragmatism. “Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could help get us what we want,” he explains. “Instead of hinting that literature might succeed philosophy as discoverer of ultimate reality, they gave up the notion of truth as a correspondence to reality.”\(^{15}\)

Regarding “the suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there,” Rorty said in a later work that it “is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.”\(^{16}\) He is referring, of course, to the Christian era, when the search for truth involved confident efforts to uncover the worded order God had woven into the fabric of reality and to receive the truths by which God’s purposes had been revealed in sacrament, Scripture, and redemptive events.
The Logos tradition’s vision of language and reality holds no interest for Rorty because he is concerned exclusively with those modern intellectual forces—natural science, philosophy, and literature—that he takes to be the rightful successors to a discredited and vanquished theism. Science sought supremacy on the basis of its power to harness nature, while idealist philosophy committed itself to the proposition that “within natural human experience one can find the clue to an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, and this clue is revealed through those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being.”

As Rorty describes them, science and philosophy are driven by an ideal of mirroring and a standard of calibration. Scientists and philosophers assume that truth entails bringing our linguistic representations of reality into line with that reality as precisely as we can. By joining words to things, we enable the world to reveal its truths to us.

But Rorty considers this a fantasy, for “the world does not speak. Only we do.” The world may cause us to hold certain beliefs, “once we have programmed ourselves with a language,” but it is powerless to “propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that.” They—“other human beings”—and we collectively propose those languages through the construction of large “language games” that establish the standards of criteria and choice by which we determine the truth within the confines of the game we happen to be playing.

When she began to muse on the nature of names, Juliet did so because she wanted to rescue Romeo from the forces of prejudice and cycles of revenge that threatened to overwhelm him and destroy their hopes of marriage. As radical as her claims about naming may sound, Juliet harbored no hopes of transforming the world and made no arguments touting the virtues of self-definition in a godforsaken world. But many who came after her would do just that, and it is with these individuals and theories that we will largely be concerned in this and the following chapter.

The Word and the Structures

What Rorty calls textualism is a late development in a central twentieth-century revolution in language theory known as structuralism. This dynamic intellectual movement came into being as a result of “the birth and explosive growth of the twentieth-century science of linguistics.” From its base in linguistics, structuralism migrated over the course of the past century to cultural anthropology and sociology before establishing itself—and its offshoots,
including deconstruction and poststructuralism—securely within literary and interpretive theory. Language became a central concern of twentieth-century thought, explains philosopher Charles Taylor, and what is “striking is the partial hegemony, if one can put it this way, that linguistics has won over other disciplines. From Saussure and the formalists there has developed the whole formidable array of structuralisms . . . which seek to explain a whole range of other things,” from kinship systems to the operations of the unconscious and the origins of mythology.¹⁹

In Beginning with the Word, I will use the term structuralism both narrowly to designate specific developments in linguistics and more broadly to represent that system of philosophical naturalism which has become the tacit creed of literary theory and cultural studies. As the embodiment of key naturalistic assumptions, the structuralist paradigm—with its comprehensive understanding of language, reality, and truth—has mounted a sustained challenge to the premises that inform Christian thought about everything from creation and redemption to revelation and resurrection.

In speaking of naturalism as I do here, I have in mind that set of beliefs that Alvin Plantinga has cogently described in a recent book on science and religion. He takes naturalism to involve the belief that “no such person as God, or anything like God” exists. Naturalism clearly is not a religion, but in a number of ways it plays a religious role for many in the modern world. Like a religion, it poses such questions as: Does God exist, and is God personal? How should we live? What place do we occupy in the universe? What is our relationship to other creatures? In Plantinga’s words, naturalism offers unmistakable answers to these questions: “There is no God, and it makes no sense to hope for life after death. As to our place in the grand scheme of things, we human beings are just another animal with a peculiar way of making a living.” Yet while naturalism may not be a full-blown religion, Plantinga says we might think of it as a quasi-religion that “offers a master narrative” that claims to explain all natural phenomena and human experience, from the primordial explosion of the Big Bang to the fading embers of the last dying star.²⁰

In structuralism, the tenets of this “quasi-religion” are wedded to what Jonathan Culler calls the “two fundamental insights” that inform its own master narrative about language and meaning. The first is that we never encounter social realities or cultural phenomena as discrete, factual objects or neutral events. Instead, these phenomena present themselves to us as objects and events replete with meaning. They are not facts awaiting the inductive study that will yield their meaning; instead, they are signs that point to things of significance, and their meaning is embedded in the vast, complex networks of relation that constitute the system of language.
The second structuralist insight seems simple yet has profound implications. It is that natural objects and social phenomena “do not have essences, but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external.” That is to say that the meaning of such phenomena is dependent on “an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes this meaning possible.” By way of explanation, Culler asks us to think of what an observer from a culture in which marriage and soccer do not exist might make of a wedding ceremony or a World Cup match. The observer could probably describe the actions in considerable detail but would have no idea what they meant or what their purpose was. For example, wherever we come upon two posts set apart from one another, we may indeed kick a ball between them. Yet our action will acquire the meaning associated with a soccer “goal” only if it is embedded within a network of rules and conventions that we know as a particular sport. In turn, those conventions are only available in and through the use of language. All human practices and values are the product of a collective human effort to order the world within the boundaries established by language.21

Like Rorty’s textualism, structuralism relies on a series of tacit metaphors to depict the role and reach of language. Language is the foundation on which all human meaning is constructed; it is the web in which all human experience is implicated and ensnared; and it is the fount of all human meaning. The verbal universe is a self-sustaining world without origin or end. There is nothing before language, no one behind it, and nowhere beyond it. In the words of Robert Scholes: “At the heart of the idea of structuralism is the idea of system: a complete, self-regulating entity that adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its systematic structure.”22

What this structuralist theory articulates, with its depiction of a self-sustaining system with nothing or no one beyond it, Ernest Hemingway embodies in a famous story from the 1930s, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” This is the tale of an old man who comes each night to a Spanish café to drink himself into oblivion. From the two waiters who discuss the man’s condition we learn that he has recently made a failed attempt to take his own life. On the night in question, after the lonely man has left the café, the two waiters have a brief exchange, with the younger of the two saying: “I have confidence. I am all confidence.”

“You have youth, confidence, and a job,” the older waiter said. “You have everything.”

“You have everything I have.”

“No. I have never had confidence and I am not young.”

20
After the younger waiter has left for home, where his wife awaits him, his older counterpart lingers at the café, and as he flips the switch that had kept the place “clean and well-lighted,” he ponders the darkness:

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who are in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. (382–83)

The world as rendered in Hemingway’s story is “a complete, self-regulating entity” of the kind that Scholes celebrates and the structuralist paradigm enshrines. It is a given that from within such a system it is pointless to pray to a Father in heaven, to hallow his name, to pray for the kingdom that is to come, or to thank the deity for our daily bread. It is fruitless to do such things because the system is closed and runs smoothly, even ruthlessly, on its own. Anyone who lives within it ought to have the sense not to waste his or her time by foolishly praying for a god or gods to intervene from anywhere beyond the mechanism, for we live and move and have our being strictly within the confines of what Frederic Jameson calls “the prison-house of language.”

At the same time, the structuralists tell us, the imprisoning system needs to be mapped so that we can learn its contours and exploit its resources to our advantage. Everything needs to be accounted for and explained through the study of its relationship to everything else within the system.

According to Scholes, this is a task the structuralist model is well equipped to accomplish since it was born out of an effort to counter the fragmentation of knowledge that characterized the academic treatment in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. As disciplines and fields proliferated, the isolated disciplines became “so formidable in their specialization as to seem beyond all synthesis.”

Several crucial developments lay behind this fragmentation. As Rorty has already indicated—with his rejoinder that “the world does not speak. Only we do”—one development involved the questioning of the long-standing correspondence theory, which took truth to be a matter of making thought and its instruments—language, mind, ideas—conform to the objects of its attention. What I think and what I say, in other words, should correspond to a reality that stands before me in the present as a fact or is handed down to me.
from the past as an event. Yet the harder it has become to define what such correspondence or conformity to reality might look like, the more difficult it has become to ground theories of knowledge and morality in the study of the mind’s relationship to the world outside it. Ralph Waldo Emerson gave voice to skepticism about the correspondence theory as far back as the early 1840s, when he wrote in “Experience”:

> We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions,—objects, successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas. Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast. (487)

With good reason, then, Rorty concludes that in the early nineteenth century, “the idea that truth was *made* rather than *found* began to take hold of the imagination of Europe.” That idea took hold of our modern theories of language, truth, and reality and changed them almost beyond recognition. Looking back on these developments in 1936, William Butler Yeats famously described the transformation of the image of the mind as a mirror held up to nature to that of the mind as a lamp casting light on an otherwise darkened world. “The soul,” he wrote, “must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp.”

This transformation of the mirror into a lamp was in good measure a legacy of romantic poetry and idealist philosophy. In any number of poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, or William Wordsworth, we come upon explorations of a dynamic state of tension between the givenness of things and the inventiveness of the mind. This tension is concisely and elegantly depicted in “Tintern Abbey,” where Wordsworth describes himself as

> A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
> And mountains; and of all that we behold  
> From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
> Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,  
> And what perceive.

This romantic compromise—with the truth divvied up equally between nature and mind—was to last only for a generation. By the end of the nineteenth century, philosophical naturalism and Darwinian theory had stripped from
nature its moral and theological significance and left the lamp of the mind as its sole illuminating source.

During the same period that specialization was fragmenting the academic disciplines, the concept of an overarching, theistic framework for knowledge was being undermined by what Hans Frei has termed the “eclipse of biblical narrative.” From the beginnings of Christian history to the early stages of the modern era—from the first and second centuries to the seventeenth and eighteenth—“the Biblical narrative . . . [made] its claim to absolute authority,” Erich Auerbach observes. “Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.” But in the early modern period, the adequacy and trustworthiness of that narrative began to come under suspicion. To a small but increasing number of observers, the Bible, instead of being a unified framework within which all human experience and history could be encompassed, appeared to be a ragged compendium of tales, episodes, and genres whose connections to truth and reality were dubious at best.

A new form of skepticism in the late nineteenth century served as a third source of the fragmentation of knowledge. This line of argument called into question the ability of human consciousness to know even itself, let alone the world outside it, fully or adequately. In a study of Sigmund Freud, Paul Ricoeur famously named this movement “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” To Ricoeur, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Freud were the great “masters” of suspicion who shared a common determination “to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness.” With this skeptical turn, they took up the problem of Cartesian doubt and carried “it to the very heart of the Cartesian stronghold” of self-conscious awareness. And in doing so, they shook religious knowledge to its foundations as well.

In the face of these and other sources of fragmentation, the comprehensive naturalistic framework promoted by structuralism appeared to offer a systematic approach to reintegrating knowledge. In the words of Scholes, “structuralism . . . [seeks] nothing less than the unification of all the sciences into a new system of belief.” It sets out to meet the need for a “coherent system” that will “unite the modern sciences and make the world habitable for man again.” Scholes admits this is a fundamentally “religious need,” but he says structuralism can fill it by providing a “believable belief,” something he says Christianity can no longer offer. Structuralism shares with Marxism a view of the world as being “both real in itself and intelligible to man.” The secret of that intelligibility is to be found in the relationships among words rather than in any supposed correspondence between them and the world.
outside of language: “For, in its broadest sense, structuralism is a way of looking for reality not in individual things but in the relationships among them.” In structuralism the tie between language and reality is never seen to be “a natural bond” because the connection “between [the] sign as a totality . . . and the real thing is arbitrary.”

Wherever we look in cultural studies today, we will find a far greater number of theorists who would side with Juliet rather than St. John on the question of the word. Juliet’s view grants to language a greater mobility of meaning and flexibility of use than any doctrine of the Logos could ever sanction. If language is embedded within an order inscribed by God upon creation and within the human mind, and if it can serve as God’s agent of revelatory self-disclosure, then a powerful logic will shape our use of it. Christians may differ on the question of whether we primarily find that order in nature or learn of it through revelation, but they are in essential agreement in believing that language discloses more than the workings of vast systems and the vagaries of arbitrary wills. But if, on the other hand, we believe that power and custom, the agents of the arbitrary and the contingent, alone determine the relationship of words to things, then our possibilities in using language seem unlimited. Hamlet saw this to be the case at the dawn of the seventeenth century: “For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so” (II.ii.247–48). And Rorty reiterated the point in the closing years of the twentieth century: “Anything [can] be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed.”

Signs and Wonders

Something seemed familiar about all these large themes—the Logos, structuralism, nominalism, and philosophical naturalism—when I first learned of them in college, seminary, and graduate school. They struck me not as abstract theories set apart from life but as unique and helpful ways of speaking about something I had come to know in personal, even intimate terms earlier in life.

One way to explain this would be for me to tell you that if I could set before you a series of pictures of me between the ages of nine and twelve, you would quickly spot a quirky habit on full display in the snapshots my mother took during those years. In those pictures, whether I am standing stiffly next to my brother, hamming it up before the camera on a summer day, or sitting on a sofa next to a television, I am likely to be doing one of two things. I am either tossing an object into the air so that it can be caught in midflight or I
am holding up a section of a newspaper, so that the events it reports will be captured next to the face I present to the camera.

At the time, I had no idea why I felt compelled to do such things whenever my mother reached for the camera. Only years later, when I checked the dates on the photos, did it occur to me that my eccentric behavior began only months after my maternal grandmother had died. I was nine years old at the time, and aside from my own mother, “Mormor”—which means “mother’s mother” in Swedish—had been the strongest influence on my early life, and her death shocked and saddened me.

I came to realize that with those clumsy and comical poses, I was doing my best to defy death by stopping time in its flight and by freezing the flow of events within the frame of a photograph. It wasn’t much, but it was the best I could do; and to a rattled nine-year-old, it seemed better to resist death’s menacing power than to submit to it without offering so much as an argument, a protest, even a gesture.

Some years later, when I first read Dylan Thomas’s elegiac hymn to childhood, “Fern Hill,” I heard in its haunting images and lilting cadences bittersweet echoes of my own serene obliviousness in the years before Mormor died:

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea. (226)

In like manner, when I read Thomas’s famous poetic plea to his father—“Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night”—I recognized the spirit of my own childhood’s resistance to death and “the dying of the light”:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light. (239)

I trace my love of literature to experiences of the kind I had when I came upon these poems by Dylan Thomas. With his evocation of the unknowing bliss of childhood and his furious but futile protest against death, he gave a voice to my grief. I sensed that here and elsewhere the novels and poems
I was reading in English classes had to do with my own deepest fears and longings. I understood Jack London’s “To Build a Fire” because I too sensed life’s senselessness; like Macbeth, I took life to be a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”; and the rigid, icy landscapes in Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* captured my feelings of fatality and frustration. As I read these plays and stories, I drew on a deep but inchoate fund of my own experience to understand them and their power.

So it was that in my adolescence, I began to sense both my genuine need for literature and my fledgling love of it. Like most children, I had come to depend on the stories my parents told me about my infancy and our family’s life before I came along. Through their stories, I acquired my first sense of where I had come from, who I was, and what I might become. As I grew older, works of literature began to build on the foundation and within the framework my parents had established. Poems and novels rearranged the rooms, flooding some with light and deepening others with shadows, and in my experiences of reading, I began to sense that there might be a pattern to my life and a meaning hidden somewhere within it.

These hints of meaning came to me during a period of quiet desperation. When I was fifteen, my only brother, eighteen-year-old Gordon, died suddenly, several days after routine surgery. Gordy was at the heart of our family’s life, and the shock of his death set a devastating grief to work on my mother, my father, and me.

In my case, that grief often manifested itself as an aching dread that stalked me during my waking hours and haunted me while I slept. Every few months, I would have a new version of a troubling dream that was always set in the three-day period between my brother’s death and his burial. In the dream, I was always told that if I could touch the body of Gordy before he was buried, he would come back to life. Yet no matter what I did, I bungled the assignment every time. In one dream, I talked with mourners at the funeral until it was too late; while I chatted away for hours, others buried my brother, and I lost my chance to bring him back to life. Invariably, my failure involved a fault having to do with my confusion, incompetence, or worse. I’d forget about the task in the press of other events or get lost on my way to the funeral. When the dream ended, I’d wake up, gaze across the room at Gordy’s empty bed, and realize yet again that he would never come back to life.

The silent emptiness of that room stood in stark contrast to the voluble fullness of my memories of Gordy. As he and I were growing up together, whenever I called out his name, he would reply by running upstairs to play with me or by telling me to get lost. As long as Gordy was alive, the sounding of his name could command his presence and draw him into the heart of my
experience. But when he died, nothing—neither his name, nor any picture of him, nor any recording of his voice—could call Gordy back from the silent land of the dead. From that point on, whenever any one of us in the family spoke his name, Gordy never came running, and the sound of his name only rattled around the cavernous spaces he once had filled. The presence of Gordy’s name was only a marker pointing to his absence in our lives.

Although I could never have said so at the time, I was learning through these experiences something foundational about the nature of language and its relationship to reality. To be specific, through the loss of Gordy I was beginning to realize that to have the word was not necessarily to have the thing. (This happens to be a central tenet of structuralism and its view of words as signs—but more on that shortly.) I was being schooled in the truth that language deals as much with absence as with presence and that of their own accord, words can work no magic that will bring the dead to life nor cast any light that will flood the darkness they have left behind.

As I continued to read in the midst of grief, I found the fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to provide remarkable and occasionally devastating insights into my own predicament. There I met characters—Thomas Hardy’s Tess Durbeyfield and Jude Fawley, and Theodore Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths and Carrie Meeber, along with Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome—who seemed to be perplexed by the same anxieties that vexed me and to be propelled by longings of the kind that were drawing me slowly if unwittingly to God.

“We had the experience but missed the meaning,” writes T. S. Eliot in “Dry Salvages,” the third of his Four Quartets. “And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form” (133). That was the case for me, when I turned toward literature in my late teens. As a child in an unchurched family living in a working-class neighborhood, I had developed a view of life that was in rough accord with naturalism as Plantinga describes it. I doubted the existence of God, but even worse, I feared that if God did exist, he certainly had to be a heartless character. I desperately hoped to believe in life after death, but I suspected it to be a fantasy. And as for my place in the grand scheme of things, I took myself to be an animal afflicted with a consciousness whose sole purpose was to make me aware of death and of my powerlessness before it. I wanted to believe in truth, to experience forgiveness, and to trust in eternal life, but I feared these were simply words that embodied my desires but had nothing to do with anything real or possible beyond my mind. Dreiser seemed to have it right. “People in general attach too much importance to words,” suggests the narrator of Sister Carrie. “They are under the illusion that talking effects great results. As a matter of fact, words are as a rule the
shallowest portion of all the argument. They but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind” (118).

For me, as for a number of the writers I was reading, the most unsettling aspect of naturalism had to do with the fear that such “surging feelings and desires” led nowhere and to no one, and especially not to God. Few writers have registered the pain of that sense of aimless emptiness with greater force than Henry Adams, the grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams. In an autobiographical study written early in the twentieth century, Adams tells of his experience of watching his 38-year-old sister die of lockjaw in 1870. As he contrasted the beauty of the Tuscan countryside outside his sister’s sickroom with the torment unfolding within it, Adams felt he saw—and understood—both nature and death for the first time:

The first serious consciousness of nature’s gesture,—her attitude towards life,—took form then as a fantasm, a nightmare, an insanity of force. For the first time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies, with resistless mass, colliding, crushing, wasting and destroying what these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect. Society became fantastic, a vision of pantomime with a mechanical motion; and its so-called thought merged in the mere sense of life, and pleasure in the sense. The usual anodynes of social medicine became evident artifice. Stoicism was perhaps the best; religion was the most human; but the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident, with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made pure atheism a comfort. God might be, as the Church said, a Substance, but he could not be a person. (983)

The universe as Henry Adams envisions it is ruled by brute structural force and not by a personal God. In this world, language appears to serve human needs well for a time, until death shatters the illusion, leaving self and society alike exposed and defenseless.

Throughout this book, I will be taking this naturalistic vision to be one of the core premises of modern understanding that the Christian faith must engage if it is to speak boldly and fearlessly of the Word that became flesh, dwelt among us, and flooded our world with a light that no darkness can ever overcome.

“What’s in a name?” Juliet Capulet asks. “In one case, everything,” according to a converted Jew from Asia Minor who wrote to a band of fellow converts residing in a European town some three decades after the death of Jesus of Nazareth:
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)