IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences
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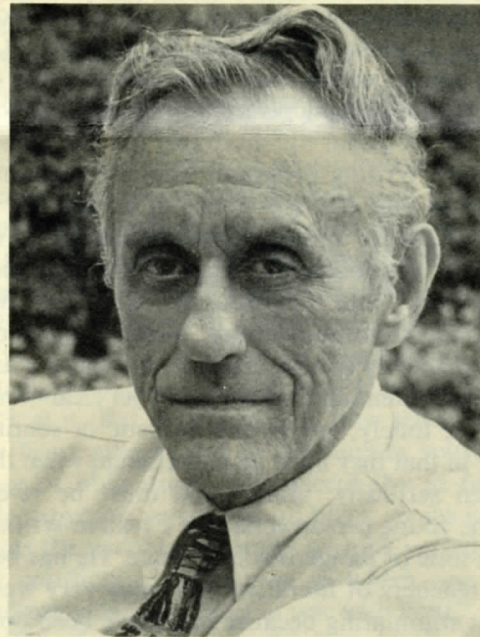
THE UNWRITTEN TEXTS

Claude Koch

Editor's Preview: Literature of value will endure depending upon the degree of its involvement with serious ideas, but the years since World War II seem to have produced shallowness and novelty rather than works reflecting the life of the mind. We seem to have wandered into a circus ring abounding in dancing bears, conscious of the dance, but not the reason for it. The common reader does not encounter books which encourage him to reflect; he finds escape-reading and what Russell Kirk calls "literary ephemera, or else the prickly pears and Dead Sea fruit of literary decadence."

Last February, ten writers gathered at Hillsdale to address the topic, " 'Bright Books of Life': Performing Novelty or Literary Idea?" One of the participants, Claude Koch, novelist and director of the Creative Writing program at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, emphasized that good literature cannot be produced by writers who have never had any exposure to it. We must, he insisted, bring the "Bright Books of Life" once more to the attention of our young people with literary talent, as well as the rest of their generation, who will choose vice over virtue if they are not offered some substantive cultural vision.

It is the term *interregnum* in the topic statement of this seminar that attracts me, because I confess that I am one of those who await the restoration of the Stuarts and hope against hope that these years since World War II represent indeed a "lapse or pause in a continuous series"—at the very least in education as I have known it. It is 1986, and just 40 years ago a generation of teachers of which I am a member left one set of trenches for another—not necessarily hazardous trenches in either case, though scary. The heroes went into the urban public schools; others, like myself, joined the faculties of small urban colleges, for 40 years of Freshman Composition and allied disturbances—as not very heroic support troops, I guess—to take the blunted burden of the second attack. And now we, who were once castigated as over 30 and rendered untrustworthy thereby, are to be the great weight again on the backs of those whose lisping steps we sent upon their errant ways. And *their* sons and daughters, in what a wit has called their



"surgically implanted jeans," bear witness that "the more things change . . . ." At least with youth.

The theme of this seminar is a large one. I'd like to block off a small segment of it—indeed, the only segment of which I can claim any useful experience as a journeyman teacher of writing. I'd like to address myself to the fact that the unwritten texts, the poems and works of fiction (and these are the texts of particular interest to me) that will move for good or ill our children's children, are gathering in their prenatal stage in the young people of talent whom we now teach.

It is a stage to be understood if the result is to work to "the natural end of man [as] virtue and well-being." It is a stage in which the young are innocent and at hazard. They will compose as they can, to do what they must. *Can* and *must*—and we in the communities of our colleges monitor discipline in the former, and influence mightily in considerations of the latter.

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They have grown up in a society addicted to an hypnotic instrument of seductive passivity; they have the leisure to be drawn into political postures that involve no pain; they are committed—by a disengagement from allegiances and obligations—to the satisfactions of the moment with the haunting, unspoken, distant thought that it may be the terminal moment. Who can blame those who are attracted to an emerging, rootless urban culture whose only psychological demand (when even that exists) is "getting on?" Even culture that may gradually smother, in its solipsistic bent, the communal life. The "Bright Books of Life" of this seminar would call them back—call us all back.

They, themselves, are writing or will write under the aegis of the schools, particularly the colleges. It is not easy for a young, middle-class American to avoid college anymore. And the young person with aspirations to make the fiction or the poem will inevitably fall into some stage of a Creative Writing program. The interregnum years have given us that activity—more of an activity than a discipline—Creative Writing (*institutionalized,* to use the cant term of opprobrium), honored through semester hours, credits, and degrees. So Creative Writing beckons—and Communications, another and more encompassing activity (whose effect on the solitary arts and the individual attention to them is not yet clear—on those arts that are lonely, not in any pathetic or sentimental sense, but in that they must be undertaken, when they are undertaken seriously, alone—and must be re-created alone). The young person enters the Creative Writing program at a time of dangerous innocence. He has been exposed to teachers of literature who may very well have been most stimulating because they have been politically oriented and carry the enthusiasm of a movement, a cause, in whose favor literature is manipulated. The student, finding a cause, can escape the discipline of enforced isolation that the writing otherwise requires. But his innocence more likely lies in two factors that will seriously affect his writing life. He who, willy-nilly, *hears* by virtue of the fact that he has ears, has probably not been taught throughout his years of education to *listen.* And it is most likely that he has little sense of the past, perhaps even his own past. Because of an unfortunate aspect of the interregnum years, his teachers may themselves have developed little regard for the past as a primary need in the creative life and the life that respects human life.

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Who will tell the young person who has the talent and the need to work toward the fashioning of the poem or the fiction that the past, though transmitted to us as fable, has the density of his own moment in history, and it is that density that he ignores to the disadvantage of his vision and his craft? At what stage in history has the artist ever ceased to enter into his craft through imitation—no matter how free he flew thereafter? For him there is a special respect for, a special advantage in what he can use or might aspire to use in the techniques and the perceptions of his forebears. What blindness or arrogance would deny this?

I am aware that there is nothing more tedious than a teacher "talking shop," but because I think the matter is crucial to our concern in this seminar for what we have called "The Bright Books of Life"—in recognizing them, living them, and perpetuating them—I ask your patience while, for a moment, I recapitulate what seems to me to be basic and obvious.

Is it not a wise, practical principle to feel that we possess the work of literature only to the degree that we have lived it—re-created it in the landscape of the imagination with such concentration that, though it is a work of temporal art never before us "in one piece," our impression is of it as substantial as sculpture in stone. We follow its action as a participant in that action, enter its mood as our own—all orchestrated in a complex movement of words whose grammatical and rhetorical rhythms join with the larger patterns that are provisions of the craft to enlarge its music. It is that concentration which, by means of words, summons elements of our own past and reorders them largely in conjunctions not realized before. Through it we enter the symbolic covenant with the dead and the unborn that contributes its major note to the sustenance of a culture. The experience is not the accumulation of information or the waste of a pleasant hour. It is a sharing and a perpetuation that we have earned through the discipline of a re-creative act. And for the writer who has been listening, it is the enlargement of the instrument of his trade. Understanding the ways

About the Author

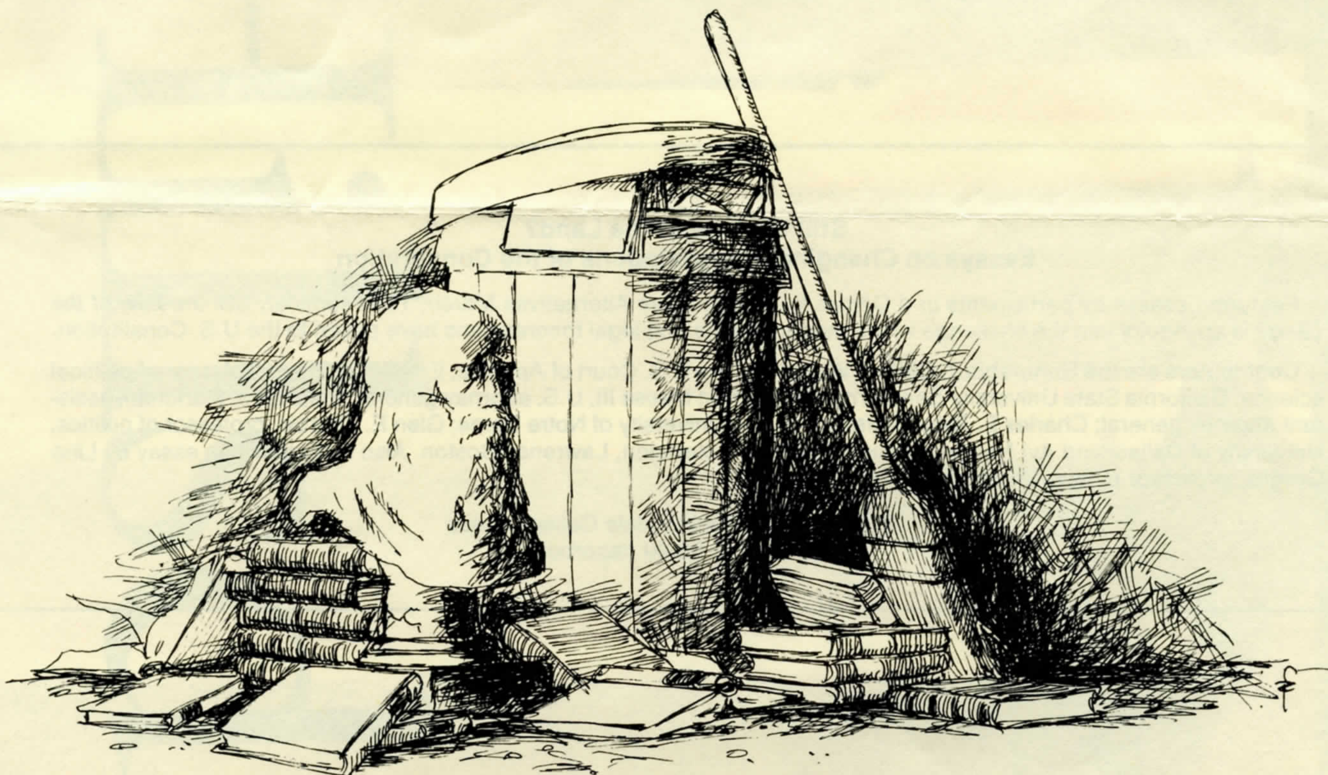
Claude Koch is a professor of English and director of the Creative Writing program at LaSalle University in Philadelphia. He has written four novels: *Island Interlude* (1951), *Light in the Silence* (1958), *The Kite in the Sea* (1964), and *A Casual Company* (1965). His work also appears in *The Southern Review, Four Quarters, The Antioch Review, The Sewanee Review, Craft and Vision: The Best Fiction From The Sewanee Review,* and *Prize Stories: O. Henry Awards.* Currently, his plays *Anne Askewe* and *Mother* are being revived in small company productions.

in which the verbal imagination may move, in its pursuit of definition through words, has been opened up or confirmed. Once again, he who has ears, let him *listen.*

Though in the world of matter we walk different roads under different skies, it is in the landscape of the imagination that we may meet, not surrendering our individual identities but sharing a vision that is made, finally, out of the elements of our individual lives. "Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires, old fires to ashes . . . ," continual and companionable renewal.

When those eyes are shaded and those rhythms terminated, one has more than an interregnum. Tyrannies understand this.

What practical ancestry has the "moment" in America today? In the imagination of the young writer whose bright books we await, very little I am afraid. My generation attended the wake of historical studies just as it sat out the demise of formal studies in rhetoric and logic. I cannot be one of Yeats' "Old men forgetful of their sins." The young people whose sit-ins and the educa-



In his obituary on Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins wrote of "Dylan . . . seeking, with every device of language, the ancestry of the moment." I am grateful for that phrase; language proclaims an ancestry. No matter

They [our children] have grown up in a society addicted to an hypnotic instrument of seductive passivity; they have the leisure to be drawn into political postures that involve no pain; they are committed—by a disengagement from allegiances and obligations—to the satisfactions of the moment with the haunting, unspoken, distant thought that it may be the terminal moment.

what innovations appear, the burden of the language at any moment clearly embodies rhythms appealing to those who have preceded us, and names things long since perceived in revealing ways through the eyes of the dead.

tionists whose theories freed us of history did their work well. We did not. I am not so much pained by the lack of the factual data of history. I have little factual data of my own; one knows where to get it. And though it does vex me to find students graduating from urban high schools who cannot identify Pearl Harbor, I am even more flabbergasted to discover that the owl and the pussycat no longer put to sea in that beautiful pea-green boat. I took that to be of the canon of childhood. No matter—but gone too is the sense of the past that a Vermont villager might have; the conviction that the dead really lived, that one walks in their presence, and that their voices (for you and me in the language of literature) speak out of the travails of their separate pilgrimages—though all roads lead to Canterbury.

That dimension, which for the writer is a dimension of language, or rather, inseparable from language and which provides distance and judgment, matrix and mirror—that dimension, which exists when one strives to re-create the historical moment or the fiction or the poem in its own terms and without political perversion—is not likely to

be, without pain, a talented young writer's strength today. The poem, the fiction conceived, say, as an act of *finding* for the purpose of celebration, of clarification, of definition, will reach as deep into history as one's genuine awareness of the appropriate and analogous past will permit. And so, as deep into the communal life with its ideas and its rituals.

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Evelyn Waugh creates a moment in *Brideshead Revisited,* shored up and given depth by a distant echo of *Twelfth Night*; Philip Larkins's "An Arundel Tomb" illuminates and is illuminated by Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." One sees simultaneously through Waugh's eyes and Shakespeare's, through Larkin's and Keats's. Counterpoint. We enter more fully into the human pilgrimage; we are not alone. We do not expect, necessarily, to agree—we expect to understand. We do not deny differences; we recognize them as necessary. But we share a landscape of the imagination; we are not suddenly travelers on the moon. We are not decked out in the trick of singularity, as was Malvolio. Nor is the poet. The historical sense demands the sense of layered language in which, to a degree, it lives. The elements of the past, wrote St. Augustine, are drawn out of the memory—"not the things themselves which are past, but such words as . . . they, in their passing through our senses, have, in their footsteps, left imprinted in our minds."

The habitual practice of the awareness of the past for a writer is an exercise in humility. It is difficult to learn humility (which has nothing, necessarily, to do with modesty). Through one of those quixotic, wise leaps in etymology (from *humus,* earth) the word has become a synonym for *honesty.* Honesty or humility—difficult to learn. Yet we must learn that we are obligated by the very need for the communal life to carry voices other than our own.

I have a friend who studied print-making in Japan. One of his earliest assignments was to prepare a representation of a stone. He sketched well, and he brought his sketch to his master. He was chided as imprudent. To do a stone, he was told, one must become a stone; one must understand "stoneness." "You have simply provided an appearance. Your rendering is actual but not real." My friend who was thus instructed in humility in the presence of the stone had not thought beyond a certain technical cleverness; the kind of justice due to the thing—or indeed that justice was due to anything but his own sensibility—had not occurred to him. But he had met a master in more than an artistic sense.

Many years ago, speaking at Harvard, Thornton Wilder (a charitable man) considered what he called "the American loneliness"—and what others have called its narcissism or its solipsism. Wilder said that it arose from the American's conviction that he must be an autodidact—that he must teach himself "from the ground up," as it were. Of course, one so oriented is inclined to disparage the past, its formulations in art and life.

The topic statement of this seminar refers to the "print-plentitude" of the interregnum years. That, and those creations of the interregnum years (*exposure* as we say without conscious irony, and *image*—those collocations of television and advertising) may condition the young writer to the conventional, to what appears to be "normal" and hence desirable; that is, voyeurism and the pyrotechnics of narcissism. One grows sad that the maker may not have the decency of the majority of mankind to accept, perforce, the large silence of the humble life—to bear in silence that for which he cannot find the redeeming form that would remove it from the category of the isolated and personal cry (which may be poignant or pathetic or salacious—but is not art, and should not be encouraged in Creative Writing workshops). The inclination to thrust the individual sensibility upon us in detailed stages, as boring as the tedious recitation of "personality" on talk shows, militates against a sense of the communal life, against the dialogue involving us with the dead and the unborn that is a necessary ritual in a culture's survival.

There is, it seems to me, in the solipsistic bent of some contemporary writing an attractive trap for the young writer, who otherwise would probably recognize his gradual escape from it as a sign of maturity. When I think of what this seminar has called the "Bright Books of Life," I think of those fictions, those poems, where love has been the means of the writer's escaping self-centeredness, the narcissism of the moment, into the mystery of a breath of air—the poem, the fiction—liberated by the exigencies of form and the traditions of the craft. We are obligated to bring this experience to the attention of the young writer. It is not easy to talk about. There is a curtain to be drawn, a window to be opened, and fresh air to be let in—because the talented young writer inevitably sees through the enlarged "I."

I think that one of our obligations is to unfold to him or to her the subject of the virtue of charity—love in its traditional sense: the recognition of the right of the other—thing or person, man- or God-made—to *be* in terms of its own best nature, not as an appendage of the self. (The tradition of the realistic short story presses one to this divestment of self.) The analogy of love is not useless, because love is indeed involved. When we first love we feel that we know the other. We see our face mirrored there. As our love deepens, it is the separateness,

the unique creation that bears upon us, and we begin to sense the weight and mystery and wonder and preciousness of another's being—no longer an extension of ourselves. The enlarged "I" is peeled. So in the making. What we bring into being is a collaboration. It is monitored by an inherited language and the voices of the dead—formulations emerging from those that they have realized in art and life. It will shape as surprising to the maker as to anyone else—an epiphany. But only if we have heard those voices and weighed that language.

May I add a postscript? I do not speak as a student of contemporary literature, for I am not. I am merely an interested and, I think, representative reader, in that, largely in no formal or academic way at all, I have come with goodwill upon poems and fictions through the habit of reading—grateful for illumination, or diversion, and appreciative of the beauties of the craft. My contribution to this seminar, such as it is, arises from a crisis of faith. Not in the religious sense. But, quite frankly, in fear for this land, for this incredible experiment in which we participate—for so I must think of America as it was named to me in my youth—that still receives, yearly, multitudes of the hopeful of the world, and must continue to do so or reconsider its reason for being. But the temper of this increasingly complex society—complex in its ethnicity and in the startling changes that technology engenders—is greatly shaped by the secret life of the mind, which is certainly the province of literature, and the manifestation of that mind in manners, customs, ceremonies, and rituals. I do not find the destructive narcissism in my acquaintances that I see in some contemporary writers—but is the latter a prophecy? The number of people delighted by violence and voyeurism of one kind or another in literature and the media far outnumber those actually exposed to violence or actually disrobing in public. Theirs is the violence and voyeurism of the mind. No prophecy there but fact. What are to be the consequences?

The number of people delighted by violence and voyeurism of one kind or another in literature and the media far outnumber those actually exposed to violence or actually disrobing in public. Theirs is the violence and voyeurism of the mind. . . . What are to be the consequences?

Behind us is a vast literature in which the use of matter was essentially sacramental—not inert, but an instrument for revealing the spirit. It was not a literature of illusion to those engaged in it, nor a literature brought into being in times necessarily less troublesome than our own. Do we properly teach the young writer, in his or her apprenticeship, how to live that literature? Is its being implied in practice, and seeding practice, so that he or she has, thus, through an awareness of the past and its perceptions and formulations concerning the human spirit, taken another dimension into account, if only on the working principle that we can know nothing in itself but only in relation to something else? We can actually deprive that young writer of the experience of judging for himself, asking too if the human spirit remains subject to the same impulses to good or evil and if such impulses should be of concern regardless of changes in the workaday world, and their influences. A literature given to a concentration on the isolation of and the satisfactions of the moment—sensuous or political or emotional—either out of despair, or the arrogance and blindness that may accompany a thesis of moral evolution, or cynicism enlarged by the media's selective covering of events, or simple animal greed—cannot be hectored into reform, into what Auden once said we need: "A change of heart."

Dishonesty and negligence begin officially in the schools and affect the talented young, inspired first, I think, by those professors whose instruction is politically oriented, and whose politics cloud their primary commitment to the establishment of disciplines so important to the young writer. We all know the attraction of outrage—how, as for Johnson's man who knows he is to be hanged within a fortnight, "it concentrates [the] mind wonderfully." Give the young writer a cause and, of course, if he believes in it—no matter how temporarily— he must work at it. But we know, too, how selective is outrage. The heart attends not to the human spirit, not to the range of obligations, but selectively: to female versus male, to youth versus age, to black versus white, and all versus the wider community with its varied, individual, and conflicting obligations in which one experiences Faulkner's "human heart at war with itself" and Sidney's conflict of erected wit and infected will. All are lost in the noise.

And at another extreme, I mean no disparagement when I say that it seems to me much easier to proclaim "we are the world" than to face the obligations of piety. One must finally speak to the young writer of piety—of the Roman *pietas:* "the dutiful conduct toward the gods, country, parents, brothers, sisters." Michael Novak recently wrote of "the nation's writers, artists, television producers and journalists." He paraphrased with approval a Dutch commentator to the effect that "One of the most devastating U.S. exports since World War II ... is the pervasive anti-Americanism of the American intellectual class."

As a sense of the validity of the Christian synthesis diminishes—and this has been long in process—a sense of the pathos of life remains, to be turned so easily into cynicism and disgust. No longer are we witnessing, it seems, the Divine Comedy. The traditional virtues are not dramatic to us; but the traditional vices remain titillating (indeed, they emerge as conventional and even desirable—at least to be taken for granted). Society is held up to contempt in the eyes of the world—but selectively. A sense of the past, it seems to me, would convince

a person that he should have at worst a lover's quarrel with America, as Frost said he had with the world. If it goes beyond that, I want him to prove to me that he has grounds. If he has grounds, I want him (or her) to demonstrate to me a willingness to suffer more than the prominent inconvenience of parading before embassies or the equally prominent though less financially taxing inconvenience of speaking at writers' conferences.

If one cannot see the daily parochial heroism, grace, and sacrifices of love in this most vulnerable of societies, he is wilfully blind. Will the young writers now exposed to our influence take these virtues into account? A disappointed romantic will lament the imperfections of the sacrifice, one soured on moral evolution will revert to a glum cynicism, but still the heroes of the real world are here, in America, with us, as in ancient fable—though they live and die largely unnoticed unless the writer of the poem or the fiction "submit the shews of things to the desires of the mind." Perhaps that is what he *is* doing, and it is the desires of his mind that are questionable.

In any event, the angels keep their accustomed places . . .

Still the Law of the Land?
Essays on Changing Interpretations of the Constitution

Featuring essays by participants in a Center for Constructive Alternatives March, 1986 seminar, *Still the Law of the Land?* is an inquiry into the challenge which modern jurists and legal theoreticians have posed to the U.S. Constitution.

Contributors are the Honorable J. Clifford Wallace of the U.S. Court of Appeals; Edward J. Erler, professor of political science, California State University-San Bernardino; Edwin Meese III, U.S. attorney general; Stephen J. Markman, assistant attorney general; Charles E. Rice, professor of law, University of Notre Dame; Glen E. Thurow, professor of politics, University of Dallas, and Avi Nelson, president, WMFP Television, Lawrence-Boston. Also included is an essay by Lino Graglia, professor of law, University of Texas-Austin.

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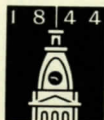

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