

Sermon for William Anderson

by *Thomas Fleming*

"In every part of every living thing
is stuff that once was rock."

—*Lorine Niedecker, "Lake Superior"*

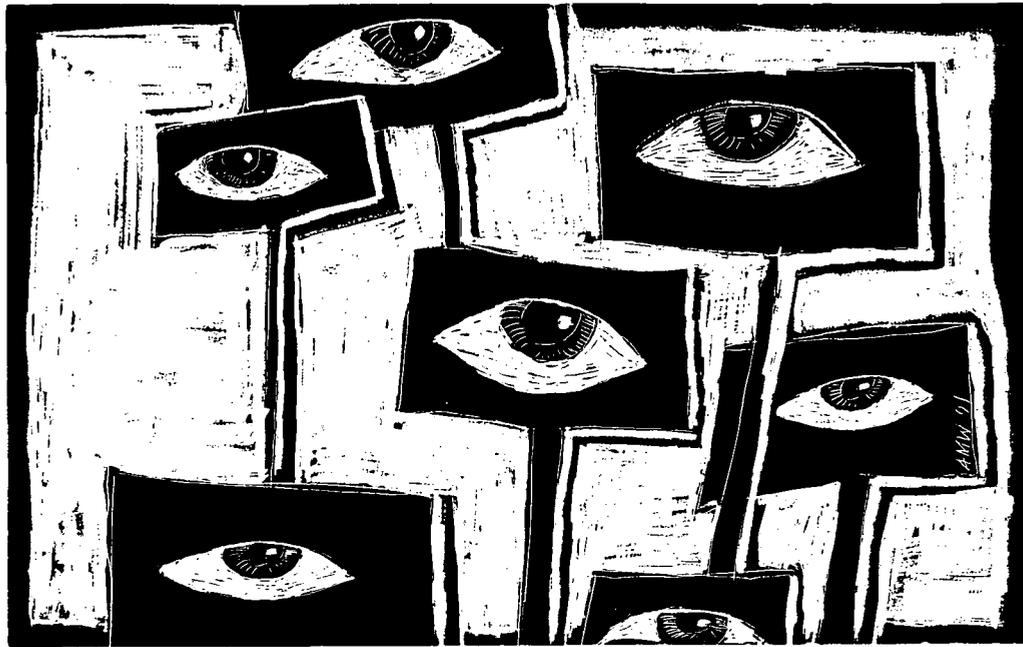
After forty years of dying the world is new;
the sky above all metaphor is blue,
houses a bleed of brush-strokes on this street
I once walked down to school and back in sleet-
disheveled October dawns and bee-bumbling spring
vacation Fridays for nine years: Wyoming
Avenue, which dwindles to a track,
running out to the woods; and past the woods the lake
stretched unfretted beneath the wind-gnarled rock
the glacier thrust. On this familiar walk
to school I read the graduate dean's decree:
"Fleming: Please be advised your Ph.D.
in classics is suspended till you pass,
with grade of B or better, a sixth grade class
in social studies you did not complete."
After thirty years the teacher must be dead—
still parroting her paradigms underground—
and I was sure they'd pulled the old school down,
but I (or everything else) must be wrong:
I see the red brick building, which so long
had fouled itself with smoke from the soft coal
the School Board fed the furnace with.

The roll
was being called by now, and late for class
I cut across the pupil-worried grass
and down the oak floors meant to dignify
the sweated fact and oft-repeated lie
that stands in for the truth with half the risks,
the sums told off on fingers under desks,
the photo exposés of Greece and Rome.
Searching beneath the desktop for the gum
I planted, I find the initials carved: TF.
After a filmstrip on Prokofiev—
attacked by Stalin's music commissar
on his return to the U.S.S.R.—
the pupils, kids I must have seen somewhere,
stare past Gulliver squeezed into his chair,
while teacher reads the new curriculum:
"Athens— with capital A, the ancient home
of Plato, Thales, Homer, Pericles,
was first of all the world's democracies.
(Thales, you remember, fell down a well

from thinking for himself and went to hell.)
The Spartans were the worst of all the Greeks;
they beat their children, killed slaves, lived like sheiks
and abused their wives. Bullies, braggarts, liars,
they ran like dogs when they saw King Darius.
Repeat this after me: the Athenians, good
in general, were bad in owning slaves and should
have freed their women and let aliens vote.
Boys and girls, we learn these things by rote
until we get them right.”

It all came back,
the way they put the question, cranked the rack
until you learned never to cast out nines
as mother taught. “Crayon *inside* the lines.”
I’d dreamed I had escaped, they’d won at last:
Here I am, an exile in my own past—
my one last refuge from the Cosmopole,
torn down to build this prison of the soul
they call democracy: the party state
of bought elections, the engineered debate
on how to mow the artificial lawn
that stretches to a quiet grave, a yawn
after history’s harsh barbaric sex.

I’m out
the door, back on the street to see our house,
which someone’s painted dirty shades of brown.
The same delinquent tore the lilacs down
and stuck, where lilies of the valley grew,
a K-Mart swingset and a barbecue.
I watched them watching television, through
the window, talking back to Donahue
as to a man. Turning my way, Phil
transfixed me with a look I knew would kill—
“Is it life or death?” he asked the audience,
“Dial 1-900, vote for fifty cents” —
unless I dropped my eyes and made a break.
I see my feet running out to the lake
across a sodden field of strawberries
and sweet clover that once had stained our knees,
to the stone-stubbed hill, where we’d built a shack
to hide out from our parents, smoke cigars,
divide up into armies and wage wars
that always ended in an apple feast,
with medals and promotions for the best
eye-punchers and rock-slingers in the sham
combat. And Bill, who died in Vietnam
(I called in ’69, just passing through.
His sister said, “Bill’s dead. I thought you knew.”
And I remembered how he’d loved John Wayne
in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. “How much pain?”
he used to ask, was there when you got shot.)
He was about the best of our bad lot,
who believed the things he didn’t learn in school.
He loved our camp, this shack, the pool
we swung from the elm tree over, reckless boys,
Trojans and skin-kneed Greeks who built their Troys
and toppled them in the course of a summer’s day
till September came and took them all away.



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

The Terror of the Obvious

by George Watson

There is a painting on my wall that fascinates me. That is partly because it is beautiful, partly because of the story it tells. It is a large Dutch oil of 1658 by Hendrik van Vliet, better known for his church interiors, and it shows two men solemnly seated at a dark table lit only by a candle — the one speaking from a book under his left hand, the other about to reply. The most probable view is that the first man is Nicodemus who, according to St. John's gospel, came to Jesus by night. The second man, in that case, whose shadow crosses the wall to touch him, is Jesus.

Nicodemus has been the type of the literal man for two millennia, which is why, being literal myself, the story fascinates me. He is saying that one can only be born once, and he is about to be told that one can be born of the flesh and of the spirit: twice-born, in fact. One day he will help bury his master. In Renaissance English the adjective *nicodemical* is fairly common, meaning excessively literal; and there is even one recorded use of the verb to *nicodemize*, in 1624, meaning to misinterpret by failing to note that something is metaphorically meant.

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In academia, at least, there are not many Nicodemuses now, and few enough in any literary age. Fame has not brought him honor. Though a learned man and a member of the Sanhedrin, he was never a hero, and his famous objection in the third chapter of St. John, like his help to Joseph of Arimathea after the crucifixion, assures him at best of a secondary role. The literal man, it is widely felt, is the one who gets it wrong — to be corrected, once and for all, by the seer and the prophet of God. Since the modern critic, at his most ambitious, sometimes aspires to be a seer, anyone who in academic debate denies that an author is writing metaphorically or symbolically is likely to lose points, and “I think he just meant it literally” is not a seminar remark likely to excite much approval. All that needs to be seen, as an analogy, in context. In a secular age the critic's claims are not to the miraculous but to the hermeneutical; and it is significant that hermeneutics, which once meant biblical interpretation conducted by believers, has long since become the familiar tool of secular analysts who interpret works that, as they imagine, call for no commitment or faith.

In the past quarter-century interpretation of that sort has powerfully invaded criticism from the austere world of Old and New Testament studies — Frank Kermode's lively and elegant book *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (1979) is a classic instance — and receding layers of meaning, as they are laid bare to view, are supposed