



Notre Dame Institute *for*
ADVANCED STUDY

Student Evaluations from Graduate Student Literature and Religion Seminar

Conducted by Dr. Ludwig Steinherr, German Poet and Philosopher

November, 2012

The seminar with Ludwig Steinherr was extremely stimulating. The poet explained parts of his creative process, the intentions and guiding ideas behind his poems, particularly how he uses religious imagery in his poetry, or how he goes about exploring Christian themes in a poem. This insight into the creative process of an author was valuable to me. My work intersects just a little but with aesthetics, and there were many things that were surprising to me about the way he works (for instance, the process is much more conscious and intentional than I had imagined it to be). When I deal in the future with aesthetic issues, particularly about the production of art, I will be better equipped to engage intelligently with them.

A successful interdisciplinary workshop for graduate students is a rare and valuable thing: at this seminar I was able to see how fellow graduate students in literature, theology, history and other departments approach a text, in comparison to my own philosophical approach. I think it is a credit to the organizers that they were able to bring together students from so many departments and have them engage in a lively discussion with each other and the guest. In this discussion no one seemed left out or confused, nor did any particular approach dominate the discussion. I am grateful to NDIAS for including me in this seminar.

Naomi Fisher
PhD in Philosophy Program

Working at the nexus of religion and literature is both exciting and frustrating. While it is an area of study that has gained interest in the past ten years, it is still an area fraught by methodological questions, particularly regarding what it means, exactly, to *do* religion and literature. Interdisciplinary projects in literature can often morph into history or theology projects, turning the literature itself into merely an example of a historical trend or a site for the development and discussion of theology. Having the chance to sit down with other graduate students, faculty, and a poet like Ludwig Steinherr helps to cut across the disciplinary divides that so often recreate themselves in our work by providing an opportunity for dynamic, interdisciplinary conversation not only about the poetry but about the production of the poetry and the organic way in which thinking about objects and places, history and theology develop into a piece of literature that is, ultimately, far more than the sum of its literary-historical or theological parts...and far more than the poet himself might realize as well! As a graduate student, I particularly appreciate the opportunity for such conversations because they keep me from becoming overly myopic in my work and enmeshed only in my own thinking, which is certainly a danger when one is writing a dissertation. Furthermore, sitting down not as students or faculty members but as scholars interested in a similar set of questions helps graduate students to bridge the gap between the world of the student and that of the professional academic and professor, helping us to assume the role of a scholar in the humanities.

The time with Dr. Steinherr was particularly interesting because of the ways in which the conversation highlighted the communicative power of poetry beyond dogmatic statement and argument. One of the recurring and central issues in the discussion was the extent to which particular theological ideas are essential to the worldview presented by his poetry—for example, is the Incarnation necessary to appreciate the material world? Also under discussion was the extent to which religious ideas and imagery actually carry their religious meaning in poetry: does talk of the Incarnation actually mean the dogmatic understanding of the particular incarnation of God in Christ Jesus or is it simply a way of expressing the divine presence within the created world? Such questions are important because they begin to address one of the key questions for all students of literature—why does the study of literature matter? While there are many reasons to study literature, one of the very important reasons in today's world is that being a good student of literature also makes a person a good reader and being able to read the overwhelming number of TV shows, news programs, movies, books, websites, and marketing messages that bombard us daily is absolutely essential to building and maintaining a thoughtful, deliberative, honest and, ultimately, more beautiful society. But, in order to help students learn to be such readers, we must first be able to, at the highest level, read and understand the relationship between form and content ourselves. In the end, this is the question at the heart of all studies of religion and literature: what is the relationship between form and content and why does form matter? If way something is presented is irrelevant, then there is no reason to delve into the mysteries of the divine in narrative or verse. But, considering that the Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all faiths grounded in a *narrative* and *poetic* revelation of the divine, learning to appreciate the nuances, vagaries, ambiguities and sheer problems that literary representation creates trains us to be better readers and thinkers when dealing with the ultimate sorts of questions and truth claims that define religious belief. The time with Dr. Steinherr helped each of us to focus more clearly on these questions of form, content, and value, creating the sort of inspiring conversational atmosphere and intellectual space for non-utilitarian thinking that characterizes academia at its best.

Jessica Hughes
PhD in English Program

It is difficult to put into words just what makes Ludwig Steinherr's poetry so powerful. Perhaps it might be called honesty.

For Steinherr writes of our inevitable relationship to God--though in a way that renders that relationship always and already problematic. For God is, every poem implies, painfully silent--and yet this means that God lurks in every silence. Consider the following lines on the road to hell--which, Steinherr notes, is actually quite narrow:

even the devil's

amazed at the

way we

find it infallibly,

fueled by obsession,

quite without his help

This expression of the paradox at the heart of the human condition, that we are spiritual yet material--specifically, that we are such as to judge ourselves in terms of right and wrong, and yet we compel ourselves to choose wrong, time after time--captures perfectly the simultaneous presence and absence of God. This is the sort of insight that, as a philosopher--specifically, as one with an interest in both ethics and in theology--makes the difference between a mediocre dissertation and an excellent one.

For this realization is an honest one--if that is the right word. Indeed, calling it such misses something: it is the sort of thing that is so close to us that it is profoundly difficult for us to realize. Indeed, it takes a great poet like Ludwig Steinherr to bring us to an awareness of it. This is the reason that the work done by the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study is so crucial: without their invitation to this seminar, I never would have thought in this way about any of this. It is crucial that we continue to support them as they bring intellectuals like Ludwig Steinherr to campus. Indeed, our mission as a university depends on it.

Daniel Sportiello
PhD in Philosophy Program

The Religion and Literature Seminar sponsored by NDIAS this semester was enlightening and affirming for me as a PhD student in an interdisciplinary program. Dr Steinherr writes beautiful poetry and spoke eloquently as a philosopher and a poet who is well aware of the challenges of the craft. Dialoguing with him was an honor but also affirming in the sense that his interdisciplinary experience and the wealth of insight it gave reinforced my own conviction of the importance of interdisciplinarity, especially interdisciplinarity between philosophy and the arts.

The event was also enlightening because it demonstrated that sometimes a philosophical reading of a work can be reductive, that art opens more questions than it answers. In broaching some of the normative questions of the goodness of creation, the value of artistic styles and their representation of reality and the key notions of the Christian faith, the seminar was also quintessential NDIAS and Notre Dame. It is so rare to have this kind of opportunity even in the best universities – an internationally acclaimed poet and intellectual coming from a foreign country and speaking to interdisciplinary and normative concerns. To have it also made available and eminently accessible to an interdisciplinary group of graduate students who have a special interest in issues of religion and literature was a further proof of the quality of this university and of the significance of the work being done at NDIAS.

Peggy Garvey
PhD in Literature Program

Notre Dame's Institute for Advanced Study continues to provide graduate students with remarkable opportunities for close and engaging discussion with some of the finest authors and thinkers alive today. As an aspiring literary scholar, I can attest to the critical value of meetings like the one held recently with major German poet and philosopher, Dr. Ludwig Steinherr. Many students of literature spend the duration of their doctoral educations without actually meeting or discussing literary works with their authors. We often thus gain a false impression of the manner in which literary works relate to their creators, who tend to see them as evolving, personal dialogues with particular themes, or in the case of Dr. Steinherr, with the very notion of the sacred. Discussing his poetry with him lent a new vitality to my sense of literature; we forget that literature has its roots, like philosophy, theology, and history, in the ongoing lived experience of individuals, and Dr. Steinherr's humble and open discussion of his works brought this fact

to life. His uncommonly articulate explorations of his poetry and their relationship to philosophy and history also provide a novel model for bridging personal religious experience with more abstract concerns. Although my work does not focus specifically on Dr. Steinherr's poetry, I came away from the seminar reflecting on many important issues in literary studies and specifically on the complicated relationship of literature to religion.

The Institute's various functions and seminars provide a great deal more than interesting but tangential events for graduate students at Notre Dame. Due to its commitment to exploring big questions and themes, the Institute's guests and programs, while diverse in their scholarly backgrounds, engage fundamental questions that invariably relate to our specific research projects. I often leave Institute events with a renewed sense of a greater purpose or context for my scholarly work, and with an appreciation for the possibilities of scholarly work pursued as a common endeavor.

Erik Larsen
PhD in Literature Program