



Friday Feature for June 19, 2026

Mars Hill Audio

Glenn Arbery on the Vanderbilt Agrarians

Synopsis:

This *Friday Feature* presents an interview with **Glenn C. Arbery** from Volume 103 of the *Journal*. Arbery discusses the mid-twentieth century group of literary critics in the American South known as the Vanderbilt Agrarians. These critics, along with their students, exercised an incredible influence on the study of literature. Arbery suggests they centered their criticisms around changing technological, social, and industrial norms, and they finally settled on the metaphor of agrarianism to highlight the aspects of traditional farming communities they believed did justice to the sort of life people were made to have. Through their prose and especially their poetry, they attempted to draw out and embody these aspects so as to strengthen their readers and communities to be able to resist the practices and norms of consumer society and hyper-mobility and busyness. Arbery discusses the particular strengths of the form of poetry and its power to be able to capture and communicate the truths concerning a well-lived life. This conversation ends with a short discussion of “new criticism.”

This *Feature* also includes clips from two new *Bonus Feature* lectures by Glenn Arbery, both provided by the Center for Beauty and Culture at Benedictine College. The lectures are “Lyric as Disclosure” and “The Tragic Self.”

Transcript

Ken Myers

This is the *Friday Feature* for June 19th. I’m Ken Myers.

Today, I’m happy to announce that we have a new Partner: The Center for Beauty and Culture at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. The executive director of the Center is Dr. Jason Baxter, who has been a guest in the past on our *Journal* talking about Dante and C. S. Lewis. I trust you’ll hear more from him on the future.

On his organization’s website we read: “The Center for Beauty and Culture’s mission is to demonstrate that beauty, which is the revelation to the mind, through the senses, of the fullness of God’s presence, can save the world

through artists who understand and apply objective standards of beauty at the service of truth and goodness.” You can read more about the Center’s work on our website, at Mars Hill Audio.org/cbc, where you can also find a link to the Center’s website.

Today, we’re releasing two new *Bonus Features* courtesy of the Center: two lectures given by Glenn Arbery, Professor of Humanities at Wyoming Catholic College. I’ve had the pleasure of interviewing him twice for our *Journal*. The first of the lectures we’re making available today is titled “Lyric as Disclosure,” and to whet your appetite, here is a short snippet from his talk, in which he’s examining two poems by Ted Hughes, “Flesh of Light” and “The River,” both included in Hughes’s collection *River*.

(Segment from “Lyric as Disclosure” Bonus Feature)

Glenn Arbery

At the same time that Hughes asks us to see the river’s source in the sun itself, which is true in the sense of correctness over countless intermediate steps, he also makes us see something — if we’re attentive to the revelatory suggestion — he makes us see something about the Incarnation, which brims out of the Godhead to enter a world in so lowly a form that cattle can wade the river, as they once stirred around Christ in the manger. Hughes calls the poem “Flesh of Light,” as though to echo “God from God,” “light from light” in the Nicene Creed.

Later in the book, he picks up this startling identification again. The title *River* is also the subject of the sentence with which the poem begins. “River, fallen from heaven, lies across the lap of his mother, broken by world. But water will go on issuing from heaven, in dumbness uttering spirit brightness through its broken mouth. Scattered in a million pieces, And buried, its dry tombs will split. As at a sign in the sky, at a rending of veils, it will rise, and a time after times. After swallowing death in the pit, it will return stainless for the delivery of this world.”

So the river is a god, knee deep among reeds, watching men, or hung by the heels down the door of a dam. It is a god — inviolable, immortal — and will

wash itself of all deaths. This is simply what the word *river* means, what a river *is*.

And from the first disclosure, there's a pathos. River, fallen from heaven, lies across the lap of his mother broken by world. River is Michelangelo's *Pietà*. And Mary is Earth itself, *Gaia*. And here is the passivity of Christ's body exposed from it, deposed from the cross, broken by world — *world* here in the sense of civilization, commerce, conquest, all the constructs of man's enterprise and pride and sin. The world that Wordsworth evokes when he writes that the world is too much with us. This is river fouled by waste, hung by the heels down the door of a dam exploited for energy, like the Rhine, and Heidegger's essay concerning technology, but for all that still uttering spirit brightness from its broken mouth.

River reveals Christ as though his baptism in the River Jordan, which announces the beginning of his public ministry, were at the same time a revelation that he *is* the river from which he rises, inviolable, immortal. He will wash himself and therefore us of all deaths. Regardless of what foulness and willfulness we empty into river, it will rise in a time after times. After swallowing death and the pit, it will return stainless for the delivery of this world. River is baptismal, resurrectional.

KM

That's a preview from Glenn Arbery's lecture "Lyric as Disclosure," available now as a *Bonus Feature*. If you're not currently a member, but would like to hear the lectures shared by the Center for Beauty and Culture, you can see information about signing up for a free affiliate membership on the Partner web page at Mars Hill Audio.org/cbc.

Dr. Arbery's second lecture is titled "The Tragic Self," and here's a short excerpt in which he's speaking about the tragic hero Ajax from *The Iliad*, who comes to his senses after his mad slaughter of animals, thinking they were his enemies, and realizing that he has dishonored himself.

(Segment from "The Tragic Self" Bonus Feature)

GA

Pretending to have a change of heart, expressing his willingness to submit to the rule of Agamemnon and Menelaus, Ajax uses this pretext of needing time alone. And then he finds a solitary place, says a few prayers — probably the first sincere ones — and then falls on the sword that Hector gave him after their duel. The suicide takes place in full view of the audience, though not of his fellow characters in the play. We gaze through the second half of the play upon the lifeless body and through it into the abyss of his passion for distinction.

The disrespected, the one always inadequately honored, Ajax cannot achieve the distinction he wants, but he wants this so much that he rejects the gods in pursuing it. He tries to kill the leaders who rejected him, but succeeds only in killing the animals, which is a kind of unholy slaughter. Exposed as a fool in the futility of his attempt, he anticipates the laughter of his enemies. He thinks that Agamemnon and Menelaus are going to be mocking him. This great *hamartillo* is trying to kill his friends, and yet killing himself too is pathetic, pitiable, a kind of avoidance of responsibility.

And great as he is, Ajax seems like one of our young contemporaries who plot some horrendous slaughter and then carry it out and then commit suicide, thinking, as I mentioned, that condemnation and notoriety will at least lift them from purposeless anonymity. But when Ajax turns his hand against himself, he deliberately rejects the other, nobler view of himself that he used to trick Tecmessa into letting him go off alone.

I just think these lines are very interesting. This is pure lie, all right? He's using this simply to escape from her and get away so that he can commit suicide. But he says, "I must give way, as all dread strengths give way, in turn and deference. The dread blast of the gale darkens and gives peace to the sounding sea. Shall not I learn place and wisdom? Have I not learned this only so much to hate my enemy as though he might again become my friend?"

It's a real wisdom in this thing that he's saying that is absolutely false. This humility would be wisdom, because it would be a willing relinquishment of his false view of himself. It'd be a kind of death to himself, to the fiction he had

had of himself. But he rejects it, and the rejection goes to the heart of his own tragic self-fiction. He stands above his own forgiveness and executes himself.

KM

Glenn Arbery, from the lecture “The Tragic Self,” newly available as a *Bonus Feature* from the Center for Beauty and Culture, our newest Partner.

As I mentioned earlier, I spoke with Glenn Arbery twice for our *Journal*. The first of those interviews was in 2001, when we talked about his book *Why Literature Matters: Permanence and the Politics of Reputation*. That interview is available on our website and app as an *Archive Feature*; it’s from Volume 50 of the *Journal*. Here’s an excerpt:

GA

What I think literature can do, although it’s not, you know — you don’t work with exact repetitions with literature. You work with a movement into some sort of experience of form that can take a reader or an audience down into those depths where ritual also reaches.

KM

I talked with Glenn Arbery again in 2010 about a book he edited titled *The Southern Critics: An Anthology*. When I introduced that interview on Volume 103 of the *Journal*, I mentioned that one of my crusades as an editor was to challenge the widespread assumption that the link between form and content — in works of art or in social practices— is simply conventional or arbitrary. Certain forms or styles do some things well and some things badly. Limericks work toward different ends than do sonnets. Loud and fast music doesn’t nourish contemplation, and marching bands make more sense at football games than does, say, plainchant or Renaissance polyphony. And this is no accident. It’s natural, it’s in the nature of things.

The essays in the book that Glenn Arbery edited in 2010 were written by a group of literary critics who understood very well the links between form and content, between forms of creative expression and forms of social and economic life and the content of various ways of understanding human nature and human purpose. The book is called *The Southern Critics: An Anthology*. The critics in question are principally the literary group that came to be known as

the Fugitives, a collection of young Southerners at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s who — with their students, followers, and sympathizers — exerted an enormous influence on the study and practice of literature. In some circles, their influence is still felt strongly. Among this group were Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks. The anthology that Glenn Arbery edited includes essays by Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon, later writers better known for fiction and essays than for literary criticism.

As Glenn Arbery explained to me when we talked about his anthology, the concern of all these writers was not limited to concerns of their region, although the initial impetus for their uniting was tied up with particularly Southern struggles.

GA

There were several immediate things, I guess. Probably the most troubling to most of them was the Scopes trial, which I guess was in 1925 or so, and the South came out of that looking pretty backward, you know, to most of the rest of the nation.

KM

Yeah, think of H. L. Mencken's "the booboisie."

GA

Right, yeah, and Mencken had written an essay, I think even earlier than that, called "The Sahara of the Bozart" chastising the South for not having any artists or poets or anything — great blank for the whole extent of the former Confederacy.

That was part of it. I think they were aware that there were things about the South that were defensible, and not in terms of the Lost Cause romance that had dominated the Southern imagination since the end of the Civil War. They were trying to come up with a more substantial way of seeing things and Agrarianism is what they came up with. Whether that's a sufficient metaphor I think a lot of them later came to doubt. But at the time it seemed the one that they could pose against what seemed to them the dominance of industrialism, not just in the North, but increasingly in the South.

And what they regretted about industrialism was what a lot of people regret now, that is a standardization of everything, you know, everything being understood in terms of its monetary value, the loss of some sense of the good life outside the context of consumerism. And they posed this as a kind of — it wasn't really a *program* so much as it was an *image*. But this has been the source of much debate whether they meant it practically or symbolically. But they posed it against some dominant strains in American thought, one of them being communism. They didn't want communism, they wanted individualism. They wanted the private farm and the virtues that came from it.

That's the kind of thing they wanted to do, is to bring before the Americans of 1930 an image of the good life that wasn't based on continual progress, that didn't necessitate having more and more money, or having more and more things, as though these were going to make you happy, but some kind of rootedness in place and family and having enough without always having to strive to get more, and enjoying life rather than trying to make a rat race of it.

If you're thinking simply in terms of being a consumer, then you're always looking for those things that you desire and you're having to simply come up with the means to purchase what's desirable. Whereas what the Southern critics are really trying to get at is a traditional way of life in which you're not a consumer so much as you're a participant in a society that has certain demands on you, that requires of you manners and art in what you do, that involves you in rituals, and that keeps from making those things that you desire simply something that you *consume* — which is a strange word that we use, in any case — and [instead] something that you honor, you enjoy. And I think that's also part of what they're aiming at with poetry and how to get at that attitude toward toward things.

KM

And all of those attributes of the way of life in a traditional culture don't simply *endorse* desires. They all *train* the desires.

GA

That's right. They give them a form, which is one reason that training in poetry might be particularly appropriate. You know, you're always being trained in forms.

KM

Yeah. Maybe you could tease that out a little bit. Somewhere I think you comment on poetry — or maybe it's one of the essays that you cite. A reference is made to poetry involving a training of the sentiments. How does poetry train the sentiments?

GA

I would say that it offers you images of people who are in circumstances that arouse their feelings. It shows you how they act, or it gives you, say, something like Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," with its sort of ironic argument [which] works you through the attempt to win over a young lady. And it does so by the kind of infinite suspension of things through the couplets that Marvell uses, all of which is trying to get her to overcome her disdain or her reluctance. But at the same time you're seeing someone engaged in an imaginative act that keeps his own passion at bay at the same time that it's trying to move the object of the poem.

I think when you read Shakespeare, you see over and over encounters between people who are forced by the nature of the play to put their passions into words, to voice them and to make visible, as it were, the subtleties of their own inner natures, so that when you experience those over and over, it begins to form the way that *you* respond to situations. It begins to make your own emotional life more articulate, which means that you have access to those otherwise dumb forces within you that would move you in ways that you might not understand. I think they make them subject to reason, though they're not deadened by it. I think that's what poetry has — I mean, in a sense poetry has that advantage, say, over philosophical ethics.

KM

Yeah, I was going to ask how poetry, in its form of articulation of those desires — why is that better than a more analytic, or even a spreadsheet or a flowchart, that might describe something?

GA

A rational choice analysis of a situation? I think because it shows you someone making a decision based on his emotion or his idea, and then how that works out. I always think about Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when Raskolnikov has this notion that he's the Superman, you know, all he has to do is prove it by killing someone to get the money that he needs to start out his new life. And in doing the deed and in experiencing the terror of what Raskolnikov undergoes, I think the reader works through what might look like a superficially attractive idea, say, to a young adolescent mind, who's sort of charged with self-importance or with a kind of arrogance of superiority.

To see that worked through, to see the suffering it entails not just for himself but for others, to see the gradual dissolution of the idea under questioning by Porphyry Petrovitch, who is a kind of Socratic figure in the novel — all of that is to me much more powerful than simply reading a two- or three-paragraph refutation or some sort of quick summary of why you shouldn't make this kind of decision.

Think about Shakespeare's tragedies — not that Shakespeare writes these as moralistic lessons, but Macbeth's ambition or Lear's foolish decision in his old age to reject the daughter who loves him most — seeing these things worked out, seeing their consequences, experiencing the consequences, I should say, is a profound way of teaching. At the same time it's the way you understand the form of the work.

KM

And through our experiencing of the work and through the characters, the language is always an essential part of it. You talked about articulation earlier, the giving of adequate words and words that have a particular kind of resonance to them is essential in that.

GA

It is essential. In some ways this is the most difficult thing to talk about. And I think that's why Brooks and Ransom and the others who were engaged in this conversation in the forties and early fifties were so intensely engaged in it.

The language of a poem is so particular to that poem in its rhythms and the way the words sound next to each other, in the particular choice of words, that it's difficult even to imagine what the poem would be if you simply paraphrased it — used other words and had no access to that level of the experience of the poem. That's particular to a language, it's particular to a culture, and it's something whose sensitivity has to be learned. And I think that's probably one of the things most necessary to teach, and perhaps most difficult to teach.

KM

As I was reading the essays in *The Southern Critics*, it occurred to me that it may also be difficult to teach many students that the kinds of concerns that were so intensely felt by these writers still mattered, particularly their concerns about the critical relationship between literature and social well-being.

At the time of our interview, Glenn Arbery was a visiting professor at Assumption College in Massachusetts, and he assured me then that such concerns were not impossible things to teach.

GA

Well, I think that if you get the students early enough, the questions can still be formed in them. And I think that that's particularly the case if you have the students read widely or deeply in the classical tradition, out of which these writers all come, so that they get a sense of that larger, wholer vision of the way a society or a culture might imagine itself, some kind of integral sense of the being of the individual in the larger society.

I think the harder question is how to get this across to academics, who would read these essays and treat these questions with a kind of jaundiced look — that would be very difficult to overcome, especially after a generation or so of theory that kind of cuts against the grain of what they're after.

KM

I also thought of Wendell Berry's essay "The Loss of the University." He looks at somebody who says we can teach the Bible as literature without violating the First Amendment. And he says, I don't even think *literature* should be taught as literature. The idea that to teach something as "literature" means that you bracket the question of whether or not its convictions are important and

valuable and true. “We don’t learn *from* literature, we learn *about* literature” is the attitude. And I wonder whether the jaundiced view that you suggest might be dominant in the academy is because those professors have accepted the idea that the best we can do is learn *about* literature, not learn *through* it.

GA

Maybe the issue that lies behind that is some sort of feeling that literature really doesn’t have anything to offer unless it’s working in some more or less immediately useful, and I want to say almost propagandistic, way. So that it leads to some sort of social change and that that change is usually in a certain direction that has to do with the usual things of race, class, and gender, and that is a push toward justice understood in terms of equality and so on. There’s so many things that literature addresses that open up those questions — and opens up the question of what the good life is — that you have to teach it, it seems to me, always as though it’s opening on some truth, or at least partial truth.

But that does seem to have been largely lost. You look at it simply as another exhibit of how somebody could imagine something and you lose the possibility of its opening to the truth.

That’s I think something that maybe the Southern critics could help address. The difficulty there is that to some extent, the Southern critics, in turning toward the New Criticism, are directing attention back to the work, to the literary work, as an object in itself, something that has to be understood in its own terms. So in a way you could say they lead to a certain kind of formalism that directs the attention away from the truth of the poem or of the novel.

But I think that what they’re trying to do is to get people to pay attention to the work formally so that what it’s teaching can come across. Without that, you don’t get anything but the sort of surface doctrines that are being presented often.

KM

Maybe you could explain quickly what the [term] New Criticism refers to. And not all of the Southern critics accepted that term, I think. Was it Tate who wasn’t sure there was such a thing?

GA

Well, he was a little wary of that kind of label, I suspect. Well, the New Criticism was really a reaction to the emphasis on philology and linguistics and biography that tended to dominate the study of literature from about the 1890s up until the generation of the new critics in the 1930s. They were rebelling more or less against people who would study everything around the poem rather than studying the poem itself, which had its own formal principles and its own way to be read. The New Criticism came to be understood simply as a methodology of looking for paradoxes, of looking for tensions, and never looking at the history surrounding it, never looking at the biography. I think all those are late calcifications of what the Southern critics were trying to do. They simply wanted to direct attention back to the literary work itself, to study the work in itself.

KM

And the form of the work was itself meaningful, not just a container of meaning.

GA

It wasn't just what Cleanth Brooks called the "paraphrasable core." It was all part of the meaning of the poem, part of the *being* of the poem, if you will.

KM

To use a phrase you use in a later context, it was in a sense a sacramental view of poetry.

GA

Right. And again, I use that language with some hesitation, because that even gets pushed too far toward the verbal icon, you know, toward treating the poem as though it really were sacred and couldn't be thought of outside a really almost ritualistic context. But still there's something to it that I think is important, which is that it opens on to an understanding of the sacramentality of things in the world when poems are truly understood rightly, when they're good poems.

KM

Glenn Arbery, talking with me in 2010 about an anthology he edited titled *The Southern Critics*. Dr. Arbery is currently Professor of Humanities at Wyoming Catholic College and you can listen to two lectures he gave last year as our newest Mars Hill Audio *Bonus Features*. These two talks were given for the Center for Beauty and Culture, our most recent Partner. Links to those lectures are on our website at [Mars Hill Audio.org/cbc](http://MarsHillAudio.org/cbc). The executive director of that Center is Jason Baxter, and I strongly encourage you to listen to the conversations I've enjoyed with him. Search for his name on our guest index for a listing of those interviews.

That's all for this week; thanks for listening; I'm Ken Myers.