

From *In Measured Resistance: On Hayden Carruth's  
'Contra Mortem'*

IN THE CHARACTERS OF MEURSAULT FROM *THE Stranger* and Dr. Rieux from *The Plague*, Camus presents different attitudes toward a contemporary anxiety. Neither man questions whether or not God is dead but each demonstrates his own particular incapacity to believe. Meursault finds the question of God uninteresting and not worth his time, whereas Dr. Rieux is less aggressive in his response to those who try to convert him. He does not ridicule the believer's point of view but simply says it is not his own. Unlike Dr. Rieux, who demonstrates no anguish over his inability, there are those who are tormented, or at least disturbed, by why they find it so difficult to imagine how others can believe. These people live, not in a crisis of faith, but in a challenge to their imaginations.

I am one of the latter group. My search is not one toward faith but toward a condition of awe at who and what lives outside me. Abraham had the advantage of a purer ignorance than mine. But we live where and when we live in the bodies and minds we are given. As I work backwards I look for references closer to my experience before I can learn Abraham's language. "Contra Mortem" by Hayden Carruth is one of my references. It is a poem of wonder, gratitude and celebration expressed by a man whose expectations of the life he would live were decimated by mental illness. "Contra Mortem" is the foundation of a new life Carruth built through poetry after being told by doctors in an asylum he would never live anything which would approach a normal existence.

Before his illness blossomed in 1953, Carruth was editor of *Poetry* at the age of twenty-eight, his poems were being published in the right magazines and journals, and he was on his way toward the type of conventional literary success of which he had dreamed. When he collapsed it was recommended by his psychiatrist that he be admitted to Bloomingdale, a private asylum in White Plains, New York that was a branch of New York Hospital.