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Disciplinary Brief

## **LITERATURE AND THE MORAL URGENCY OF AMBIGUITY**

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To respond to Jennifer Herdt's compelling plea to restore consideration of virtue and character formation to academic discourse and practice, I argue that literature can play a crucial role in this undertaking. I argue further, however, that it often does so in ways that complicate our understanding of what the process of being/becoming virtuous looks like. This is not an account of what all literature does, but what some literature does, which adds texture not only to our appreciation of literature but to the often-conflicted experience of pursuing a virtuous life: what Herdt calls the effort towards "a finer-grained grasp of ... virtues and vices."

### **Literature as Contested Space**

In his essay "Religion and Literature" (in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 1933), T.S. Eliot famously (some would say *infamously*) asserts, "Though we may read literature for pleasure, ... this reading never affects a sort of special sense; it affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence." He later adds, "It is our business, as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business as Christians, *as well as* readers of literature, to know what we *ought* to like" It was for this reason that in this same essay Eliot contends that "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." But the problem, he continues, is that there is no longer such a shared "definite" standpoint, and as a result, the formation of moral judgments whether in literary works or from the reading of literature has disintegrated. For him, that "common code" was championed, was made coherent by religious beliefs, which secularization had undermined, substituting not necessarily immorality or amorality, but the suspension of resolute moral judgment itself.

Set Eliot's perspective alongside a claim like that of Georg Lukács who famously described the novel as inhabiting "a world that has been abandoned by God" (in *The Theory of the Novel*, 1916), or the more recent views of Salman Rushdie and others that fiction is inherently secular, and we get a sense of how contested the space is when we talk about literature and morality, or in the context of this conversation,

literature and virtues, particularly when appeal is made to theological moorings. Whose Virtue? Whose Morality?

### **Literature Creates Moral Space**

Despite competing views about what literature is and what it does (or *should or could* do), and the sources that inform literary creation and criticism, all these writers and thinkers would agree that literature creates a *moral space* of some kind. And how could it not, given its commitment to explore and express the human condition? I suspect that offense is taken not at the affirmation of this rather obvious quality, but when proposing that it is the *purpose* of literature to teach virtue and inculcate morals. Even Eliot distanced his views from literature that was too pedantic, or in our idiom, too 'preachy,' which failed by comparison with the literature he esteemed. His appeal for a discriminating and theologically astute Christian reader did not commend an indiscriminate approval of literary works whose explicit aim is to inculcate virtues, as we may find especially in youth literature such as the Horatio Alger series or The McGuffey Reader. What kind of moral spaces, then, do poetry, fiction, drama, create?

### **Literature Generates Moral Complexity**

I would argue that what some may find to be its deficiency is in fact one of its greatest advantages in this regard: literature creates and generates *moral complexity*. Yes, the embodiment of virtuous lives (or lives in need of virtue) in works of the literary imagination has affective pull that other kinds of texts do not, and for this reason we may commend literature as a distinctive vehicle for inculcating moral vision and virtuous aspirations through its characters or personae. When we encounter the heroes we find in such works as *The Lord of the Rings* we want to be like them, we want to be brave, loyal, willing to sacrifice. The affect of Tolkien's remarkable literary imagination inspires us to be people with these same virtues – prompted not by a list of qualities but by lives embodied in the creative work, which have a powerful influence on our own aspirations. Critics have affirmed this potential found in literature for millennia. Such works *make a virtuous life dramatically exciting* (something Peter Jackson failed to appreciate in the conflicted portrayal of central characters in his film version of Tolkien's classic).

But as with biblical narrative, protagonists are also fraught with their own weaknesses and moral deficiencies. Literature embodies such ambiguities and multi-valences in ways that connect with our own, equally fraught moral lives. This is not to say that the ambition to live a virtuous life is treated best when that prospect is held in abeyance because of the failure to fulfill it. But to recognize, as literary embodiments distinctively enable us to do, that we are complicated creatures who often find ourselves in morally ambiguous situations and ones of significant moral failure, as often as not the product of our own [un]doing. What this kind of literature does distinctively, regardless of whether it is rooted in explicit religious commitments, is *provoke moral urgency*. Some of the most edifying literature in terms of the cultivation of a virtuous life is not the fiction or poetry or drama that resolves into a clear moral vision, as compelling as this also can be. It is those works that approach moral virtue at an angle, which portray moral decadence (without gratuitously indulging it), which offer characters who are morally conflicted,

immoral, or even amoral, that make us want to find such a vision, and to find it embodied in our own lives. We encounter the lives of these personae or a world that lacks virtue and we wish it were not so.

This also is not an original insight, nor even a recent literary invention (however tinged with modern and postmodern sensibilities literary expression has been over the past century). Indeed, we find a similar dynamic at work in many episodes from the Bible or in Greek tragedies or Shakespearean drama. But in the context of our discussion of virtue, and particularly in light of a desire to overcome the erosion of virtue (or even to aspire to such a life), we can tend to think that only literature which offers clear moral vision and exemplary virtuous characters aligns with our ambition. While affirming the contribution of such works, my argument is that this is both a narrow understanding of literary and artistic power and of the process by which we come to pursue a virtuous life. In this respect, the complexity of 'developing virtues', which Herdt highlights, fits best with my commendation of other literary works that generate moral urgency by complicating this process, by obscuring moral clarity or leaving the prospect of moral goodness in suspense.

There are a multitude of examples of this kind of literature, both ancient and recent. Yes, the privileging of moral ambiguity has become far more commonplace in the literary imagination of the last hundred years. My aim is not to valorize ambiguity or doubt in the ways such works often do, as if we have no basis for affirming something like virtue. My interest is in those works that do foster moral urgency and indirectly direct us towards virtue, despite the absence of it in the lives of their characters (or speakers, as in poetry). Space only permits me to highlight works by two authors, one a Christian, the other agnostic, both literary geniuses, with the hope that I can demonstrate at least some facets of my main point.

## Flannery O'Connor's Christian Irony

My first author is the Catholic fiction writer Flannery O'Connor. As much as any Christian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, O'Connor appreciated the difficulty of conveying her religious sensibilities to audiences that no longer shared that vision, to "penetrate the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality," as she put it ("Novelist and Believer"). She writes of this dilemma:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make them appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. ... when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the blind you draw large and startling figures. ("The Fiction Writer and His Country")

In creating such figures, O'Connor also understood that direct appeals would fail. As a result, she sought to "bend" her story and its characters with particular gestures that would *"suggest both the world and eternity ... a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery"* ("Mystery and Manners"). In doing so,

O'Connor deploys irony as a central technique for getting at a vision of faith and goodness at a slant, or 'angle,' as I call it.

There are few characters that we find appealing in her fiction, let alone those of genuinely virtuous quality. And yet we come to sympathize with them and their plight. An outstanding example of her use of irony made manifest through startling figures of such dubious quality is found in her short story "Good Country People," an epithet repeated throughout the story. We quickly realize that the very title announces an irony that will govern the drama that unfolds.

Published in 1955 in the collection *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, "Good Country People" centers on the character of Joy, who has renamed herself "Hulga" because it sounded like 'ugly,' a decision that represented what she considered her "highest creative act." 'Joy/Hulga' is 32-years old and single and wears an artificial leg because of a hunting accident suffered as a young girl, an object that becomes an image for a deeper, spiritual disablement. Because of a weak heart, she has returned from completing a PhD in philosophy at a prestigious New England university to live with her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, on the family farm. Hers is a brooding presence in the home, glowering over the daily routine with scorn for everyone, often directed at her mother. At one point she screams, "Woman, do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" The irony of course lies in Joy/Hulga's own egotistical blindness (the situating of "not" next to "God" underscoring the point).

When a [supposed] Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, arrives at their home, he disrupts Joy/Hulga's comfortable nihilism. He charms Mrs. Hopewell by approving her declaration that "good country people are the salt of the earth," a quality he claims for himself. He tells both mother and daughter that he has devoted himself to a life of Christian service, frequently citing the Bible. And he is fascinated by Joy/Hulga, who, despite her disdain for religion, begins to fantasize seducing Manley and leading him to "a deeper understanding of life" as one who possesses a superior mind to his. But when they meet for a rendezvous in a barn loft, Manley exposes his true character. While Joy/Hulga reacts to more talk of faith by professing her atheism, regarding Manley with amusement and pity, Manley presses Joy/Hulga to tell him that she loves him. She replies that "I don't have illusions. I'm one of those people who see through to nothing. ... We are all damned, but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see there's nothing to see," insisting that there be no dishonesty between them. Manley demands she prove it by removing her wooden leg.

When she finally yields to his request, believing naively that "for the first time in her life she was face to face with real innocence," Manley betrays her trust, absconding with the leg and abandoning Joy/Hulga in the loft. As he is leaving, Joy/Hulga pleads with him, "aren't you just good country people?" Denouncing any genuine Christian faith as "crap," and reminding her that she had said "she didn't believe in nothing," he taunts her, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!"

This is a story that plays on appearance and reality, on authenticity and deceit, all wrapped in a contemplation of moral goodness as well as sincere faith. Joy/Hulga's claims to have no illusions and her belief in 'Nothing[ness]' explodes when she confronts the cynical and exploitative Manley Pointer, the

embodiment of the very tenets she propounds. Playing on the image of eyes and blindness throughout, O'Connor portrays the inevitable outcome of a failed moral vision when that vision is tied to arrogant self-deception. "Good Country People" resolves into a question mark rather than an affirmation. Are we really the good people we think we are? Is anyone? What kind of people should we be? What are the implications for beliefs that deny the substance of transcendental values such as virtue when someone acts them out, leaving destruction in their wake?

The story's center of gravity is captured in the name Joy-Hulga-Hopewell – at the heart of the theological virtues of joy and hope is an ugliness that haunts any presumption to think that a virtuous life is easily won, especially when shorn of the very moorings required to fulfill such an aspiration. O'Connor's story doesn't explicitly commend any of this and offers no character who embodies such a life. Rather, the easy affirmation that we are 'good people' collapses into a cliché, in Joy/Hulga's case under the weight of an outlook that refutes the notion while requiring it of others. We as readers who perceive the irony of Joy/Hulga's plighted self-deception are thus provoked to think again about our own presumptions of goodness, whether our own or others'. What by story's end becomes the possibility of enlightenment for Joy/Hulga (we never know), becomes for us a *potentiality* as her story challenges us to undertake our own self-scrutiny. To put it bluntly, we don't want to be or to end up like her! A summons to true moral goodness and integrity rises to the fore from the shadows rather than from the shimmering lives of its exemplars. And because O'Connor's use of irony generates this affect for readers indirectly, space is made for us to become participants in a process of self-reflection that promises fresh awareness of the stakes involved.

Again, O'Connor's method, which we find throughout her fiction, is not new. Aristotle spoke of similar effects through the catharses generated by the fallen heroes of Greek tragedy, and the benefits of negative examples for the cultivation of a virtuous life is well-attested throughout the history of literature, including of course the Bible. Perhaps we need to be reminded of this as we commend the work that literature can do. Where O'Connor is unique lies in her distinctively Christian outlook and her appreciation for the condition of audiences who can no longer recognize moral repugnance and evil, who require the shock of "large and startling figures" that can reawaken such sensibilities.

But what of other works that do not share her religious framework, which depict amoral worlds and characters with no moral compass, and proffer no appeals, directly or indirectly, to a particularly virtuous life? Can these achieve the same kind of moral urgency that I argue for?

## **The Moral Urgency of Moral Ambiguity in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction**

Our second work fits this category, a novel by the Pulitzer Prize winning author Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, which is loosely based on an alleged 19<sup>th</sup> century account. Its central protagonist is "the kid," a name at once iconic and anonymous. While invoking the classic Western saga, the novel subverts any traditional hero narrative. Instead, it portrays the adventures of a

young man who finds himself in the company of a gang of bloodthirsty scalp hunters in 'the old west', who wreak, and suffer, violence, destruction, and death everywhere they go. Other parties are portrayed in the same light, including a company of Union soldiers, armies of warring Native Americans, and a gang of Mexican bandits.

Apart from the scores of slaughtered victims of every imaginable violation and violence, no group or individual emerges with any possible moral good or virtue. This a world of unspeakable inhumanity and greed which the story portrays with relentless, soul-crushing intensity, a "void" with no ultimate meaning, reflected in the stark landscape, "the bloodlands of the west" (144). It is one of the most difficult and yet compelling works one may ever read. As the critic Richard Woodward has written of this and other novels by the author in his essay "McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," "McCarthy's prose restores the terror and grandeur of the physical world with a biblical gravity that can shatter a reader."

The leader of the gang is Glanton, whose only interest, like the others, is money, and who revels in the hideous crimes he and his men commit. They are eventually joined and dominated by another figure, Judge Holden, a giant of a man physically with an equally monstrous ego, proportionate to his almost mythical presence in the story. He is variously described as "some great pale deity" and "a great ponderous djinn." He becomes the kid's chief nemesis, together with Glanton an architect of the gang's brutal run of terror. Truly a 'large and startling figure' in the tradition of O'Connor and her use of the "grotesque," the judge (as he is called) is the embodiment of willful, amoral destruction and twisted humanity, not only a "vast corpus" but "a vast abhorrence."

But the judge is also the embodiment of another nightmare: the *Übermensch* or superman of Nietzschean proportions, who celebrates the autonomous will of those with power to create their own existence and destiny. In one of his several alarming speeches or 'lessons,' he declares,

"If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of mankind would he not have done so by now? ... The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. ... His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day" (153). Later he declares, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent. ... Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. ... In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation" (207).

The judge is an anti-Christ, or rather a parody of Christ, the only other appearance of Christ at a village feast in the form of a crucifix, "a rude Christ ... a poor figure of straw with carven head and feet, the priest bearing it beaten as he fell to the ground "clutching his image" (198, 199).

As the one who ultimately triumphs in the novel and over the kid (I won't spoil the ending), he emerges as the icon of the human spirit that drove American western expansion and all those they fought and killed. In his final 'lesson' he proclaims that "war is god," which "endures because young men love it and old men

love it in them" (262). He then clarifies, "Men are born for games. Nothing else," and (echoing Nietzsche) that "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak" (262, 263). Against the affirmation of Flannery O'Connor, the judge concludes, "Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is there is no mystery" (263).

What are we to conclude from this, or more to the point of my argument, of what edifying value is *Blood Meridian* for the pursuit of virtue? In the end, the judge's vision dominates this anti-epic, and no refutation is offered by the author, or by the characters (despite brief confessions of conscience). Rather, the human story is depicted as a pilgrimage of blood and suffering ("pilgrim" a reference repeated in the novel), and human consciousness as an experience of alienation. When the judge contemplates the different races of humans and their traits, he comments, "not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them" (144).

McCarthy includes a curious and ambiguous epigraph to the novel from Jacob Boehme that may give one clue to my questions: "*It is not thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of darkness.*" For Boehme, of course, that darkness was infused with spiritual significance. Can we say the same about this novel?

Whether or not McCarthy would align with a 'spiritual' reading of his work, religious allusions permeate his writing, including *Blood Meridian*. Religious concerns, including moral vision, also resound, though are never explicitly affirmed. What we find is moral urgency in the negative, in the darkness (perhaps a further explanation for his Boehme epigraph). The almost total absence of virtue in the characters and its opposite embodied by the judge, disturbs to an extraordinary degree through the power of the writing. So gruesome and so appalling is the action and so alien is the "terra damnata" of the world depicted (64), that we experience a visceral plea for existence to be otherwise. In theological language, we are confronted with fallenness, and with such force that goodness, virtue, and redemption become the longed-for counterweight to this agony. I have read few works of literature that more profoundly excite my moral sensibilities.

## Deeply Textured Understanding

To return to my earlier comments, what we want is a deeply textured understanding of virtue and a virtuous life. This is not because we revel in ambiguity, though many do, but because we appreciate what it takes for something like moral goodness to be achieved. And among the many complexities of that journey is desire. What makes us want to be virtuous? What urges us to believe it matters? There are many sources of such effects, and affect: powerful sermons or oration, films and other works of art, personal examples and models. My argument for the role of literature adds to that reserve, while insisting that it has what the biblical critic Robert Alter called "peculiar advantages" by virtue of its form (see *The Art of Biblical Poetry*). This is perhaps because it is a verbal medium, with language itself mirroring the



very complexities that I have highlighted in my brief consideration of O'Connor and McCarthy. Literature illuminates and complicates, or we may say it illuminates by complicating, as a reflection of our own complexity as human beings. When the English poet Geoffrey Hill was asked why his poetry was so difficult, he answered simply, "because we are."

### **Virtuous Reading: a Final Appeal**

Hence, in keeping with T.S. Eliot's exhortation that "It is our business as Christians, *as well as* readers of literature, to know what we *ought* to like," we ought to admire and learn from those literary works that most forcefully urge us towards a vision of the good. Some of these achieve this indirectly and need to be included in any quest to inculcate a quest for virtue, even when on first glance they seem morally ambiguous or to promote the opposite. As scholars who, in Jennifer Herdt's estimate, need to champion the importance of virtue to our flourishing, we want to draw upon an array of resources that warrant our careful attention because of the work they can do in this regard, perhaps especially when they complicate what is an admittedly complex and often fraught process.

In that light, one other comment I would add regards 'virtuous reading,' under the aegis of what literary critic Alan Jacobs (2001) calls "the hermeneutics of love" in his book of that title. Although not limited to the reading of literature, this notion was born of his lifetime engagement with literary texts. Writing against a 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' Jacobs commends an approach to texts that reads critically but also *charitably*, granting to authors the same courtesy that we are called to grant persons. In the often toxic atmosphere of competitive academia, virtuous reading offers another aspiration that highlights the practice as well as the disposition of virtue in our scholarship, and confirms my own appeal for a broader appreciation of the many diverse ways that literature can serve our interest to restore virtue as a scholarly priority.

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## Works Cited and Further Reading:

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T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature": First published in the collection *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), the full text is available online at: [gwers.net/doc/culture/1935-eliot.pdf](http://gwers.net/doc/culture/1935-eliot.pdf).

Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (reprinted by Routledge in 2001 and still in print): In this work Jacobs argues for a transformation of our reading practices that eschews the dominance of a hermeneutics of suspicion and appeals to a way of reading that is at once critical and charitable, on the model of loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (New York: Vintage, 1992; the edition cited above and still in print)

Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Winner of the National Book Award and first published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, January 1, 1971): Many of O'Connor's short works, including "Good Country People," and essays can also be found individually online.

Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (also published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and still in print): In this collection of essays we find many of the thoughts highlighted in my brief and integral to her vision of being a Catholic writer in modernity.

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