



FRITZ OEHLSCHLAEGER

Love and Good Reasons

POSTLIBERAL APPROACHES

TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND

LITERATURE

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"Love has nothing to do with good reasons."

—Isabel Archer to Lord Warburton, in Henry James,

The Portrait of a Lady

Charity is not a figurative precept.

It is a horrible thing to say that Christ, who came to replace
figures by the truth, came only to set up the figure of charity
in place of the reality that was there before.

"If the light be darkness, what will the darkness be?"

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 849,

trans. A. J. Krailsheimer

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acknowledgments

I am convinced that our reasons for acting morally are rooted deep in our loves. Most people do not ask, Why be moral? They simply act from something like Aquinas's assumption that the good must be loved and made real. Simone Weil argued that one of the illusions created by "imaginative literature" was that evil is "romantic and varied," whereas good is boring. She thought just the opposite to be true in life and great art: real evil "is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring." "Real good," on the other hand, is "always new, marvelous, intoxicating."

My experience confirms Weil's judgment. I have been the recipient of many real and extraordinary goods, and I have always found them varied, engaging, and inexhaustible. They have often come, of course, in the form of people, some of whom I can try to thank here.

My intellectual debt to Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre is enormous. George Hendrick has provided me with a model of scholarship and friendship for nearly thirty years. James F. Childress kindly included me in a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar where I first encountered the work of Hauerwas, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and others integral to this study. J. D. Stahl introduced me to the work of John Howard Yoder; Rob Patzig, to that of Emmanuel Levinas. Tom Gardner and Robert Benne read sections of the manuscript and provided important suggestions and encouragement. Katherine Soniat kept me apprised of articles chronicling literary study's decline from where it ought to be, at the center of humanistic education. Peter Graham has been a wonderful conversation partner in all things literary and ethical for many years. My understanding of religious ethics has benefited greatly from discussions with Ned Wisniefske and Paul Hinlicky.

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I first glimpsed love in the process of making the good real in my parents and other members of my family. I have been very lucky in them. Finally, to adapt a phrase from Jane Austen, the "best blessings" of my existence are my wife, Deb, and my children, Amy and Matthew. This book is for them.

Love and Good Reasons

introduction

The central effort of liberal ways of doing ethics has been, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, "to specify universally binding principles or rules whose universality has the scope of humanity itself."¹ Both Kantianism and utilitarianism identify ethical action with what can be justified from the standpoint of anyone. Another way to put this is that liberal ethics has tried to do without a sustaining narrative or story. As Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas likes to say, the liberal story is that there is no story.² Rather, the primary task of liberal ethics has been to give an account of obligation sufficient to enable diverse groups of strangers to live together without violence. And this has been no mean task. What the dominance of liberal ethics has done, however, is to render the specific convictions of particular communities irrelevant to moral deliberation. No longer is there any intimate connection between right action and the kind of people we understand ourselves to be.

I subscribe to George Grant's sense that insofar as "liberalism' is used to describe the belief that political liberty is a central human good, it is difficult . . . to consider as sane those who would deny that they are liberals."³ Nevertheless, there is now a substantial body of opinion in the universities, if not yet in the general populace, that we have moved to a postliberal period. The Enlightenment metanarrative of tradition-free reason has lost its credibility for many elites and largely been replaced by frank commitment to Nietzschean will to power, "that power over ourselves and everything else which is itself the very enhancement of life."⁴ No doubt this movement from liberalism to postliberalism is part of the logic of technology itself, as that blending of *techne* and *logos*, making and knowing, fashions the subjects it requires. Following Heidegger, Grant has been particularly prescient about the way technology puts into question liberal reason. "The chief fact," Grant writes, is that "technology organises a system which requires a massive apparatus of artisans concerned with the control of human beings . . . The machinery reaches out to control more and more lives through this apparatus, and its alliance with the private and public corporations necessary to technological efficiency."⁵ Perhaps the irony of liberalism is to prepare for the regime of

technology that undermines it. Or, to put this another way, perhaps liberalism served technology by providing an account of reason that enabled the relentlessly manipulative quality of human relations to be screened from view.

In any case, postliberal or postmodern teachers of literature and other "humanistic" disciplines increasingly argue that manipulation or transformation of the students is their primary goal. The dominant model of the classroom is often quite different from that of liberal education as classically understood. On the one hand, the conversionist pedagogue's explicit confession of ideological aim seems refreshing. Surely all teaching in the humanities involves, in some way, moving students toward implicit or explicit goods. But there is an important difference between teaching that aims at goals shared by student and teacher within a common account of authority and the kind of elitist pedagogy that assumes "the teacher must recognize that he or she must influence (perhaps manipulate is the more accurate word) students' values through charisma or power." "Otherwise," as one "emancipationist" pedagogue puts it, "one must depend on the assumption that those values are latent in students, and the teacher's job is merely to help the student bring them to the surface. It must be recognized, then, that emancipation is not a transcendental vision, but is a value, which, like all values, is contingent, and that if the teacher wishes to instill such a vision in students, he or she must accept the role as manipulator."⁶ The elitist and Gnostic assumptions of such pedagogy are too obvious to need remarking. What the writer misses is the possibility that students and teachers might work together in a mutually enriching way from within a shared tradition of value. The passage resonates with anxiety over loss of cultural authority, the one shared ground between defenders of "liberal" education on both the right and the left. What needs to be asked of the transformationists, in my view, is the following question: Absent a tradition devoted to defending and upholding the unique unsubstitutable identity of every person, what prevents those to be transformed from becoming what Heidegger called "standing reserve," material "to be done with," resources to be transformed into power?⁷

It is little wonder, then, that students seem increasingly uninterested in the humanities, literature especially. Students are generally quite willing to regard their lives as projects to be fashioned, but they see little reason to let others do the fashioning. Like Thoreau when he "knew for a certainty that a man was coming" to his house "with the conscious design of

doing [him] good," they run for their lives.⁸ Such reading as continues becomes purely a private pleasure, a subversive activity that escapes the corporate realm dominated by the powers that claim our lives. How completely English departments have become part of the technocracy is illustrated rather drearily by the stream of articles assessing the state of the profession through such measures as wages, benefits, ratio of doctorates to "dignified" professional positions, and "market share" of resources relative to other disciplines.⁹

If literary study is not to become an exclusively private pursuit, it must be brought into more explicit relationship to the substantive ethical convictions of various traditions. We must learn to read very specifically in relation to the varying accounts of the good that remain in this culture. To what degree this involves reorganizing learning communities is a matter that university departments might fruitfully discuss. MacIntyre's idea of the "university of constrained disagreement" offers a model for reconfiguring communities that would enable more specifically traditioned literary and ethical studies. I make some proposals drawing on MacIntyre's ideas in the last part of my first chapter. At the same time, I recognize the seriousness of theologian John Milbank's explicitly Christian reservations about MacIntyre's paradigm of the virtues.¹⁰

This study seeks to articulate a particular moral vision, a Christian one, and discover what it entails for reading texts. To be thus explicit and particular about my position seems to me the only honest way to recognize the truth of Stanley Fish's contention that the ethical can never be free from political and ideological construction, for anyone seeking to construct the category is always already embedded in a "local network of beliefs, assumptions, purposes [and] obligations."¹¹ Hauerwas has argued that "ethics always requires an adjective or qualifier—such as Jewish, Christian, Hindu, existentialist, pragmatic, utilitarian, humanist, medieval, modern."¹² A Christian ethics will be that marked by the specific convictions of a body of people formed by the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Church. The narrative of Scripture that forms Christians does move from a local and particular history to universal claims. But that history is ongoing, not yet complete. The Kingdom has appeared in Jesus, who invites us into His life, but it awaits its definitive fulfillment in God's own time. Any Christian reflection about the universal, then, should occur from within Jesus and the community formed by his life, death, and resurrection: the church.

The approach to Christian ethics I explore in the following chapters is

greatly indebted to the work of Hauerwas, the main proponent of a Christian ethics whose central terms are narrative, vision, character, the virtues, community, and church. For Hauerwas, doing ethics is *not* primarily a matter of developing principles by which quandaries or dilemmas might be resolved by impersonal choosers. Rather, Christian ethics is a practical activity—closely allied to the practical activity of theology, or, I might add, literary criticism—whose “first task is to help us rightly envision the world.”¹³ Doing Christian ethics, then, involves giving people the linguistic skills to understand “what is going on,” in H. R. Niebuhr’s phrase, in relation to the narratives and traditions that form the Church.¹⁴ Even what we define as moral decisions depends on the kinds of people we have learned to be and thus on the descriptive skills we have learned from the communities that form us—communities that are themselves sustained by narratives. The questions that arise for a community and its members are a function of the practices and commitments of the community: “Only in view of baptism,” for instance, does the question of military service become a question for the Christian at all. Similarly, “people consider questions of sexual immorality only if they first presume that those in their community are pledged to live lives of fidelity.”¹⁵ Christian ethics, in this view, is not about what we can justify doing in our freedom, or justify doing to others; rather, it is part of the ongoing effort of a community to get its descriptions right as it lives out a substantive understanding of the good.

This book is devoted, then, to articulating a way of doing Christian ethics and literary criticism in conjunction with one another. The studies that follow represent attempts to get the descriptions right from a Christian point of view. I am concerned throughout with the kinds of questions Hauerwas teaches us to ask: How will readers formed by Scripture, by the narrative of Israel, Jesus, and the Church, go about reflecting on this text? What kinds of questions will they ask? How will they construe the complex, manifold realities confronted by the figures in this fictional world? This is not to simply invite Christian interpreters to pour into the text whatever content they wish. They will be prevented from doing so precisely by Christian themes: hospitality to the stranger, love of the neighbor, a fidelity to the other rooted in the “discipline of repentance.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, there will be some consistent features of Christian insight into literary texts, and thus readers will find me turning repeatedly to several concerns: the insufficiency of liberal ideas of autonomy, the consequences of creatureliness, the cruciality of forgiveness to life conceived

as a narrative unity. These are matters involving the closest kind of relationship among the narratives of the books we read and love, the narratives we live, and the great narrative that seeks to incorporate Christians within it: that of Israel, Jesus, and the Church.

To some extent, I share Edward Said's concern about the "disappearance of literature itself" from the curriculum and its replacement by "fragmented, jargonized subjects."¹⁷ An Arnoldian return to a high culture version of literature, the kind implicitly advocated by the genre of literary jeremiads, seems to me, however, neither possible nor desirable in today's university. Such a return is prevented, on one hand, by the increasingly multicultural character of the university and, on the other, by the presentist provincialism of suburban students. In short, I think the only way to revive literary study in the university is to bring literature back into connection with what Martha Nussbaum calls "our deepest practical searching," our basic ethical questions about how we should live.¹⁸ To do so will be a difficult matter, however, for liberal culture has itself encouraged the increasing privatization of those very questions: "how one should live" is, for most people, not a public, civic, communal, or religious question but a purely private one—at least as long as one refrains from overt harm to others. Moreover, this privatization of ethical questions is a perfectly understandable response to the increasing manipulation and domination of life by corporate and state powers in modern mass society. Sensing the impotence of individuals in the public sphere and also perhaps the "aridity" of a realm where all relations are purely contractual, individuals retreat to the private.¹⁹ In a recent lament called "The Decline and Fall of Literature," Andrew Delbanco comments on "the mysterious and irreducibly private experience" of literature without recognizing how his very description undercuts the reason for studying literature in a classroom or within a discipline or tradition.²⁰ If literature is primarily about "irreducibly private experience," why talk about it? Moreover, why pay the extraordinary fees charged by contemporary universities to hear a professor talk about it, particularly if one knows in advance that the sum of the teaching is likely to be the confirmation of an ideology already clearly understood without reference to the literature?²¹

Today's literary Jeremiahs infrequently confront the issue of the authority to teach. Delbanco is a case in point. He cites approvingly a journal passage of Emerson's from the period in which Emerson was moving from being a preacher to a lecturer: "The whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they

are. They want awakening." Delbanco believes that we have forgotten this, but I suspect just the opposite is the case. The students have been awakened, specifically to the broadly relativist understanding, itself indebted to Emerson, that authorized ways of reading are the more or less arbitrary behaviors of disciplinary communities—and that part of their function is to determine who counts and who does not. The problem is not that we have forgotten Emerson, but that everyone has become Emersonian. Students generally accept the Emersonian notion that all history is merely biography, and they sensibly concentrate on the biography that concerns them most: their own. Many unthinkingly accept, with American naïveté, that genius amounts to believing that what is true for them in their "private heart is true for all men." The result is solipsism and a lack of interest in what would take them out of themselves. Elsewhere, Delbanco quotes Emerson saying that "the use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it."²² Surely there is today no shortage of students seeking to use knowledge of one sort or another as a tool to move the present, but students so motivated wisely choose the technological subjects rather than literary study. In short, a definition of literature that positions it as a kind of technology is unlikely to compete well against more powerful and rewarding technological disciplines.

My own approach is to confront the issue of authority directly by locating it within a specific tradition, the Christian one. No doubt my literary-ethical descriptions will be of most interest to Christians, but I offer them, too, as hopeful enrichments of a conversation that has not often welcomed explicitly religious interpretations. If they serve no other purpose for non-Christian readers, perhaps they can at least provide interpretations for criticism in a process of "teaching the conflicts" along the lines advocated by Gerald Graff.²³ The challenge for all nonscientific disciplines in the university, and for our democracy as a whole, is to devise forms in which people can contribute to the ongoing conversation without ceasing to be the people they are formed to be by their particular commitments. I hope in this book to suggest how Christians can contribute to the conversation about ethics and literature without bracketing the convictions that define who they are.

One final word here about my title. Doing Christian ethics and literary criticism in conjunction with one another seems inevitably to involve working out concrete, particular correlations between love and good reasons. Each of the studies that follow this introduction will, I hope,

make some contribution to our thinking about these terms, even though I do not take them up in the abstract way more appropriate to a systematic work. I do want to focus attention, however, on how Christian accounts of action—the good reasons we are rightly compelled to offer—are related to love. To be sure, the God who loves in freedom needs no good reason to love us, and we need no good reason to love one another except that God commands it, appears in the very form of love, and teaches that to fail to love is to remain in death.²⁴ But, to the Christian, these will appear the very best reasons of all, and thus all our good reasons for acting, our ethics, will be rooted, in some way, in the love that moves the universe and comes to us in the rabbi Jesus from Nazareth.

chapter 1

LITERARY CRITICISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

IN SERVICE TO ONE ANOTHER

The recent critique of liberal ethics, whether Kantian or utilitarian, has come from a variety of voices and viewpoints. After suggesting the chaotic and fragmented quality of contemporary moral language, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that there can be no tradition-free account of practical rationality. Judgments about what is just or rational must take place within traditions dependent on narratives about the good life for human beings.¹ Stanley Fish has claimed that references to "the realm of the ethical in general" are merely efforts to "pass off" some particular and "contestable set of values." "The ethicists are not *the* ethicists," according to Fish, if that word is used to denominate a group of experts operating in a value-free way to solve, as if by special technical competence, dilemmas that are beyond the rest of us. Rather, they are the "purveyors of a *particular* moral vision" that must make its way against competing moral visions.²

Bernard Williams has emphasized the way demands for objectivity in moral deliberation cause agents to adopt a "mid-air stance" that alienates them from their projects and commitments. Divorced from what they care about, agents have difficulty answering the question Why be moral?—for to do so seems to depend on our having particular cares and commitments.³ Stanley Hauerwas has pointed out the problems inherent in picturing the moral life primarily as a matter of confronting quandaries or hard choices as if from the standpoint of anyone. Such an account of ethics severs our moral choices from our character, diminishes the importance of the virtues, and overlooks the way vision determines the kinds of quandaries we confront.

Several works of the past decade on ethics and literature, or the virtues in academic life, attempt to redress the separation of morality from the rest of life promoted by liberal ethics. At the forefront of this work are

Martha Nussbaum's interdisciplinary studies of literature and philosophy, with their foregrounding of the Aristotelian "starting point," "How should one live?" Wayne Booth has similarly turned to Aristotle, specifically to the virtue of friendship, to work out an ethics of fiction. Historian Mark Schwehn has advocated the importance of the virtues for academic work, suggesting that the character of scholarship is, or ought to be, related to the character of the scholar. J. Hillis Miller has taken a somewhat different tack in proposing an ethics of reading that insists literature includes within it an "ethical moment" resistant to technique. Miller's work stands in ambiguous relationship to the liberalism of Kant, whose notion of respect Miller seems to want to preserve while simultaneously undermining the value of Kant's narrative exemplifications of the law.

The works of Schwehn, Booth, Miller, and Nussbaum offer important insights to one seeking ways to think about literature and ethics in relation to one another. I turn momentarily to examining the proposals of each, suggesting both their strengths and the ways a Christian ethics of literature will differ. Following my engagement with these theorists, I offer an exposition of Hauerwas's understanding of Christian ethics, showing how it specifically informs the larger arguments of this study. The penultimate section of the chapter suggests how the specific literary-ethical studies of the following chapters contribute to the overall conception. In the final section, I suggest the way literary study might flourish within MacIntyre's "university of constrained disagreement," and, at the same time, I acknowledge the reservations of theologian John Milbank about MacIntyre's paradigm of the virtues.

I

Mark Schwehn makes the case for virtue in academia in *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America*. Schwehn traces the academic calling, as understood in American research universities, to Max Weber. For Weber, the academic life required Puritan asceticism and renunciation even though the academic pursued his calling in a rationalized, secular world. Pursuing his "impersonal and solitary undertaking," the Weberian scholar "wait[ed] alone, in disciplined attention, for the chance infusion of mundane grace that would lead him to a temporary salvation through his making a correct conjecture in his manuscript."⁴ Noting the turn to interpretive communities and the communal epistemologies of

antifoundationalism, Schwehn calls for a changed conception of the academic vocation, one that would emphasize the virtues—specifically humility, charity, faith, and gratitude—and simultaneously move teaching to the center of the academic calling. There is much to commend in Schwehn's argument. An infusion of these virtues into contemporary academics would likely promote a more communal, less competitive approach to disciplinary knowledge. Placing teaching at the center of the academic's life would diminish the isolation of the scholar, giving him or her an increased sense of the life and values of communities larger than the university. That kind of change ought, in turn, to change the nature of research, making it less specialized, more available to wider publics.

Schwehn writes as a Christian but wants to make his case for humility, charity, faith, and gratitude without reference to theological warrants. He acknowledges that there is a "historical connection between religious beliefs and these virtues," and he insists on "an epistemological connection between the exercise of these virtues and the communal quest for knowledge and truth." He vigorously insists, however, on "nowhere argu[ing] that there is some sort of absolute and necessary connection between religious belief and the virtues of humility, faith, self-sacrifice, and charity" (53). Obviously, Schwehn does not want to be in the position of arguing that only professing theists can be humble, self-sacrificial, or charitable. He repeatedly uses the work of the "pious and genuinely virtuous secularist" Jeffrey Stout to illustrate the virtues he commends in those without theistic convictions. Schwehn's use of Stout, however, is a bit curious, as he quotes Stout to the effect that his secular piety is "analogous to and even . . . indebted to a central theme from the Reformed tradition."⁵ Moreover, Schwehn invokes an argument that is a favorite of cultural conservatives: that liberal secular culture lives off a moral inheritance from the past that it simultaneously undermines. He worries that "our present-day academies as well as many academicians like Jeffrey Stout might be living off a kind of borrowed fund of moral capital," a fund they may not be able either to "replenish" or "transmit" to the next generation (53).

Schwehn seems a bit condescending in his need to argue that professed nontheists can be "genuinely virtuous." Of course there are humble, sacrificing, charitable nontheists. A more productive line of inquiry might work out the ways theists and nontheists understand these virtues. One might also ask whether these virtues are indeed vital to scholarship in academic communities of discourse and whether some accounts of truth

are more likely than others to foster them. To further discussion along these lines, let me take up the conversation with Schwehn on two virtues in particular: humility and charity.

Schwehn's fullest account of humility does not avoid invoking theological warrants. He argues that what frequently passes for lack of motivation among today's students "really involves a lack of humility, stemming in part from a lack of piety or respect for that aspect of God's ongoing creation that manifests itself in works of genius" (48). He cites an example of his students' unwillingness to do the cognitive work to understand Augustine's discussion of friendship and loss, confesses that no doubt part of the failing is his own, but insists that the problem stems also from a lack of student humility, the kind of humility that would lead to "the *presumption* of wisdom and authority in the author"—any author, Kant, Aristotle, and Tolstoy as well as Augustine (48). Schwehn has nicely posed the problem of student dismissiveness here, but it cannot be addressed by simply urging the "practice of humility" (49). We must notice the way Schwehn's theological understanding of Creation underwrites the "presumption" of authority in his classic writers. God's creation is "ongoing" and "manifest[ing] itself" in the works of these geniuses, each of whom discovers some aspect of a truth available to all.

Now, for contrast, consider Richard Rorty's urging students "to see moral progress as a history of making rather than finding, of poetic achievement by 'radically situated' individuals and communities, rather than as the gradual unveiling, through the use of 'reason,' of 'principles' or 'rights' or 'values.'"⁶ If moral progress or truth is understood to be a social construction, the product of relatively local acts of making by radically situated individuals, then why should the student bother to work through the nuances of Augustine's discussion of friendship and loss? Rorty's description undercuts any sense that Augustine and the student are engaged in a continuous process of discovery about the most important matters. Moreover, it seems to me that Rorty's pragmatic understanding of truth is much less likely to foster humility than one that insists the truth to be "something other and something more than warranted assertibility."⁷ Individuals constructing reality, making moral progress, and articulating truth seem less likely to develop humility than those who think of themselves as seeking, discovering, and learning to love the truth. As Josef Pieper says of Thomas Aquinas's sense of humility, "The ground of humility is man's estimation of himself according to truth. And that is almost all there is to it."⁸ The way to overcome the Christian student's dismissive-

ness of Augustine is to reaffirm the community between the student and the saint. The source of the presumed authority Schwehn wants the student to grant Augustine lies in their sharing commitment to the same central Truth and the Church's acknowledgment and validation of Augustine's teaching. I suggest a shift in the nature of the question implicitly raised, though not directly addressed, by Schwehn. Rather than pondering how to encourage students and academics to practice the virtues, we ought to think about changing the nature of learning communities in ways that will foster the virtues. One thing this means is bringing Christian students and instructors together more intentionally as seekers after a proper "estimation" of themselves "according to truth."

What's at stake for literary interpretation in the cultivation of the virtues and reformation of communities might be seen by contrasting my account of the way a Christian student would read Augustine with a comment of Annette Kolodny's on reading the classics: "The only 'perennial feature' to which our ability to read and reread texts written in previous centuries testifies is our inventiveness—in the sense that all of literary history is a fiction which we daily re-create as we reread it."⁹ It is not my purpose to lament the diminishing cultural status of the classics. Attempts to restore teaching of the classics without the reformation of learning communities seem to me largely wrongheaded. Neither do I think that any such teaching will suddenly result in the quotient of civic virtue needed by a society of ordered liberty. But I do insist that there is a "perennial feature," for Christians, to Augustine's treatment of friendship and loss. Readers of Book 4 of the *Confessions* will remember how the mourning Augustine feels that the loss of his friend leaves him "with only half a soul" and how he comes to dread death himself because his own death would mean the abandonment of his friend to utter extinction: "I felt that our two souls had been as one, living in two bodies, and life to me was fearful because I did not want to live with only half a soul. Perhaps this, too, is why I shrank from death, for fear that one whom I had loved so well might then be wholly dead."¹⁰ Eventually, Augustine comes to see this grief itself as a type of prideful unfaith, and he moves toward the recognition that he must love the lost friend, and other friends, in God. Now, I did not "invent" this interpretation of Augustine: I *recognize* the pattern in Book 4, in part because it is like the movement of Augustine's thought in many places and, in part, because I recognize in his experience something that describes my own. Augustine's recognitions and mine derive from our shared faith in the Trinitarian God, Whose revelation in

the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Church has given us the very language, the descriptive skills, with which we understand ourselves and make sense of our experience.

Kolodny's and my sense of what we are doing when we read differs because of the kinds of communities in which we find ourselves. Kolodny's understanding of interpretation is that of the autonomous self inventing itself from moment to moment by inventing different versions of a past that point toward a culmination in the present. The Christian, on the other hand, understands himself or herself as a creature formed and sustained by God and as a participant in a living historical community, whose linguistic resources give him or her the ability to understand what it means to be a "self." The Christian looks toward the culmination of history in God's definitive future while at the same time knowing that an anticipation of that future has already been given in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. History does not point to the individual Christian but to the Kingdom, a foretaste of which is manifest in Jesus. For Kolodny, when we read, "we appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire), or in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it" (280). I'm not sure that "critical assumptions or predispositions," presumably the learned behaviors of a disciplinary community, are quite the same as "what we need (or desire)." But Christians—and Kantians as well—will be troubled by the suggestion that we "appropriate meaning" according to our wishes and desires. To Kantians this will suggest violating the categorical imperative, using the author as a means rather than an end in himself or herself. Constructing a literary history to account for oneself will seem, to the Christian, like an attempt at self-justification, the process from which one has been freed by God's justification in Christ. Christians will be moved to "appropriate" meanings from literary or historical texts in accord with their "needs or desires," but their training in the dispossession of self and respect for the other ought to act as checks on this interpretive sinfulness. When Christian interpreters are tempted to construe a text in a self-justifying way, they should be restrained from doing so by fundamental notions, and disciplined habits, of fidelity, justice, and charity. In short, any account of an interpretive community should also include an account of the virtues it fosters—for the virtues it fosters are surely relevant to the interpretations it will produce.

Schwehn wants especially to foster charity in interpreters, but his account does not sufficiently distinguish charity from justice or offer

convincing reasons for academics to be charitable. A historian, Schwehn notes the way virtue language “easily insinuates itself” into the criticism he has received from other scholars or directed at himself: “‘You have really not done [William] James full justice in your discussion of his religious views.’ Or again, ‘You really need to be more charitable to James in your analysis of his courtship and marriage’” (50). Notice how interchangeable the language of justice and charity seems; it’s not clear why the second comment could not just as easily call for greater fairness or justice to James. Moreover, Schwehn does not confront the inevitable challenge to his call for charity. Why should a historian be charitable to James rather than simply just? Schwehn offers the argument that it will make him a better historian: “If I have grown to treat my colleagues and my students with justice and charity, am I more or less likely to treat historical subjects such as William James in the same manner? I am surely more likely to do so. And would such treatment increase or decrease the quality of my historical *thinking*? Again, I think that the exercise of charity toward my historical subjects is bound to make me a better historian: more cautious in appraisal, more sympathetic with human failings, less prone to stereotype and caricature” (50–51). What Schwehn fails to acknowledge are the value judgments embedded in his assumptions about what it means to be a good historian. How far, one might ask, is he willing to extend his sympathy? Should the good historian give a charitable or sympathetic treatment to the totalitarian dictators of our century? Would not such a treatment risk being inadequately condemnatory, opening the historian to an argument analogous to that Kantians sometimes make against forgiveness: that it insufficiently values appropriate resentment or what Jeffrie Murphy calls “moral hatred”?¹¹ Being a good historian is not a value-free description. Both what counts as history and the requisite virtues of the academic are at stake in differences among interpretive communities. Kolodny’s community of feminist literary historians can be held together in their work of reenvisioning and reinventing the past by shared commitment to greater justice for women. A presumably loose community of Rortean pragmatists could measure the worth of their conceptual redescription of one another’s work by the pragmatic differences they make. Such a community would produce those devoted to strong misreading rather than cautious faithfulness—as long as such misreading leads to the extension of North Atlantic bourgeois democracy, whose institutions Rorty now sees as “prior” to philosophy.

Perhaps we should extend to communities Hauerwas’s insistence that

ethics always requires the "qualifier." Communities formed by particular narratives will give differing accounts of the virtues and even of what is going on in academic work. Perhaps we should also say with Fish that whenever one refers to oneself as a "communitarian," some specific understanding of community is being "passed off" under a deceptive generality. Schwehn's account is more dependent on Christian warrants than he acknowledges. He repeatedly insists on his brave modernity, saying that his "reconception of the academic vocation" should not be seen as "an atavistic undertaking," for he has "no patience for nostalgic returns to medieval syntheses of one sort or another" (22). After quoting Cardinal Newman on the differences between a university and a college, Schwehn states, "To think that we could reintroduce distinctions like these into the present United States is at best to be afflicted with a severe case of terminal wistfulness" (80). The last phrase echoes Rorty, who speaks of the "terminal wistfulness" with which the books of communitarian critics of liberalism typically end.¹² Among the wistful is MacIntyre, whose *After Virtue* closes by depicting us, among the ruins of contemporary moral culture, "waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."¹³ MacIntyre stresses the way accounts of rationality and the virtues are narrative and community-dependent. On his model, the attempt to revitalize specific virtues would depend on the simultaneous revivifying of the communal practices, traditions, and beliefs that gave those virtues meaning. Such an approach seems considerably less wistful than Schwehn's desire to reconceive the vocation of contemporary academics in secularized research institutions in terms of virtues whose primary warrants have historically been religious ones.

Wayne Booth, in *The Company We Keep*, seeks to move one of the Aristotelian virtues, friendship, to the center of "an ethics of fiction." In the Aristotelian tradition, Booth writes, "the quality of our lives was said to be in large part identical with the quality of the company we keep."¹⁴ "Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods," Aristotle remarks in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Booth works briefly through Aristotle's tripartite typology of friendships, focusing mostly on the "fullest" kind, which "arises whenever two people offer each other not only pleasures or utilities but shared aspirations and loves of a kind that make life together worth having as an end in itself. These full friends love to be with each other because of the quality of the life they live during their time together. As Aristotle says, a true friendship is a relation of virtue with virtue, or as we might translate—remembering again that 'virtue' was

for him a much broader, less moralistic term than it is for us—a relation of strength with strength and aspiration with aspiration" (174). Booth uses friendship as his model for the relationship between a reader and the implied author of a text. The best kind of literary company we keep offers the "quality" of relationship Aristotle finds in the highest type of friendship. Booth speaks of giving a "loving response" to a text (34) and of asking the following types of questions as we read: "Should I believe this narrator, and thus join him? Am I willing to be the kind of person that this story-teller is asking me to be? Will I accept this author among the small circle of my true friends?" (39). Perhaps Booth's greatest ethical achievement lies in his modeling a rich friendly responsiveness to a variety of texts and authors.

Booth finds puzzling the "modern neglect of friendship as a serious subject of inquiry" (170), a neglect perhaps explainable by the ways of doing ethics that have dominated modernity. If ethics is devoted primarily to working out universal principles by which impersonal choosers resolve prearticulated dilemmas, then ethics will have little to do with friendship or the virtues more generally. But Booth himself remains committed to the idea of liberal autonomy that has undermined the serious consideration and teaching of the virtues. Commenting on a program of "bibliotherapy" that claims to use books, especially fiction and poetry, to cure," Booth indicates his agreement with the program's assumption but "doubt[s] that the good people" who "run [it] can have worked out any very subtle way of providing precisely the right book for a given patient at a given time." From the "problems one can foresee in any such program," Booth argues a conclusion that sounds like the relativism of today's students: "Every reader must be his or her own ethical critic" (236–237). Similarly, while reviewing the many myths that claim the attention of moderns, Booth argues that "most of us in our time are so thoroughly entangled in rival myths that only a rigorously pluralistic ethical criticism can serve our turn" (350). What he means by "entanglement" becomes clearer later in the argument: "Whenever I engage seriously with any metaphors, petty or grand, whenever I join in any narrative, religious or secular, and whenever I then choose to discuss my venture, after the fact, with those who have traveled the same way, I become part of a venture in self-education that is both supremely practical and at the same time the very end of life itself" (369). Clearly, Booth thinks here of a "self" that stands apart from the narratives it "engages" or "joins." Friendship no longer stands as the supreme good of life; rather, that place is taken by

"self-education"—precisely the commitment to liberal autonomy that, over time, diminishes the seriousness of interest in the virtues, friendship included, as "matters of character," ethics. Booth will also have difficulty persuading others who really are "formed" by those narratives that he has engaged them seriously. The Christian will find a contradiction between the claim to serious engagement with the Christian narrative and the continuing claim that "self-education" is the "very end of life itself." Participation in the Kingdom of God, not self-education, is the end of life for the Christian.

At other points in *Company*, Booth critiques the idea of autonomy, arguing that we are ineluctably social selves. Citing a range of social disciplines, he concludes: "All these and many others have tried to teach us once again what ancient philosophy, classical rhetoric, and traditional religion took for granted: the isolated individual self simply does not, cannot exist. Not to be a *social* self is to lose one's humanity. As Aristotle insisted, we are 'political animals' precisely in the sense that we become human only in a polis" (238). Booth thus argues for a model of the self based on character, role, and Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Each of us "is constituted in a kind of counterpoint of inherited 'languages,'" often in tension or even irreconcilable with one another. We become our character by doing our "best to enact the various roles 'assigned' " to us (238–239). Literature offers a rich source of roles for us to try on, adopt, and then drop or make part of our repertoire. Booth admits that this process seems akin to hypocrisy but argues that moderns have overvalued sincerity and makes the case for productive hypocrisy: the practice of role playing in such a way that it leads to the development of a character's qualities, even the virtues. Booth's point about the overvaluation of sincerity seems well taken, but serious objection can be raised to the way he describes the movement from role playing to the practice of a virtue. (And we should notice from the first how the very notion of role playing still implies a centered self that stands back from, and chooses among, various possible roles.) Booth argues that one is more likely to become a better tennis player by telling oneself, "I'm getting better all the time" than by saying, "I'm a poor tennis player." He then asks, "Why should the same not be true of all the virtues? If I do not practice courage frequently enough to make it habitual, how can I ever become courageous?" (253).

Courage, as Aristotle understands it, does require practice, but it also requires more than a set of habits or skills achieved through practice. Aristotelian courage involves not just willingness to face danger, but

doing so in particular ways: "The man who faces and fears (or similarly feels confident about) the right things for the right reason and in the right way and at the right time is courageous (for the courageous man feels and acts duly, and as principle directs); and the end of every activity is that which accords with the disposition corresponding to that activity. This is true of the courageous man."¹⁵ Aristotelian courage requires a settled disposition, a willingness "to face things that are terrible to a human being, and that he can see are such, because it is a fine act to face them" and to do so "in virtue of the formed state of character" (NE 133–134). One might improve one's tennis skills by persuading oneself that one is improving, although I suspect this would be untrue if the description were counterfactual, that is, if one were being beaten continually by opponents. But, absent the settled disposition to courage, the willingness to face things terrible to a human being seems unlikely to grow simply because one decides to practice it. The practice Booth advocates is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the virtues as Aristotle understands them. The serious question for Booth is whether conceiving of life as a matter of trying on roles undermines the ability to develop the settled dispositions necessary for Aristotelian virtue. For Aristotle, courage involves not simply choosing a role (perhaps later to be discarded) from a variety that present themselves. Rather, it involves seeing that there is something real and fine about facing danger in this way and not some other—and that norm is always before the courageous person in the form of the virtuous figure who does the right thing at the right time in the right way and for the right reason.

Given Booth's pluralism, it would seem unlikely for him to offer any normative account of the good life. He does, however, offer at least a strong negative prohibition: what "we moderns" must guard against is the "temptation to allow some one voice" from the polyphony we inherit "to triumph, either within our souls or in the political order." Indeed, "our ills can be traced to our attempts to 'perfect' some one language at the expense of all the others" (239). A tolerant liberal pluralism thus serves as something close to a norm, and Booth is at his best when he demonstrates his ability to give voice to conflicting responses to ethically contested texts by Rabelais, Austen, Lawrence, and Mark Twain. He provides a powerful moral argument against *Huckleberry Finn*, a text he is personally committed to defending, and, in the process, proves himself the good listener, the good friend both to books and people that he seeks to be. No doubt Booth has learned much about understanding the requirements of

particular roles and rehearsing different points of view from one of his most intimate literary friends, Jane Austen. These abilities are essential to the process of moral education in Austen's works, particularly in *Emma*, as I show in Chapter 3. There I stress the way imagining oneself into different roles—the way a novel allows one to do—might well be more constructive for moral education than insisting that learning to be moral involves assuming a moral point of view abstracted from particularity.

Fish has attacked Booth's general language about what literature offers—"a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own"—by pointing out that there is no correlation between moral behavior and the reading of the most profound texts. Booth's language of fullness, richness, depth, and profundity begs all the difficult questions about the particularity of his moral vision. As Fish rightly sees, such language leaves Booth with little to say in defense of a particular canon of books. But Fish is unfair to Booth when he sets out the assumptions he claims must lie behind an attempt to define an ethical canon: "It would seem that in order to answer these questions one must *already* be in the state of ethical perfection to which the canon is supposed to bring one, which suggests the superfluousness or at least causal irrelevance of the canon to the very values it is said to produce" (41). Booth claims neither to be in a state of ethical perfection nor that the canon is able to produce such a state. He presents himself as an inquirer, a friend among friends engaged in conversation, trying on different roles and voices and doing his best to see things from other points of view. The works he engages are mostly classics of English literature, but he nowhere displays any rigidity about canonicity. He simply finds himself among the friends whom trusted others have commended to his attention. It is part of his friendliness, and humble assumption of imperfection, to be always making new friends.

More specifically theoretical than Booth is J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading*. Miller contends that "there is a necessary ethical moment" in the "act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical."¹⁶ He situates his argument under the aegis of Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* while also providing a deconstructive reading of Kant that stresses Kant's own need to provide narratives to flesh out his conception of the moral law and the gap that always exists between the law as such and any narrative claiming to exemplify it. Focusing on Kant's example of the inconsistency in willing a lying promise, Miller argues that the promise is a particular form of performative language whose fulfillment is never