

The Baby and The Tintoretto

In defense of immersing students in great art and literature:
The Good *is* beautiful.

by Nancy Hoyt Lecourt

"To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."—Adorno

"The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies."—Faulkner

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE GOOD AND THE Beautiful finds passionate expression in the 20th century. An Adorno may argue that even to consider the aesthetic as a category is immoral in so corrupt a culture as our own. To spend time and energy creating or contemplating the beautiful is to be complicit in human suffering. Yet writers like Faulkner are adamant that beauty must have its own territory, separate but equal. "If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate . . ." (quoted in Booth, p. 131).

This aesthetic high ground, first glimpsed by Kant and staked out by the "Art for Art's

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Sake" movement, that sunny knoll where the New Critics pitched their tents,¹ is a disinterested space where the flood water of ethical dilemmas cannot reach. In a 1987 *Harper's* essay entitled "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty," William Gass makes clear where he keeps his sleeping bag. He begins by posing the hypothetical dilemma often used to illustrate this conflict: The water is rising in Venice. A baby in a basket is being washed out to sea—and so is a Tintoretto. Which to save? As the title of his essay implies, Gass doesn't really hesitate: "No one is so essential he or she cannot be replaced a thousand times over . . ." (p. 39). Sorry, baby . . .

But the waters of morality—now known as Political Correctness—have risen far higher than the New Critics ever could have imagined. Marxism, Feminism, Post-colonialism: these proclaim that art *does* matter, it *does* matter what you say, about class, about women, about "people of color." Your language, your hidden assumptions, your basic attitudes toward the "Other"—these will inevitably affect your behavior. What people read changes

how they act. "A book," (agrees Sartre) "is a good or bad action" (quoted in Booth, p. 24).

And so the battle of the Good and the Beautiful rages on. Teachers of literature at Adventist colleges may sometimes feel as though the fight is being fought in their very offices. Several times a year, they hear the following: "Why do we have to wade through all this trash in order to get one good idea?" (Translation: Why care about the formal qualities of the work [the Beautiful] when the author could simply hand us the meaning [the Good] in a nutshell?)

"I refuse to read fiction." (Translation: Beautiful lies are Bad, not Good.)²

"Why should I waste my time with entertaining stories when Jesus is coming soon and the world needs to be warned?" (Translation: To read poetry prior to the Apocalypse is sinful, if not barbaric.)

"These stories are dangerous. I'm afraid that if I read them I won't enjoy the Bible or Ellen White. In fact, I'm not sure this book has a place in this classroom." (Translation: Plato was right: poetry does dishonor the gods and should not be used to educate the young.)

Censorship. Plato started it, and literary criticism ever since has been licking its wounds. And it is censorship more than anything else, of course, that gives moral criticism its bad name. Gass is positively hysterical:³

It is the moralists who want to bully and beat up on the artist, not the other way around. . . . Authors do not gather to burn good deeds in public squares. . . . On the other hand . . . We know what the other hand is full of; slings and

arrows, slanders and censorship, prison, scaffolds, burnings and beatings. . . . Throughout history, goodness has done more harm than good (p. 38).

What a relief it was when Kant taught us to contemplate beauty disinterestedly! But *some people* just don't get it. *Some people*⁴ go on feeling that literary texts have power to change people's lives—and that is what makes them potentially dangerous.

As Adventist Christian readers we believe in that power. We know that books—beginning with the Bible—have changed our lives and continue to do so. We want to choose wisely the books we will read and recommend to others. How can we find a balance between the Good and the Beautiful that allows us both to enjoy aesthetic contemplation and to accept ethical consequences? How can we find a way to read literature that acknowledges the suffering in

the world, yet embraces its beauty? Three recent books attempt, all more or less successfully in my opinion, to answer just these questions.

Writing as a Tool for Action

The first of these books, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, is designed to be used as a companion to an Introduction to Literature class at a Christian college, and I suspect it would be quite effective. As I read it I couldn't help wishing I had known about it sooner; certain chapters (especially chapter 10, "Was This Author a Christian?") would have been

Books Discussed by Nancy Hoyt Lecourt

Literature Through the Eyes of Faith, by Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin (Harper and Row, 1989).

Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, by Martha C. Nussbaum (Oxford University Press, 1990).

The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction, by Wayne C. Booth (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

very useful in dealing with some of my more literal-minded students. In fact, the book not only discusses the “main point” (Why should Christians read literature?), but also explains where the canon came from (and why we should have reservations about it), what the essential difference is between tragedy and comedy (and how they relate to Christian views of history), and why there are so many different interpretations of the Bible (!).

Gallagher and Lundin’s thesis is highly utilitarian: “Literary texts are not merely imaginative creations, but also instruments composed of language that we use to perform certain activities, such as thinking about social issues, moral questions, or personal feelings. A piece of writing is a tool for action” (p. xxv). However, they do make room for aesthetic experience; they see “aesthetic ends” as one of the many purposes that literature fulfills (p. xxvi). And they are careful to point out that “our delight in God’s gifts should include . . . our delight in the literary activities of our fellow human beings. . . . We have no right to conclude that literature that primarily instructs us is somehow better in God’s eyes than literature that primarily delights us” (p. 48).

The authors deserve kudos on many points. Rather than emphasizing what *not* to read, they have tried at all times to throw a wide net, to include rather than exclude: “Within our personal reading we should strive for variety and deliberately place ourselves in new reading experiences” (p. 115). This impulse to inclusiveness extends toward feminism and multiculturalism, something not often enough seen in conservative Christian circles. Indeed, they recognize a fact often overlooked: The same force that excluded women and minorities from the canon has more recently been excluding overtly Christian literature as well. More important, they recognize that the Christian duty to the oppressed extends to reading as well: “Christians should . . . have a special concern to recover the literature of minorities” (p. 111).

Finally, I would like to thank them for tackling the common misunderstanding that Christians should read “Christian” literature, written by Christians or based on Christian beliefs. They state very clearly that a “Christian” author does not necessarily write books that every Christian will agree with, and that an “unbeliever” can write in a way that is very valuable for Christians. Most important, they debunk the whole idea of “Christian” literature. “Our desire to label works of literature Christian or non-Christian, while common, is misdirected” (p. 120). Bravo, Gallagher and Lundin!

However, I do feel a need to remark on the limitations of this book’s basic assumptions about literature; we *ought* to read it, we *ought* to enjoy it, we *ought* to learn about life from it. Surely it is one thing to defend literature against attack, or to explain why one reads; it is another to suggest a *moral imperative to read*. With this attitude, all reading becomes required reading—a dreadful thought! Can we really “delight” in poetry because it is “part of our Christian vocation”?

Even more troubling is the authors’ emphasis on “understanding.” To suggest that the purpose of literature is to help us *explain everything* reflects, perhaps, a theology that leaves no room for mystery: “Everything in our experience has significance, and our attempt to discern that significance—as well as we can—is part of our calling as God’s servants” (p. 5). This rational element in the Protestant tradition, this emphasis on explaining everything, needs some healthy challenging, I think. Where is mystery? Why must all be explained? Beyond the good and the beautiful shimmers the Sublime: experiences and phenomena that we cannot explain. Instead of ignoring, repressing, or misrepresenting them, let us accept them for what they are: evidence that God and the universe are far more Other than we have ever imagined. Sublime theory, with

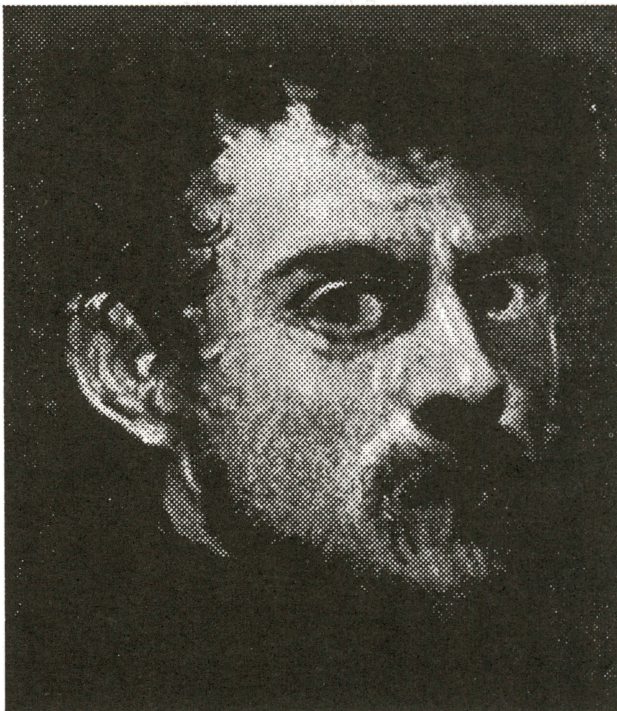
its emphasis on the inability of the mind to grasp certain concepts, should be an important part of any attempt to look at “literature through the eyes of faith.”

“Consider the Lilies of the Field, How They Are Particular”

Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge* is a group of essays collected from such sources as the *Journal of Philosophy*, the *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities*, and the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.⁵ Nussbaum is obviously addressing a much different audience from that of Gallagher and Lundin. Perhaps because of this, the reasoning is more precise and the judgments more finely tuned than anything in their book. A more important difference, however, is that it provides an ethical approach to reading that is *compatible with Christianity without being explicitly Christian*.⁶

Many of Nussbaum’s essays touch on the

Adapted from Jacopo Tintoretto’s “Self Portrait”



relationship between ethics and literature. She has a particular love for Henry James, as a couple of titles will demonstrate: “Flawed Crystals: James’ *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy”; “Perception and Revolution: *The Princess Casamassima* and the Political Imagination.” Her readings of James’ novels embody what she values in literature: They demonstrate for us the process of delicate moral reasoning that we need to live life well.

We need, then . . . texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice, and which show us, as this text does . . . the childishness, the refusal of life involved in fixing everything in advance according to some inviolable rules. . . .

Finally, without a presentation of the mystery, conflict, and riskiness of the lived deliberative situation, it will be hard for philosophy to convey the peculiar value and beauty of choosing humanly well. . . . (pp. 141, 142)

Nussbaum’s project is double: She argues for a literary theory that is friendly to moral philosophy, that recognizes “the sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live. . . .” (p. 170). She also demonstrates just what she means in many fine essays. The title essay, “Love’s Knowledge,” examines (and critiques) Proust’s approach to the question, “How do I know I am in love?” This is not a question we somehow expect a philosopher or a literary critic to handle, and yet we ask few questions more urgently. Why do we *assume* that we will get no help from philosophers when it comes to questions of feeling? Nussbaum rejects that assumption: “To make room for love stories, philosophy must be more literary, more closely allied to stories, and more respectful of mystery and openendedness than it frequently is” (p. 284).

As you have already noticed, where Gallagher and Lundin ask, “How does reading this book help me fulfill my vocation as a Christian?”

Nussbaum asks, “How does this book help answer the question, ‘How should one live?’” (p. 173). The difference will seem slight to some, monumental to others. Be that as it may, like Gallagher and Lundin, Nussbaum wants to make room for both the Good and the Beautiful. She does so by recognizing the simple truth that neither exists apart from the other:

We grasp the practical content of a literary text adequately only when we attentively study the forms in which it is embodied and expressed; and . . . we have not correctly described the literary form of, say, a James novel if we have not asked what sense of life it expresses (p. 172).

Nussbaum argues further that literature shares knowledge that simply cannot be communicated in any other way. Philosophy generalizes from particulars. Yet is there not a sense in which it is the particulars themselves that matter?

For stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new, to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome and to be bewildered—to wait and float and be actively passive (p. 184).

While this may not be Christian “doctrine,” I would argue that this willingness, this joyful acceptance of whatever happens to us, is a more deeply Christian approach to life (and literature) than the willful *can'ts* and *oughts* often associated with Christianity. “Consider the lilies of the field,” says Nussbaum, “how they are particular.”

In her love of life and her commitment “to wait and float and be actively passive,” however, Nussbaum has by no means forgotten the necessity for ethical action. She sees the other disciplines—economics, the law, psychology—influence the way our society makes its most important decisions, yet literary theory has been silent. And because of that silence,

“we . . . go on being governed from day to day by conceptions of rationality that seem impoverished next to the ones we know well and care about in novels that we love.” She argues that literary scholars should join the debate about what it means to be human, to live life well, to be a person, because “the hungry will be fed (or not fed) according to some idea of the person. . . . If we do not take a hand in these choices they will be made by default without us” (p. 192).

Books as Good Friends

Finally, I would like to recommend Wayne Booth's latest book, *The Company We Keep*. The title of this book points to its rich central metaphor: when we read a book we are spending time, keeping company, with a friend. Booth's central question, to simplify—though not, I hope, to mislead—is “What kind of person am I spending time with when I read this book? Who am I when I read it, and who am I becoming?” To answer this we participate in a guided tour of the history of ethical criticism, an explanation of the “threat” of subjectivism, an essay on what it means to be a “self” or a “character,” an appraisal of the workings of desire in the act of reading, an explanation of “co-duction,”⁷ and several other fascinating critical/philosophical discussions, enlivened by many examples of what he means in terms of specific authors, including detailed analyses of Rabelais, D. H. Lawrence, Jane Austen, and Twain.⁸ Further, each chapter has a thorough bibliography, supplemented by another of 30 pages at the back. And the whole is seasoned with apt quotations from wonderfully wide-ranging sources (including my opening epigram from Faulkner) and personal, often humorous, footnotes.⁹ Inevitably, one comes to feel that this book, at least, is indeed a friend, and its “implied author,” Wayne Booth, a lively, thoughtful, and honest human being with whom

to spend several hours.

Booth makes clear at the beginning what his basic assumption is about books: "Some experiences with narrative are beneficial and some harmful. No one who is unshakably skeptical about that notion will be likely to follow any argument about how a given narrative might nourish or poison those who take it in" (p. 40). While this may already sound frighteningly close to censorship, anyone acquainted with Booth's other books will not worry: the reading life is just not that simple for him. While he does argue that "some experiences" are good and others are not, he quickly complicates things by insisting, over and over again, that the "goods" which may come from narrative are many. "We must avoid at all costs the effort to reduce literary 'goods' to one kind; instead, we should seek to clarify and embrace a *plurality* of goods" (p. 115).

Further, what is good for me, today, may not be good for me tomorrow, or for you ever, because what "good" means is, "will help a given person grow at a given time." In Booth's words: "For some people, in some circumstances, Spark is likely to prove ethically more valuable than Dante, and for others—perhaps those who are a bit too comfortable with perpetual questioning—*The Divine Comedy* . . . would provide the superior gift" (p. 58).

Booth's central metaphor, of books (or their implied authors) as "friends," may sound simplistic at first. Yet he uses it to develop a fertile range of questions to be asked and issues to be raised when we read. Here is an interesting passage in which he compares Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and

Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*:

I know much less about the "real" Tyler than I know about the public image "Norman Mailer," or about the career author I have met in reading most of his books. "My" Tyler's range and daring are much more limited than "my" Mailer's, but I feel that she is giving me everything she's got, and she cares a great deal about what will become of me as I read. My Mailer, in contrast, is simply playing games with me; he does not care a hill of beans for my welfare—he would obviously be happy to sacrifice me and any other reader to further his own ends. This does not mean that he is not worth talking to—but it may mean that I finally regret spending quite so long with him, when I might have been reading more of Anne Tyler (p. 208).

Not only does the "friend" metaphor allow for careful analyses of this type, it also encourages us to give the process of rejecting an author the seriousness it deserves. He would not have us refuse to keep company with a book any more off-handedly than we would refuse the company of a real person. "To appraise a complex literary friend according to some single standard is critical bigotry" (p. 210).

Wayne Booth, then, like Martha Nussbaum, Susan Gallagher, and Roger Lundin, believes that something *does* happen when we read poetry. As T. S. Eliot says in his essay, "Religion and Literature," "though we may read literature merely for pleasure, of 'entertainment' or of 'aesthetic enjoyment,' this reading never affects simply a sort of special sense: it affects us as entire human beings . . ." (p. 350). Reading has serious moral consequences, and narratives help us to understand who we are and who we can become in a world of difficult choices.

It is not barbaric to read and write poetry

Reading well may just help us prevent another Auschwitz. Perhaps we will even come at last to a sunny island where the Good and the Beautiful live together in peace, with a Tintoretto on the wall and a baby crowing in its crib.

after Auschwitz; rather, reading well may just help us *prevent* another Auschwitz. Perhaps we will even come at last to a sunny island

where the Good and the Beautiful live together in peace, with a Tintoretto on the wall and a baby crowing in its crib.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Please imagine with me that this knoll is large enough to accommodate the differences between these three.

2. I don't suppose that this student would find Oscar Wilde persuasive: "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art."

3. I use *hysterical* in full knowledge of the irony implied by using it to describe a man. I consider it only fair, since his article is not only full of sexist language, but also informed by sexist attitudes. For Gass, people are "men" who value many things, including the "beauties of women" (p. 38). In fact, he only uses inclusive language when he is pointing out that people are expendable: "That attachment to human life which demands that it be chosen over everything else is mostly humbug" (p. 39).

4. Am *I* getting hysterical now? This topic *is* emotional, isn't it?

5. I would like to thank Lucerne French Snipes for introducing me to this book.

6. I personally value such an approach because I feel it gives me opportunities for connecting with other readers of literature who care about the moral effects of

literature but are essentially excluded by Christian terminology.

7. Booth's method for comparing one's own experience of a work with those of many other good readers, in order to make an evaluative judgment.

8. He begins the book with an anecdote from the University of Chicago in the mid-sixties, when an African-American art teacher in the humanities core refused to teach *Huckleberry Finn* on moral grounds. Booth remembers how embarrassed he and the other literature teachers were that one of their colleagues could not "read" properly. "Poetry,' we were fond of quoting to each other, 'makes nothing happen.' To have attended to Paul Moses' complaint would have been to commit . . . 'the affective fallacy'" (p. 4). *The Company We Keep* is dedicated to Moses.

9. Like this: "Brooks and Warren performed a clever annihilation of 'Trees,' for example . . . and generations of students were taught that what they and their home folks had loved was contemptible. At its worst, such teaching—some of which I engaged in myself—was no more than an attempt to demonstrate one's own cleverness" (p. 220, n. 13).