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**Four Perspectives on the Value of Literature for Moral  
and Character Education**

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## **Four Perspectives on the Value of Literature for Moral and Character Education**

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‘We all know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars...everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.’ (Thornton Wilder)

### **Character, virtue ethics and moral education**

The main aim of this paper is to raise and explore four perspectives on the possible or actual uses of past and present day literature for moral educational purposes -- more specifically to the purpose of cultivating moral or virtuous character. However, we shall begin by spelling out certain stage-setting claims on which this essay largely rests.

First: despite the long dominance of a (mainly Kohlbergian) cognitive developmental conception of moral education -- and its undeniable contribution to latter day theorising in this field -- its day, at least as defended by its main architect, is now largely past.

Second: the more recent general course that thinking about moral development and education has followed -- in the west and elsewhere -- is in the direction of so-called *character* education:

Third: of all the available versions of character education, the best prospect for a satisfactory practice of character education lies in further refinement of Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Fourth: the Aristotelian conception of practical reason as the ordering of affect, feeling or sentiment suggests an important role for narrative and imaginative literature in the cultivation of virtuous character. While Alasdair MacIntyre has recently championed this idea, it has perhaps more time-honoured support in the work of Aristotle who asserted in his *Poetics* that: poetry 'is something more philosophic and of graver import than history', since it is addressed to matters of 'universal' more than particular human concern. For Aristotle poetry is a principal means to emotional education.

### **Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the moral value of literature**

Still, while one might generally endorse the overall drift of this case for the moral educational value of literature, it seems far from straightforward and suggests rather different -- variously controversial -- approaches to the moral use of literature. To begin with, Plato, in *The Republic*, argued that since creative art and literature are works only of the imagination, they cannot be considered genuine forms of knowledge: artists and poets are therefore to be regarded as little more than deceivers whose fantasies merely distract us from the true nature of things. Since Plato's extreme rationalist epistemology also regards empirical experience as epistemically unreliable, holding that the only secure route to knowledge lies in the exercise of a highly abstract and a prioristic form of reasoning that he calls 'dialectic', he would not regard even the (probabilistic) claims of modern natural science as defensible. To this extent, Plato places the creative works of artists at a *third* remove from genuine knowledge; just as the sensations and perceptions of ordinary sense experience are mere copies of the ideal forms of real knowledge, so artworks are just poor copies of the world of sensible experience.

But Plato is by no means resolute in his condemnation of art and artists. For while he generally condemns the artist as a deceiver who should ideally be banished from any

rational political order, at the less rational level at which the common rank-and-file operate, artistic fictions may yet be useful to persuade people to behave in accordance with what their wiser rulers have discerned to be the right way. Thus, Plato notoriously advocated instructing the masses in figurative depictions of human inequality that he refers to as 'noble lies'. On this view, the *hoi-polloi* are more likely to be persuaded of the inherent superiority of some over others by artistic fictions of gods creating men of metals -- gold, silver and bronze -- of different value. On tight rein, the artist may therefore serve a useful socio-political function for the promotion of state-approved behaviour.

Still, to whatever extent we may recoil from such a manipulative view of art in the service of the state, Plato nevertheless defends a fairly common and conventional view of the moral and other educational role of art. On this view, virtuous conduct has a particular form or face and the function of art is *mimetic*: it is the job, even of imaginative or fictional literature, to depict moral character as accurately or as faithfully as possible with a view to encouraging people to imitate it. Indeed, we might regard this as the 'default' view of the moral educational value or significance of art and literature and it is one that is fairly regularly encountered in modern discussions of children's literature -- where even the most fantastic characters may be approved on the grounds that they can teach young people, or at least exemplify or reinforce for them, the difference between right and wrong. Indeed, many distinguished past and present authors, from John Bunyan to C.S. Lewis, have had such avowed didactic intent.

However, the moral educational purposes and value that Aristotle envisages for literature in the *Poetics* and elsewhere contrasts markedly with this Platonic view. In line with the general account of virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle takes emotional regulation or ordering to be a large part of the cultivation of moral virtue. So whereas Plato takes the great poets to be morally dangerous, because they depict the motives, passions and conduct of gods and men in a bad light, Aristotle appreciates that the great works of Homer, Sophocles, Euripides and other offer valuable opportunities for emotional development precisely via practical reflection on the way in which human motive, feeling

and appetite are implicated, for moral good or ill, in the development of good or virtuous character.

Indeed, the ancient spectators of Greek tragedies did not attend them in order to acquire knowledge of the classical myths themselves: the challenge to dramatists was rather to provide thought-provoking re-workings of such myths. Thus, Euripides' *Medea* does not just pander to any Greek stereotype of Medea as a the barbarous foreign vixen entirely enslaved to her own uncivilized passions, but helps us see her as any mother abandoned by an unscrupulously ambitious and unfaithful *Greek* husband. It may therefore help us to understand how someone -- perhaps *anyone* -- in her circumstances might have done what she did and come thereby to feel genuine pity for her. Aristotle's notoriously evasive doctrine of emotional *catharsis* seems to be about the respects in which great tragedy may assist development of purer or more refined emotions by purging them of the false -- sentimental and self-serving -- illusions and prejudices with which they are so often popularly mixed. Euripides' *Trojan Women* clearly sets out to hold up a moral mirror to the Greeks, insofar as the women of Troy are fairly plainly portrayed as victims of Greek treachery, brutality and lust.

In any event, the lessons about moral character, motive and sentiment that Aristotle evidently holds we can learn from the contemplation of great tragedy are much evident in much later western literature -- such as, perhaps notably, Shakespearean and other Elizabethan drama and the nineteenth century novel. The major Shakespearian tragedies of *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* are all cast in the classical mode of exploration of various respects in which significant human character flaws -- especially blind or misdirected motive, sentiment or passion -- can have fatal consequences for human well-being or flourishing. Likewise, though often in rather lighter vein, the classic novels of English nineteenth century literature) -- from Austen and the Brontes to Dickens and Thackeray -- are all much concerned with the study of moral character and of how this stands to be marred or spoiled by false, shallow or corrupt sentiment. At all events, what we have called the Aristotelian view of the moral value of literature aims not so much to tell us what we should *do* by way of virtuous conduct, but to teach us -- via a

kind of literary thought experiment -- about the moral psychology of virtue. There is clearly much to be learned from Shakespeare, Austen or Dickens about ways in which -- without wise Aristotelian moderation -- a range often otherwise more carefully considered motives and emotions might lead us up the moral guardian path.

### **The romantic moral challenge**

However, both the Platonic and the Aristotelian conceptions of the moral educational value or purpose of literature arguably endorse fairly conservative views of virtuous character and conduct and neither poses much challenge to time-honoured 'pro-social' moral conventions. So whether a literary work engages in the Platonic didacticism of (say) Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* or in the deeper character explorations of Jane Austen's *Emma*, we are still invited to concur in fairly conventional assessments or judgements of what constitutes decent or admirable character. Moreover, it is perhaps the hallmark of this largely 'common-sense' conception of praiseworthy character that it fits its possessor for something like decent, civilized and accommodating interpersonal association with others in society.

But this intuitive or conventional conception of moral agency and character encounters a somewhat radical challenge in post-reformation western liberal democracies precisely under the influence of certain artistic and literary inspirations and movements. Still, although such trends are most marked, as we shall see, in the 'romantic' movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are strikingly foreshadowed by a major literary work of the seventeenth century.

Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* may be regarded as one of the most powerful ever expressions of 'sympathy with the devil'. While the poem develops a narrative that is derived from and entirely consistent with traditional Judeo-Christian theology -- namely, the ancient story of the revolt against God and Heaven by a host of rebel angels led by Lucifer and of their inevitable defeat and consignment to endless perdition -- there is no doubt that Milton's Satan, in defiant resistance to what he evidently perceives to be

God's tyranny, is depicted as an heroic if not actually admirable character. He is most obviously a Promethian figure, and, like the Prometheus of Aeschylus -- for whom the ancient titan clearly symbolized the resistance to imperialism that the poet and his comrades had offered to the Persians at Marathon -- he stands for individual and political freedom from any imposed authority, tyranny or paternalism. On this view, the freedom to forge one's own destiny in the light of experience is the only route to the knowledge and understanding of full human maturity and all that serves to impede this is to be resisted.

However, this general political theme of liberal resistance to oppressive authority is writ especially large in the work of romantic artists and poets of the next century. Indeed, the political antipathy to established church and state of early romantics is further compounded by hostility to post-industrial human exploitation and environmental degradation also held to be in the interests and service of the *status quo*, and the likes of Blake and Wordsworth yearn for return to some Rousseauian natural or pre-social condition of uncorrupted moral and spiritual innocence.

In the work of later romantics, however, such reactions and antipathies take a more inward, individualistic, secular turn. Once divine authority as conceived in the image of the church and its social institutions and values has been rejected or denied, some other basis for human salvation, fulfillment or flourishing needs to be sought -- and this, in the Byronic imagination, can only be in the exercise of total freedom to express and/or create ourselves as we so please. On this view, liberty and self-expression become ends in themselves and the fullest possible human experience is to be sought -- for good or ill -- as a means to such freedom. The general drift of much of such work is towards an ethics of individual and authentic self-creation in defiance of the heteronomous constraints of ordinary -- and perhaps pro-social -- morality. Indeed, in much of later neo-romantic (especially twentieth century) literature, the creative artist is the moral hero or heroine insofar as he or she is capable of imaginative transcendence of the stifling constraints of conventional bourgeois morality.

## **Towards post-modern moral skepticism**

That said, romantic and neo-romantic literature do not entirely eschew moral point or seriousness: on the contrary, their purpose is precisely moral revision or reform of what are perceived as bogus, stale or servile conventional values and virtues in favour of something more robust, authentic or 'heroic'. Still, we should not underestimate the problems that lively literary encounter with such values and virtues might present for moral education as ordinarily conceived. Much of what might be regarded on the Platonic or Aristotelian views as virtuous conduct would not be so on romantic and neo-romantic views; and *vice versa*. It seems that such romantic literature and its authors were -- in the name of more authentic virtue -- inclined to sexual, narcotic and other lifestyle experiment at some odds with the moral counsel to which most contemporary 'bourgeois' and to a contempt for the common herd which is hardly conducive to justice as equal regard. What therefore should we say of such differences in moral educational terms? Should we perhaps say -- like moral relativists -- that here are two opposed, but simply different, moral viewpoints that are nevertheless valid on their own terms? On the other hand, perhaps there might still be scope for morally productive conversation between perspectives that, despite their differences, do at least both find moral discourse meaningful and worth taking less seriously. It is less clear, however, that such scope remains in some other directions that modern literature has taken.

While we shall here generally refer to such modern literary trends as 'post-modern', it is clear that they are foreshadowed in much so-called (by contrast) 'modern' literature, as well as much influenced by modern or post-enlightenment developments in philosophy, science and other branches of human enquiry. But the concentrated effects of such developments on contemporary consciousness are perhaps first clearly discernible in two great classics of modernism: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the first of these, the wasteland to which Eliot's poem refers is a spiritual desert or vacuum in which secularism, materialism and absence of objectively certain values have deprived human life and agency of any larger moral vision, purpose or meaning. Whilst Eliot, as a Christian, is evidently critical of this condition, it is but a short step from



Eliot's wasteland to those of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett in which such meaninglessness has become more or less the default understanding of the human condition -- and to which the only available responses may seem to be the existential angst and paranoia of Kafka or the ironic black humour of Beckett. On the other hand, the striking feature of Joyce's *Ulysses* is apparent absence of any interest in large questions of human destiny of the kind that other past and present authors have taken it to be a job of fiction to explore. Joyce's brilliant and innovative exploration of the inner mental landscape -- warts and all -- of the principal actors of *Ulysses* seems exclusively 'phenomenological' and entirely eschews moral judgement on the very human but often fairly squalid character and conduct of those actors.

To be sure, it is not possible to generalize the way literature has gone since Eliot and Joyce: the deluge of serious poetry, drama and fiction that has since appeared is a rich tapestry that has sought to achieve diverse artistic and human aims. It would certainly be quite wrong to say, for example, that fiction and drama have generally abandoned any and all moral commitment, exploration of moral issues, or even more or less explicit moral instruction. Many great twentieth century writers, such as Greene, Golding and Brecht have written from positions of explicit religious or other ideological moral commitment, much serious and important children's literature from C.S. Lewis to Roald Dahl has had morally instructive intent, and many significant modern novels have sought expose the moral evils of slavery (Allende), racism (Richard Wright), war (Faulks) and contemporary neo-liberal avarice (Martin Amis). At the same time, such no doubt significant moral issues are relatively easy moral targets in a political climate of secular liberal democracy committed to the promotion of progressive humanitarian ideals of freedom, tolerance and equality of treatment and opportunity. Indeed, by token of such ideals, it might be less surprising why much modern literature has fought shy of moral judgment or evaluation of those spheres of personal and 'private' experience and conduct which liberalism has sought to defend from paternalistic state or other intrusion.

In this light, it seems that few significant works of mainstream modern and postmodern fiction and drama seem *entirely* untouched by 'wasteland' abdication of any aspiration to

larger perspectives or visions of human purpose, destiny or flourishing or by the suspension of moral judgement on ordinary human affairs characteristic of *Ulysses*. For present purposes, the trouble with such literary fare is that the scope for education of virtuous character is not at all clear. To the extent that much modern and postmodern literary effort seems concerned to depict or report on the human condition rather than offer any morally committed comment or judgement on it, it is difficult to *derive* any conception of virtuous character and conduct from such work -- rather than, as it were, *imposing* some conception on it. Aside from the often amoral or morally agnostic 'wasteland-scapes' of contemporary magic realism and the like (Burroughs, Marquez, Kundera, Rushdie or Angela Carter) and the explorations of various darker aspects of human pathology (Nabokov, Fowles or Faulks), many of the characters of otherwise excellent fictional explorations of contemporary western life clearly operate in a world of secular post-technological affluence in which ideals or aspirations towards personal character development no longer seem on the agenda. In this regard, the lifestyles in which many of such characters engage involve, almost as a matter of course, casual (heterosexual, homosexual and auto-erotic) sex, frequent infidelity, excessive use of alcohol, narcotics and pornography and various kinds of routine dissembling -- often without any suggestion of resulting harm to themselves or others. And while someone might perhaps suggest using such works as case studies for exploration of ideas of good or bad character, this would also risk of biased reading of such works and/or serious *educational* failure to appreciate the real literary and artistic purposes that their authors may have had for them.

Indeed, aesthetic and other merits aside, such authorial intent may well include the championing of an emancipated hedonic and guilt-free lifestyle -- to which, in a postmodern world of fragmented consciousness (of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*) notions of a stable and unified psychological site of character excellences or perfections are simply meaningless. In this regard, we might recall that the early pioneers of modern virtue ethics -- notably Anscombe and Geach -- were Roman Catholics rooted in a particular substantial moral theology deeply opposed to the relativism and permissiveness discernible in modern forms of individual and social moral constructivism. For them, the

virtues make ultimate sense only in terms of a particular moral *telos* that they take to have been provided (for one and for all) by St Thomas and other church fathers. But one may also fail to see that a later influential Catholic Thomist, Alasdair MacIntyre, rejects the ‘metaphysical biology’ of Aristotle in the name of a kind of idealist social constructivism, precisely because he recognizes that the practical wisdom of virtue requires meaningful grounding in some religious or other ‘ideological’ perspective or *telos*. Indeed, this more than likely accounts for MacIntyre’s restless movement between the *grand recits* of Marxism and Catholicism.

These larger philosophical points have enormous implications for the very practical business of what we should regard as a virtue -- indeed, whether it is worth regarding anything as a virtue -- and *why*. To make the point with an extreme example, both Anscombe and Geach regard chastity as a religious and moral virtue, construing this as avoidance of sexual activity outside of heterosexual wedlock for procreative purposes. To be sure, while one might take a more relaxed view of chastity as sexual temperance, this would have to be a rather *different* conception, defined by reference to a rather different end or *telos*. Indeed, the true moral difference between Anscombe and Geach and those who would defend a more relaxed view of sexual temperance on the *instrumental* grounds that it reduces sexual excess, disease or unwanted pregnancy, is that for the former, people should aspire to be chaste because, it is a moral *end in itself*. Moreover, it seems to be much this conception of chastity that is extolled and celebrated in such pre-modern literature of Arthurian legend as Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* wherein such sexual virtue is a constituent of human (Christian) perfection symbolized by pursuit of the Holy Grail. On this perspective, it is not that Anscombe and Geach have a different *telos* from instrumentalists about chastity: it is rather that they have a *telos*, but instrumentalists do not.

In this light, the point that may be missed in recent attempts to reclaim the notion of virtuous character for contemporary moral use is that on older Aristotelian views the development of such character is something to be valued and admired for its own sake: that although Aristotle makes much of the role of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in

helping us to determine what we should *do* for the best, he is no less clear that its main value lies in helping us to become the kind of moral *persons* that we should want to be. But we have seen how the disappearance of *telos* from the secular wasteland-scapes that comprise the subject matter of much modern and postmodern literature make it difficult to sustain any such conception of the intrinsic worth of virtuous character. Indeed, even if one rejects the dubious postmodern idea that there can no longer be today any such thing as stable or unified centre of personal consciousness, it is not obvious that cultivating habits of sexual temperance for the largely instrumental purposes of avoiding the adverse consequences of sexual promiscuity amounts to the *virtue* of chastity. However, the main issue here is not that of the status of chastity as a virtue, but that of how any purported or candidate virtue may have this status in the context of contemporary human life and affairs. The deep question is that of whether there can be virtue absent the larger visions of human purpose and destiny that Anscombe, Geach and the authors of the grail stories take or took for granted.

## **Conclusion**

In Thornton Wilder's touching play *Our Town* his 'Stage Manager' insists we know that there is something 'eternal' about human beings. For many past and present day human cultures, this eternal feature of humans has been called 'soul': many religious traditions have taken the soul to be *immortal* -- and so was it argued by the founder of western philosophy Plato. Aristotle took a rather different 'functionalist' view of the soul from Plato that saw it more in terms of the various rational and deliberative capacities of naturally evolved creatures. But it is all too easy, under the epistemic sway of modern science, to be misled by this. Aristotle, no less than Plato, held that the soul occupied a conceptual space defined in terms of *logos* and *telos* that defied reduction to the efficient causes of natural and social science. In his regard, it may be that in order to grasp the eternity of the human soul we may have to turn to literary narratives of the human struggle to reach beyond its natural evolutionary state in pursuit of purposes or goods that are also beyond the resources and scope of natural or social science fully to comprehend or explain.