

*Reading and Christian Charity*¹

Over my years as a teacher, I have had parents and students challenge me on my choice of literature on the grounds that some of it was not morally suitable. Among the works that have fallen under their scrutiny are the *Iliad* (for violence), the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles (patricide, incest), the *Volsunga Saga* (murder, incest), the plays of Shakespeare (murder, bawdry, violence, drunkenness, adultery, lying, theft, treason...the list is nearly endless), and *Frankenstein* and “The Importance of Being Earnest” (their authors’ lifestyles). Teaching the various pagan myths, furthermore, has been variously condemned on the ground that they presume false gods. Even some students who have come looking specifically for classical education have not been able to refrain from ridiculing the Greeks for their beliefs.

Most of these people have good intentions. The behavior to which they are objecting is usually indeed objectionable. We should not practice murder or incest or adultery; we should not steal to become wealthier, or kill others to enhance our personal glory; we should not embrace any of the thousand human vices that are detailed almost any selection of literature one could pick. We should not be moved by admiration for a work to emulate its author’s bad behavior, either. And I would certainly affirm that the gods of Olympus and Valhalla are fictions, and that any inclination to worship them ourselves ought to be suppressed. So why should we concern ourselves with literature that includes them—and if we do, how should we approach them? It’s a good question, requiring a serious answer.

The case that observation elicits emulation has been made for generations, and there is something to be said for it. One is unlikely to be drawn to a sin one has never heard of. An adult charged with the care and education of children must bear this in mind. One oughtn’t expose an unprepared mind to even literary descriptions of some human activity, any more than one hands a six-year-old the keys to the car.

The countervailing argument is that some familiarity with the harsh reality of the world is necessary: children need to recognize evil to reject it. After all, we live inescapably in a sinful world, and are ourselves part of it. Our tendency to sin will not be eliminated by cultivating ignorance. We may not have heard of one sin, but we can almost certainly make up the lack in some other way out of our own flawed natures. In addition to exposing us to bad things, good literature can help teach us to recognize evil and avert it.

So these two excellent arguments stand perpetually at odds. It’s nothing new: the question rages in Plato’s *Republic*, and it’s still part of our public discourse relating to censorship. Unsurprisingly, Plato, who believes in the moral perfectibility of man, prefers censorship; today’s libertarian tends toward the other extreme, in a fond belief that market forces will achieve something optimized not only for economic equilibrium but moral balance. A Christian cognizant of our fallen nature, though, can accept neither extreme. The trick seems to be in ascertaining exactly *where* to place the boundary at any given time.

That is of course not obvious, nor is it even really clear that there is a fixed line so much as a murky zone in the middle somewhere, to be navigated with a queasy caution. It is hard to decide what ought to

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be read and what ought to be suppressed without relying on some kind of calculus—whether simple or elaborate—of a work’s infractions. The problem is that an incident-count is usually going to miss the point. One can promote a thoroughly repugnant ethic without resorting to obscenity or violence. It is also possible to show the light of redemption shining through the nastiest human experiences.

The shallow scoring methodology often used to define movies or books as unsuitable because of their quantities of inappropriate behavior will also erode the Scriptures. The Old Testament objectively recounts almost every known form of sin. The Gospels are not much better on that computation: they’re full of hypocrites and adulterers and sinners of every other sort, and the narrative comes to a wholly unwarranted execution by crucifixion. Can we allow our children to read such things?

And yet—dare we allow our children *not* to read such things? Are we saved by the overwhelming *niceness* of God, or by this horrific and bloody sacrifice once offered? Weren’t the Children of Israel freed in a sequence of increasingly grisly plagues upon their Egyptian oppressors? Don’t we need to take these stories into ourselves and make them ours? We aren’t coaxed into the Kingdom of God as into a four-star hotel, by its elegant appointments and superior service—we’re driven, battered, and corralled, lifted up out of the mire of our own making because that’s finally the only place we can turn where we don’t see our own destruction. So sooner or later we must allow our children to encounter some unpleasant material. It seems to me better that they should encounter at least some of it in literature rather than in person.

Still, as responsible parents trying to raise children in the nurture of the Lord, we have to wrestle with the boundaries of where and when, and even after that we’re going to have to determine *how* to approach it in substance. It’s never going to be easy, safe, or comfortable. We’re going to make mistakes. We’re going to give our children some things they’re not ready for. It will hurt them. We’re going to protect them from things they really should have known. That will hurt them too.

We can lament this, but we cannot avoid it. There’s no easy answer. People who rely on simplistic formulae will achieve commensurately simplistic solutions. I know some families, for example, that simply rely on movie ratings for their film standards. PG-13 is okay; R is not. The problem is that it doesn’t work. There are some profoundly moving and powerful movies—important ones—that are rated R. There are also some vile ones that skate by with a PG or even a G rating—perhaps not those promoting ostentatious sexuality, extreme physical violence, or drug abuse, but some that plant corrupting seeds in the soul all the same (and there *are* sins other than sins of sex, violence, and substance abuse). The complexity of our experience cannot be reduced to a simple tally.

My thinking on this issue has been transformed by a number of things over the last decade, but by nothing as much as C. S. Lewis’s *An Experiment in Criticism*. I recommend it to everyone concerned with the complex balance of both *what* and *how* we read. What I’m going to propose here has to do with drawing what Lewis says to the critical community at large at least partway under the umbrella of specifically Christian thought. (While Lewis was of course a noted Christian apologist, this particular work was written for the scholarly community, and tends not to take an openly theological approach, though I think it is informed at a deeper level by his faith.) For the most part my own thinking is motivated by an awareness

that when you read something, you are not just taking words into your eyes and mind: *you are actually encountering, at some level, the person who wrote it.*

This is a brash claim, and I'll be the first to admit that it's a limited sort of encounter. We don't know what Homer looked like, or whether there were two of him, or whether one or both of him were blind or female or slaves. There are a lot of *facts* we don't know—facts we would know if we were sitting down with him (or her, or them) at dinner. We don't know, either, whether Shakespeare the writer was Shakespeare the actor or someone else entirely. And even where we have a fair amount of reliable biographical data, we still don't know a good deal about most authors. A lot slips through the cracks.

But how is that different from any other human encounter? There are a lot of things I don't *know* about the fellow I meet on the street. And yet (assuming he doesn't approach me with obvious hostile intent) I try to give such a person a reception in Christian charity—a fair hearing, genuinely trying to understand what he has to say to me. Our Lord tells us, "For as much as you have done to one of the least of these, you have done also to me."

There are a lot of things, for that matter, that I don't know or understand even about those people who are closest to me. There are parts of my wife's personality that I am only now discovering after nearly thirty years of marriage. There are parts I'm still pretty puzzled about. Maybe I'll get them figured out eventually, but I'm not wagering on it. This is heady stuff, and should keep us humble and aware of the profound gravity (Lewis called it the *weight of glory*) that inheres in every single human interaction we have.

Is it reasonable to suggest that we approach reading that way too? I think it's a thought-experiment worth trying. When we pick up a book, we are privileged to make—on some level—the author's acquaintance. At the most basic level, we encounter *persons* when we read. And that imposes on us a moral obligation to listen—listen hard, sincerely, and attempt to understand what they're trying to tell us.

Note that there are a number of things we have no obligation to do. We're not obliged to *believe* everything they say—merely to hear it, and to strive to understand them. We have—and should have—own beliefs, and others (whether we meet them on the street or through books) have no presumptive claim upon those beliefs, unless they manage to persuade us by honest argument.

At the same time, I don't think we need to feel obliged to judge everything they say, or to condemn them for crossing this or that line. This seems to be a favorite academic pastime, and a favorite pastime too among a lot of other groups. We live in a society ruled by the iconic thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Things are apparently either to be embraced or dismissed, with no intermediate gradations of evaluation or analysis. Many watchdog groups pronounce a movie worthy or unworthy of my attention, based on whether they agree with what they think it's propounding. Few from any part of the political or religious spectrum suggest that I sift the work's content for myself. It's either one way or the other.

Do we deal with people that way? Some, I suppose, do—but that's not what Our Lord has told us to do. We believe—at least those of us who believe that God loves us all, sinners as we all are—that we need to receive not only those with whom we agree, but also those with whom we do not. We don't receive them for the rightness of their opinions, but because of our shared humanity. We don't give them a cup of water in Jesus' name because of their own righteousness (or even because of ours) but because of His.

And when we do so, if we have the humility for it, we can see a partial image of God in each of them, too: again, not because they are right but because they are His—even if they don't know it.

That's why I can read Homer and receive the raw humanity of his tale, expressed in selfish, generous, sinful, driven, glorious—and contradictory—people. I don't have to approve of Hamlet and his decisions (many of which are repellent, I think) to find a window on some very serious truths about human nature. We can have a literary sympathy for him without approving his deeds. I don't have to approve of Mary Shelley's behavior to recognize that she has some important and serious things to tell me about our capacity to create and to betray. I don't have to approve of Oscar Wilde's lifestyle to appreciate some of his scathingly funny (and often correct) pieces of human insight.

I am not eager to found another school of literary criticism, but I cannot find in any of the currently dominant ones the slightest note of the moral burden I think we inherit as readers. I would like at least to advance the notion that there is—less as a school of critical practice, and more as a disposition of the heart—a Christian way of reading. I would like to suggest that as a paradigm for such Christian reading, we take an approach that may seem simplistic to some, daring to others; but I think it will exercise our moral capacity and force us back where we belong, humbled, upon the all-sufficient love of Christ.

If we as Christians were to read with a fundamental charity toward the author, we would achieve something of a revolution in critical thought, at least within the Church. No, the world will not listen, most likely; it seldom does. It will have its own combinations of pettiness and loftiness, and it will come to its own mix of profound and vapid perceptions. And we may not do a lot better, in terms of critical output. But we are under no obligation to be successful: we are obliged to do what is right, irrespective of its success or failure.

Herewith I present a handful of what seem to me to be the chief implications of that principle:

- *We must make a good-faith effort to learn what the author was trying to say.* The so-called New Criticism of the 1950s laid it down as axiomatic that authorial intention was more or less beyond recovery, and that the text itself should be scrutinized on absolute terms as a work entirely unto itself. There is of course a profound truth behind what they claimed. We can never wholly or perfectly know the mind of another. In fact, the likelihood is high we will from time to time make some rather serious errors.

But it does not make matters better to combine a profound insight with an oversight, even more profound. What the New Critics seem to have missed is the fact that, if there is no authorial intention at stake, there is really no point to reading at all: if there is no context, neither is there, in any meaningful sense, a text. The purpose of writing in the first place is lost, for an author is almost never merely weaving words into an abstract object for his own amusement: he is attempting to communicate with readers, whoever they may be. If we respect that intention and respond in charity, we have to take this seriously.

- *We will never completely discover that intention.* As I said above, our understanding will be imperfect. This chafes some, especially those who require pure theory. I've come to expect it. Reality is messy and confusing. Now we see as through a glass darkly: if we can only see God imperfectly (whose intention, at

least, *is* perfect, and whose capacity for self-expression issued in the Logos of all creation) then surely our understanding of our fellow man will be no better. That's unfortunate, but for now, it's what we have, so we'd better make the best of it. We can hope that we will in the next life be united not only with God, but also with the rest of God's creation, in a more perfect understanding.

- *Not everything in a work can be encompassed by the author's intention.* Sometimes we will perceive something valuable in the text without being sure whether the author intended it or not. There are passages in the Psalms where the Hebrew word is simply unknown to us. There are passages in Shakespeare where the words seem clear, but the thought that knits them together is impenetrable. There are places in poetry and prose alike where words take on a complex of meanings, and we cannot be entirely sure of whether the author really meant *all* those meanings or just one. This is where the New Criticism got it right. In the overall richness of literary production, connections emerge either from the subconsciousness of the author, where murky things reside beyond the scrutiny of pure intention, or else they emerge from the innate coherence of the material itself: the author has touched a truth perhaps unwittingly, but the truth of the universe resonates with it. This is part of the literary experience, too, and it would be churlish to reject it. Christian readers, I think, can take it as a sign of the grace of God operating in and on our small creative efforts, validating them, fructifying them, and turning them to a higher purpose. I'm not sure how others take it, but that's not my present concern.

- *The whole intention of a work will be greater than the sum of its parts.* We cannot evaluate a work solely by regarding the incidents of its narrative. There may be reasons to proscribe certain works because of such things, or to ban them from schools, but this is a pragmatic tactical judgment—not a real evaluation. Put somewhat more pointedly, the mere presence of a sin in a story, no matter how appalling it is, does not make the *story* immoral. Yes, there are stories that we can call immoral, insofar as they seem to conduce to immoral practices on the part of those who read and believe them, or (at a deeper level) because they present a lie as a truth. But most stories—and all good ones—have to account for the reality of human sin. Dramatically presenting sinful behavior in a story is not *ipso facto* an endorsement of the sin. A story that presumes a sinless or perfectible humanity is, in the long run, immeasurably more dangerous.

- *We haven't entered into the reading process primarily to judge.* I know, the term “judge” is tossed around rather sloppily both inside the Church and at its periphery, and indignant secularists with a somewhat deficient sense of irony routinely condemn Christians for being judgmental. What I'm saying here is merely this: just as we don't talk to people in order to tally up the conversation's share of virtue, the goal of the process of reading is not primarily evaluative either. The goal of reading is the meeting of minds itself. That imperfect meeting, across the gaps of time, space, world-view, and personality is not a side benefit of reading; it's what reading is about. It's another instance of human interaction—which seems to be a large part of what God put us here for—and it should be conducted with full regard for what Lewis called the *weight of glory*. I don't need to pronounce on the ultimate state of Homer's soul (God surely doesn't need

my help to sort that out); I don't even need to come up with a value to assign to his work. I could not possibly do so anyway. I do need to love Homer—not because of his artistic virtuosity, or even because of his own intrinsic worth as a person, but because God loved him first and loves him still.

• *To recognize and embrace a truth is infinitely more rewarding than rejecting something.* When we have moved away from the position of judging, we also allow all those people—imperfect as they are—to mediate God's love and God's presence to us, and in that very act we can turn around some of the perceived deficiencies in these works, and make of them powerful lenses. When Achilles, a proud killing machine, and yet also a deeply sensitive representative of his culture—poetic, cruel, brilliant, and vengeful—extends mercy to Priam at last, he offers not only the mercy of Achilles, but an image of the mercy of God. Does Achilles know that? No. Does Homer know it? No. Does it matter that they don't know it? No. It's powerful because it comes unexpectedly, like lightning from a clear sky. What we experience there is not pure alienation and bewilderment: the great shock here at the end of the ordeal of the *Iliad* is the shock of recognition—like climbing Everest and finding there, waiting for you, an old friend. The part of our souls that responds to the love of Christ, mirrored among our fellow churchmen on Sunday morning, should be able to recognize it, even in glimmers half-understood, in the far reaches of time and space. The incongruity of the context can endow it with a peculiar power: a bright light shines with equal intensity by day or night, but it's by night that we see it best.

• *Humility is never out of place.* The words that come most painfully to most academics are, "I don't know." Scarcely less shameful than not knowing something is not having an opinion on it. Being willing to admit that we don't know something, and withholding the formation of an opinion until we do, though, can be hugely liberating. It leaves us open to perceive without bias. And if it entails an admission that we aren't infinitely wise, so much the better. We all need to be reminded of that.

• *It's easier to miss something that's there than mistakenly to see something that isn't.* Accordingly we should remain open to the possibility—indeed, the virtual certainty—that we've missed something. This is one of the reasons one can keep coming back to the same literature; it has the happy result that as one grows older, one can find valuable new things in what we might previously have discarded.

It's akin to the unicorn problem. It's easy to demonstrate the existence of people or dogs—one need just point one out. It's nearly impossible to prove that unicorns *don't* exist, though, unless they are logically self-contradictory. After conducting a painstaking search, we can say with some assurance that there are no unicorns *here*—but that doesn't mean that they aren't lurking just beyond our sight. In the same way, it's virtually impossible to show that a work lacks real literary value. I'm not sure why anyone feels called upon to try, and why some seem so eager to dismiss as many things as possible. As ever, the dismissal on this level is tantamount to a dismissal of the person behind the work. Dare we, on peril of our own souls, to do that?

When a work doesn't speak to me, really the worst thing I can honestly say about it is that it doesn't speak to me. That's a statement that's as much about me as about it. I have too often had the humbling experience, though, of returning to works—sometimes after several readings—and discovering in them something I had missed before. It was many years and a dozen readings or more before *Hamlet* really started to make sense to me. I don't think *Hamlet* really improved or altered in the interim.

Do note that this is different from perceiving a positive literary or moral fault in a work. Of the two, the literary fault is just a failure of workmanship; the moral fault is more problematic and probably more important. I think one can say that a work of literature is to be approached with caution or avoided altogether if its whole program is positively pernicious. But this is properly the domain of moral philosophy, and not in and of itself a literary judgment. Of course a literary scholar is also a moral agent, and this is not a concern that can be ruled out of bounds; nor in many cases are moral and artistic faults completely separable. I think it is always possible, too, that a work that is apparently advocating something we don't approve of will, upon recognition of its artistic virtues, turn out not to have been saying that all along—but that is a complex and troubling line of inquiry too big for the present context.

- *Ridicule is not helpful to the enterprise.* Ridicule does not ennoble the one ridiculing; it does not benefit the one ridiculed; it does not helpfully inform the third party. It virtually never promotes real understanding; it seldom makes a significant distinction; it is, accordingly, at best pointless, at worst cruel, and most often (even when the object of ridicule is dead and gone, and beyond apparent harm) it sets a low example of callous disregard and uncharity, a pattern of not hearing and not receiving another genuinely. There is room for satire in the world, but it's the form of literature most perilous for its practitioner: it needs to be conducted with an eye on the higher goal of lifting someone or something up, not merely tearing people down.

- *All truth is God's truth.* If something is not true in and of itself, no amount of pious dressing will make it true. Conversely, if it is true, it needs no further *raison d'être*. We don't need to apologize for every and any truth, or make it a platform for apologetics or pious polemics. Apologetics have their place, and I applaud and appreciate them: but truth, insofar as anything is true in itself, needs no further justification. The attempt to frame everything up as a case for Jesus, or to endow every story with a moral, or to force on every historical essay an evaluative pronouncement upon a culture, does not work to the glory of God. It instead tends to give the impression that truth is only worth heeding if we can somehow cash it in for platitudes, and tie it to an overtly theological point. Such a timorous view of the truth confounds the fear of the Lord: it's fear *for* the Lord, and argues a fragile faith that cannot endure to look at the beauty of truth for what it is, and know that it is God's.

And in a sense, I think, such people deprive themselves of a view of God in the very act of trying to keep their perspectives pure. For while I am very far from being a pantheist, I think (as Paul suggests in the first chapter of Romans) that the Lord has in fact hidden himself—or perhaps we might say, metaphorically, that he has left his fingerprints, to be discovered, as a channel of revelation and delight for

us—throughout the weird and wonderful diversity of creation, with the divinely ironic result that even those who deny Him can convey to us an image of Him in spite of themselves.