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PREVIEW RESPONSE

Literature Provokes Moral Urgency in Search of a Virtuous Life



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Virtues · Fine & Performing Arts · 3 min read

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In his essay “Religion and Literature” (1935), T.S. Eliot famously (some would say *infamously*) asserts, “Though we may read literature for pleasure, ... this reading never affects a sort of special sense; it affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence.” He later adds, “It is our business, as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business as Christians, *as well as* readers of literature, to know what we *ought* to like” It was for this reason that in this same essay Eliot contends that “Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint.” But the problem, he continues, is that there is no longer such a shared standpoint, and as a result, the formation of moral judgments whether in literary works or from the reading of literature has disintegrated. For him, that “common code” was championed, was made coherent by religious beliefs, which secularization had undermined, substituting not necessarily immorality or amorality, but the suspension of resolute moral judgment itself.

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

Despite competing views about what literature is and what it does (or *should* do), and the sources that inform literary creation and criticism, all of these writers and thinkers would agree that literature creates a *moral space*, which is decidedly not the same thing as *teaching* particular moral values or explicitly commending certain perennial human virtues. Even Eliot distanced his views from Christian literature that was too pedantic, too unlike the literature he esteemed. What kind of moral spaces does poetry, fiction, drama, create? I would argue that what some may find to be its deficiency is in fact one of its greatest advantages in this regard: literature creates and generates *moral complexity*. Yes, the embodiment of virtuous lives (or lives in need of virtue) has affective pull that other kinds of texts do not, and for this reason we may commend literature as a distinctive vehicle for inculcating moral vision and virtuous aspirations through its characters or personae. We want to be

like them (or not)! (One thinks of the heroes of great drama or of epic fantasies such as *The Lord of the Rings* here.)

But as with biblical narrative, protagonists are also fraught with their own weaknesses and moral deficiencies. Literature embodies such ambiguities and multivalences in ways that connect with our own, usually equally fraught, moral lives. This is not to say that the ambition to live a virtuous life is treated best when that prospect is held in abeyance because of the failure to fulfill it. But to acknowledge, as literature often enables us to do, that we are complicated creatures who often find ourselves in morally ambiguous situations, as often as not the product of our own [un]doing. What literature does distinctively, regardless of whether or not it is rooted in explicit religious commitments, is to *provoke moral urgency*. Some of the best literature in terms of the cultivation of a virtuous life is not the fiction or poetry or drama that resolve into a clear moral vision, but those which make us want to find such a vision, and to find it embodied in our own lives. In this respect, Jennifer Herdt's category of 'developing virtues' fits best with what literature can so powerfully influence.

Among the many writers I would commend on this score, I think of the Catholic fiction writers Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy, or the agnostic genius Cormac McCarthy.

One other comment I would add, regarding 'virtuous reading,' what literary critic Alan Jacobs calls "the hermeneutics of love" in his book of that title. Although not limited to the reading of literature, this notion was born of his lifetime engagement with literary texts. Writing against a 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' Jacobs commends an approach to texts that reads critically but also *charitably*, granting to authors the same courtesy that we are called to grant persons. In the often toxic atmosphere of competitive academia, virtuous reading offers another aspiration that highlights the practice as well as the disposition of virtue in our scholarship.

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Document type	Preview Response
Dialogue	Virtues
Discipline	Fine & Performing Arts
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Read online	facultyinitiative.net/article/literature-provokes-moral-urgency-in-search-of-a-virtuous-life



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