The Story Is the Point: Alasdair MacIntyre, Reading Literature, and Teaching Ethics

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> "A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*)[1]

> "Moral value, as should be obvious, is not separable from other values. An adequate morality would be ecologically sound; it would be esthetically pleasing. But the point I want to stress here is that it would be practical. Morality is long term practicality […]. Morality is neither ethereal nor arbitrary; it is the definition of what is humanly possible, and it is the definition of the penalties for violating human possibility. A person who violates human limits is punished or he prepares a punishment for his successors, not necessarily because of any divine or human law, but because he has transgressed the order of things." (Wendell Berry, "Discipline and Hope")[2]

Last fall 2018, when I was a scholar in residence at Duke University Divinity School, I taught a course in theological ethics called "Illness, Suffering, and the Witness of the Church." On the first day of class I projected Pieter Brueghel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" onto the screen in the front of the room and asked the students to say what they saw, and what the painting might have to do with illness and suffering. After several minutes of fruitful conversation, we read together W. H. Auden's poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts,"[3] which narrates Brueghel's painting and sets that narration within a broader reflection on the ways we attend or fail to attend to the suffering of others. More than thirty minutes later, I reluctantly cut the conversation short and moved on.

Although that conversation (and indeed, that entire course) was unusually fruitful, my approach to teaching it was far from novel. For example, in the undergraduate bioethics course I teach regularly, we discuss biotechnology and medicalization by reading Gerald McKenny's essay "Bioethics, the Body, and the Legacy of Bacon"[4] and Martin Heidegger's "The Question

Concerning Technology,"[5] but we also attend to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark."[6] When we address death and dying and the moral questions where medicine intersects with the end of life, we study the origins and development of distinctions between proportionate and disproportionate care and those between killing and allowing to die, while also reading Wendell Berry's short story "Fidelity,"[7] Leo Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich,"[8] and poetry by Jane Kenyon, Vassar Miller, and others.[9]

These are only two examples of courses where I employ literature and visual art to teach ethics, something I've done in most of my courses since I started teaching more than twenty years ago. I like to think I learned to do this from Alasdair MacIntyre, both by reading his work, which is replete with references to and examples from literature, and by following the example of those teachers of mine who were most influenced by MacIntyre.[10] In what follows, I want to begin to develop an account of why I think MacIntyre is correct in claiming that "morally serious" academic courses in ethics ought to include a close reading of certain kinds of literature.[11] My account will be based on my regard for three important strands of MacIntyre's work: first, his insistence that every ethic presupposes a sociology, which is to say, a particular set of normative social arrangements; second, the emphasis in his work on the significance of exemplars, practices, and apprenticeship in moral formation; and third, his longstanding attention to the significance of narrative in human life. I will conclude, finally, by attending to a particular example of the kind of literature I think MacIntyre has in mind, suggesting the kind of difference it might make for teaching ethics.

1. Every Ethic Presumes a Sociology

In a lecture delivered toward the end of her life, the writer Flannery O'Connor remarked to her audience that "[s]omewhere is better than anywhere."[12] O'Connor, whose novels and stories are characterized by meticulous attention to the particularities of the places and cultures—the "somewheres"—where they take place, understood not only that life necessarily unfolds and is lived out in particular places among particular others, but that personal identity is necessarily placed: "The things we see, hear, smell and touch affect us," she claimed, "long before we believe anything at all."[13] To presume or pretend otherwise is to become lost in abstraction. Just so, her observation about the members of a literary gathering she had been invited to speak to, namely, that "[m]ost of them live in a world God never made," was not a compliment.[14]

Although she may have found its academic pitch off-putting, O'Connor would likely have understood MacIntyre's claim in *After Virtue* that

> [a] moral philosophy […] characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions, and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world.[15]

MacIntyre's insistence upon the social embeddedness of moral agents and the necessity of attending to the particularities of that embeddedness is one of the bases of his ongoing disagreement with modern moral and political philosophy, especially in its academic guise. For not only has modern moral philosophy become, like most other academic disciplines, highly specialized and esoteric, it has also adopted an account of moral agency that is largely divorced from the realities of everyday life and "the everyday questions of plain persons."[16]

In *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity*, MacIntyre labels the subject matter of modern moral philosophy "Morality," which he characterizes as "a set of impersonal rules, entitled to the assent of any rational agent whatsoever."[17] Morality is the ethic of anywhere, held by its proponents to be distinct from and superior to every particular contextual morality. Its precepts are purportedly perspicuous to rational agents, irrespective of those agents' dispositions or social contexts.[18] Further, the precepts of Morality are part of a tightly circumscribed discourse, divorced from the spheres of faith, politics, art, economics, and law.[19] MacIntyre's argument with Morality is not simply that it is founded on a series of fictions, but that its claim to be universally binding on every rational agent obscures that it is in fact the morality of late capitalist modernity.[20] More specifically, it is the morality or ethics of "the state-and-the-market," which functions largely to underwrite existing distributions of power and wealth within the modern capitalist nation-state.[21]

Real moral agents are, of course, not at all like those presupposed by Morality. As MacIntyre insists, the various relationships and roles moral agents occupy and the dispositions they have developed in and through those relationships and roles are constitutive of, rather than incidental to, their practical moral reasoning.[22] In contrasting the practical reasoning of Morality to that of the Thomistic Aristotelianism he embraces, MacIntyre asserts that one fairly stark difference

between the two is the former's concern with managing the competing interests of agents who seek to maximize the satisfaction of their individual preferences, over against the latter's concern to form agents who recognize that their own interests include the goods they hold in common with those particular others with whom they share a life.[23] Judgments concerning the actions of such agents, he says, necessarily account for their particular social roles and presuppose "a narrative understanding of both individual agents and institutions," which is to say that "it is only in the contexts supplied by background narratives that particular actions and courses of action can be adequately understood and evaluated."[24]

Accordingly, a deep disagreement exists between MacIntyre's position, which insists upon the importance of "background narratives," and that of "anyone whose evaluative and normative judgments are independent of and incompatible with any narrative presuppositions whatsoever, as is the case with judgments made from the standpoint of Morality."[25] And here we are brought back to the indispensability of reading certain kinds of literature in the "morally serious" teaching of academic courses in ethics.[26] These are narratives that unfold in particular, historied, "somewheres." They are populated by morally complex characters—virtuous, vicious, and morally ambiguous—who are embedded in relationships and social roles that are constitutive of, rather than incidental to, their identities and agencies. These are stories that instantiate the inseparability of ethics and sociology by showing the inescapable sociality of their characters.

2. Exemplars, Practices, and Apprenticeship

It is arguably a truism to say that our identity and character are formed socially; all of us, all the time, are per hap or per force becoming one kind of person rather than another by virtue of our relationships with people and institutions, whether or not we are aware of this becoming. Yet we sometimes fail to see just how foundational certain relationships are. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, writes about this with regard to becoming a person of faith:

> It starts from a sense that we "believe in," we trust some kinds of people. We have
> confidence in the way they live; the way they live is the way I want to live, perhaps
> can imagine myself living in my better or more mature moments. The world they
> inhabit is one I'd like to live in. Faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there

> are trustworthy lives to be seen, that we can see in some believing people a world
> we'd like to live in.[27]

What is true of coming to faith is likewise true of the formation of character. Much in the same way we become relatively capable users of language before we every study grammar, we come to know a good deal about better and worse ways to live before we ever study ethics.[28] This knowing is a product of our seeing and being part of the exemplary lives of others, women and men who have learned to be good at being human and are recognized as such by their communities.[29] In her 2017 book *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, Linda Zagzebski suggests that exemplars are foundational, not just for the way we live, but for the language we use to describe moral excellence and evaluate our actions and the actions of others; our moral language is "anchored in" exemplars of moral goodness. We identify lives as exemplary not because they satisfy predetermined criteria, she says, but because they elicit in us the emotion of admiration, which is developed through "the telling and retelling of narratives."[30] Parents, teachers, and others, themselves potential exemplars, are frequently tellers of stories populated by other exemplars.

Exemplars, Zagzebski says, "not only show us what morality is, but they make us want to be moral and show us how to do it."[31] Learning from exemplars how to be moral is not simply a matter of being affected by them, or even of imitating their discrete actions, but also of coming to understand why certain actions are called for in certain situations and not in others, and why, which is to say that we learn from them something of the art of practical moral reasoning. Here we may return to MacIntyre, who has argued that moral enquiry presupposes a commitment to becoming a certain kind of person who reasons in a particular way, which entails "making oneself into an apprentice to a craft, the craft in this case that of philosophical enquiry."[32] The process of apprenticeship begins with the imitation of a master and progresses toward an understanding of how and why the master does what she does when she does it. This entails that the apprentice develops self-understanding, including the ability to recognize his or her mistakes and limitations, "to identify what it is about him or herself that needs to be transformed, that is, what vices need to be eradicated, what intellectual and moral virtues need to be cultivated."[33]

Among the things the apprentice comes to understand as her learning progresses is that both she and her teacher are part of a particular history. "To share in the rationality of a craft requires sharing in the contingencies of its history, understanding its story as one's own, and finding a place

for oneself as a character in the enacted dramatic narrative which is that story so far."[34] Where moral formation is concerned, these narratives may be literary, introducing the apprentice to the kinds of exemplary characters whose lives are accessible to her only through literary narratives. Literary narratives grant hearers and readers access to the consciousness of their characters, and the way they deliberate about what to do in particular circumstances given who they are and who they aspire to become.[35]

3. The Significance of Narrative

MacIntyre's considerable regard for narrative as an important category in moral philosophy follows from his and others' observations and convictions about the narrative character of human existence: our faculty with symbolic language renders us capable of telling stories, which make possible and shape our common lives as political animals.[36] As MacIntyre writes: "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal."[37] We depend on and use narratives in at least three intertwined ways: (1) they enable us to make sense of the things going on around us at given times in particular places; (2) they allow us make sense of our lives as historied beings whose stories are part of and dependent on the stories of particular others; and (3) they help us make sense of the world by orienting us toward the pursuit of particular ends and showing how those ends may best be achieved.

MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that the proper identification of a given human action demands or presupposes attention to context in two ways: actions are rendered intelligible only as the agent's intentions are located (1) within that agent's history, and (2) within the history of the setting where the action is performed. To attend to the context of human actions in this way is to narrate them as part of a history, which leads MacIntyre to assert that "[n]arrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."[38]

Importantly, narrative is not something superimposed on actions to render them intelligible, but something characteristic of actions in themselves. "Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists, and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise or decoration."[39] Instead, narrative "works" as a mode of characterizing the actions of others because human lives are lived narratives.[40]

To say that a human life is a lived narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, is to say that we are not simply actors in our life stories, but the authors of those stories, as well. Our

authorship is limited, however, by the fact that our lives, and so our stories, are from the beginning part of a constellation of other lives and stories. We are "born with a past" that remains part of our stories; like all characters in dramatic narratives, we "never start literally *ab initio*," but "plunge *in media res*," for our stories have in a sense already begun without us.[41] Just so, our lives are circumscribed by the fact that "we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own stories. Only in fantasy do we live the life we please."[42]

Not only do our stories begin without us, they point as well toward imagined futures shaped and shared by the stories of those whose lives intersect with our own.[43] Those futures, which give our lives and stories a teleological character, may be inspired by certain "bigger" stories that connect us not simply to those whose lives directly intersect with our own, but to others whose lives have also been shaped by these stories. Such stories become over time partly constitutive of moral traditions; MacIntyre describes a tradition as "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[44] Insofar as "the individual's search for his or her own good is generally and characteristically conducted with a context defined by a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part," these stories may come to have a kind of canonical status.[45] They suggest the existence of ultimate or final human ends that inform the actions of agents who aspire to lives that can be characterized as good.[46] As often as not, these stories are representative of certain kinds of literature.

4. "Certain Kinds": Wendell Berry and His Stories of the Port William Membership

At the conclusion of each of the three parts of this essay, I have returned to MacIntyre's insistence on the importance of reading certain kinds of literature in the teaching of ethics. (He says novels, but I have taken the liberty of also considering short stories and narrative poetry.) But what characterizes such "certain kinds"? Rather than try to answer this question in the abstract, I will turn to a particular example, namely, the fiction of the American poet, essayist, ecological activist, and social critic, Wendell Berry. Berry's work is exemplary in part because it implicates each of the three points I have tried to make in defending MacIntyre's claim about the importance of literature. Perhaps more importantly, it is exemplary because, as Stanley Hauerwas says, "I often think that Berry's novels do what is next to impossible in our time, and that is make goodness compelling."[47]

Berry, who is now eighty-five years old, lives and works near the Kentucky town where he was born and raised, on a working farm on the Kentucky River near its confluence with the Ohio. He has not always lived there; he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in English literature at the University of Kentucky, he was a Wallace Stegner Writing Fellow at Stanford University, and he was a member of the English faculty at NYU. His move back to Kentucky in the mid-1960s and his gradual return to farming became determinative for his writing; nearly all of his fiction, both novels and short stories, is set in an imagined Kentucky farming village called Port William and is populated by a transgenerational cast of characters who think and speak of themselves as "the membership."

The notion of membership is essential to Berry's fiction. The Port William membership is neither exclusive nor insular; it exists and is sustained by the mutual awareness of a common life built upon a variety of reciprocal obligations to people and place. Those obligations are sustained by the membership's love for one another and for the land to which they mutually belong.[48] As one of the membership's pillars remarks, "The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't."[49] The historian Eric Miller captures this ethos especially well:

> Far from an exclusive circle, membership in Port William comes to mean exactly the opposite: the grateful inclusion of any who live in devotion to the wellbeing of the town and its environs. The membership isn't self-appointed. But it is self-identifying. Those who are devoted to the place recognize one another by their mutual inclinations and sacrificial practices.[50]

Port William is no utopia, and its membership is far from perfect. The town's barber, Jayber Crow, ends his "memoir" by declaring:

> This is […] a book about Heaven, but I must say to that it has been a close call. For I have wondered sometimes if it would not finally turn out to be a book about Hell—where we fail to love one another, where we hate and destroy one another for reasons abundantly provided or for righteousness' sake or for pleasure, where we destroy the things we need most, where we see no hope and have no faith.[51]

The membership's history includes all manner of conflict and viciousness. One of the appeals of Berry's fiction is the pathos attending the failures of and conflicts among its characters, as well as its ability to elicit admiration when they reconcile and move forward—or when they simply move forward.

As Port William's story unfolds into the late Twentieth Century, its economy disintegrates, its young move away, and its pillars begin to die, the tone of the stories turns deeply elegiac. But it is never despairing, for the membership endures, in large part because its existence is not solely dependent on the virtue of any one of its living members. It is sustained by hope, and that hope is born of constancy, both experienced and remembered. As the protagonist of Berry's eponymous novel *Hannah Coulter* says, "The membership includes the dead."[52] Telling and retelling stories of exemplary dead members is essential to the membership's ongoing life, as well as its connection to the life to come.[53] One of the membership recalls his father, not simply as his father, but as one of the membership:

> In such wanderings and encounters, my father enacted his belonging to his country
> and his people. He could be as peremptory and as harsh as a saw—we younger ones
> had all felt his edge—but he knew how to be a friend. One night when he was old,
> he named over to me all those of the dead who had been his friends. He said, "If
> they are there, Paradise is Paradise indeed."[54]

Thus for Berry's membership, the final good of human life is given and pursued in and through the many proximal goods that constitute their common life. As Hannah Coulter explains, "And it is by the place we've got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven."[55] Even Heaven turns out to be a somewhere. Consider in this regard Berry's poem "A Meeting":

> In a dream I meet
> my dead friend. He has,
> I know, gone long and far,
> and yet he is the same
> for the dead are changeless.

They grow no older.

It is I who have changed,

grown strange to what I was.

Yet I, the changed one,

ask: "How you been?"

He grins and looks at me.

"I been eating peaches

off some mighty fine trees."[56]

Notes

1. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

2. Berry, *Recollected Essays, 1965–1980* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 217.

3. W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 179.

4. Gerald McKenny, "Bioethics, the Body, and the Legacy of Bacon," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, 3rd edition, eds. M. Therese Lysaught and Joseph J. Kotva, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 398–409. This essay is a summary of McKenny's thinking in his book *To Relieve the Human Condition: Bioethics, Technology, and the Body* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

5. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 307–341.

6. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark," in *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, ed. Newton Arvin (New York: Vintage Classics, 2011), 177–193.

7. Wendell Berry, *Fidelity: Five Stories* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 107–189.

8. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Signet, 1960), 93–152.

9. My friend and sometime collaborator Dr. Brian Volck has influenced me considerably here, especially with regard to the particular texts I use in the classroom.

10. I especially have in mind here my dissertation advisor and mentor, Stanley Hauerwas, who was MacIntyre's colleague at Notre Dame and remains his friend. One of the things that

most struck me about the way Stanley taught the "Introduction to Christian Ethics" course at Duke Divinity School was that the class always read novels, written by a variety of authors.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 219. MacIntyre here insists that "[o]ne test of whether a particular academic course in ethics is being taught in a morally serious way is whether or not its students are taught that a close reading of certain novels is indispensable to their learning what now needs to be learned."

12. Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, eds. Sally and Roberts Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 191–209, at 200.

13. Ibid., 197.

14. O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 125.

15. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 23.

16. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 70–71, at 71.

17. Ibid., 65.

18. Ibid., 65, 114–115.

19. Ibid., 65, 118.

20. On these points, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 36–78, 109–120; *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 1–11, 326–348; and *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 114–115.

21. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 124–129.

22. Ibid., 218–219.

23. Ibid., 214–215.

24. Ibid., 218.

25. Ibid., 219.

26. Ibid.

27. Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 21–22.

28. Herbert McCabe, *The Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2005), 9.

29. Ibid.

30. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

31. Ibid., 129.

32. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 61–65, at 61.

33. Ibid., 62.

34. Ibid., 65.

35. Zagzebski, *Moral Exemplarist Theory*, 66.

36. See McCabe, *On Aquinas*, eds. Brian Davies and Anthony Kenny (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 51.

37. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 216.

38. Ibid., 208.

39. Ibid., 211.

40. Ibid., 212.

41. Ibid., 215.

42. Ibid., 213.

43. Ibid., 215.

44. Ibid., 222.

45. Ibid.

46. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 231–234.

47. Hauerwas, from the Foreword to *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), xii.

48. Here see D. Brent Laytham, "The Membership Includes the Dead: Wendell Berry's Port William Membership as *Communio Sanctorum*," in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, eds. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 173–189.

49. Berry, "The Wild Birds," in *That Distant Land: Collected Stories* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004), 337–364, at 356.

50. Eric Miller, "Reign of Love: The Fiction of Wendell Berry," *Commonweal*, January 4, 2019, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/reign-love.

51. Berry, *Jayber Crow: The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2001), 354.

52. Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Washington. DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), 94.

53. Berry's oft-documented ambivalence towards institutional Christianity is shared by the membership, but so is his immersion in and deep commitment to local community sustained by Christian hopes and ideals.

54. Berry, *A World Lost* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2008), 136.

55. Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, 83. Compare Laytham, "The Membership Includes the Dead," 176.

56. Berry, *New Collected Poems* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2013), 238.