

Cultivating a Moral Imagination: Practice in Perspective Taking

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Jack (after some hesitation): I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell: I'm pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Clov: Do you believe in the life to come?

Hamm: Mine was always that.

(Exit Clov)

Got him that time!

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Oscar Wilde's play overturns the cultural norms of his day. We laugh at the absurdities, admiring Wilde's ability to perfect his aphorisms, to take the wind out of grandiose notions of society. The word-play is delicious. Yet we remain at a distance. There is no need for empathy. We read for entertainment. Samuel Beckett features absurdity too, in a different sense. Again with Beckett we remain at a distance, suspended in the moments of his play. Beckett's play *Endgame*, in his own words, illustrates "the power of the text to claw" (1057). His humor is sardonic: we perceive the unfunniness of the funniness. We may deny that Beckett's universe is our own, yet we know we are "at odds with ends," know that "something is taking its course," the sands of time mounting up to the "impossible heap." To each play its speciality. Both delight and instruct, give pleasure and wisdom. They also heighten our moral imaginations.

Considering how literature helps to form the moral imagination, I speak not for my discipline, but from my participation in the discipline at this stage of my teaching. I will admit my vision for cultivating the moral imagination together with students is ideal.

At least sometimes I glimpse the ideal. I believe that literature awakens the moral imagination in its power to bring the self to the self and the self to others, what Seamus Heaney refers to as the core and its concentric circles.

Literature, however, awakens the student's moral imagination only if students are awake. Little happens if there is no active engagement between the student and the work, the professor and the work, and the professor and the students. Students need to know the truth about reading upfront. Not every work will mean something to them. Not every work will provide pleasure or wisdom. Not every work will bring understanding, although some works bring delayed understanding, an unexpected "use for their earnings."

Bringing the self to the self is a moral enterprise. Literature brings the self to the self, but does so unconsciously. Unconsciously. That's its strength. In a *Harvard Business Review* interview, Harold Bloom suggests a reading list for Bill Gates (Shakespeare, Cervantes, Emerson, Freud). The article asks, "Who has time for literature anymore "when there are hundreds of urgent e-mails to answer, training seminars to attend, and trade publications to scan" (63). Reading Shakespeare is, according to Bloom, like overhearing yourself. It is different from hearing yourself. Bloom points out, "When you overhear yourself, you're almost unaware that you're the speaker. In other words, you learn about yourself, without any self-consciousness" (64). Reading literature is a process of bringing the self to the self without self-consciousness. That process makes possible the cultivation of the moral imagination.

Overhearing takes place—as I believe it does—especially when the students engage with themselves subjectively as well as objectively. Then students do not leave

the self at the classroom door. They do not maintain a safe distance from the course material, and the classroom becomes a potently rich experience.

Literature gives us abundant practice in perspective-taking (the phrasing is my son Aaron's). Writing on Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* last spring in English 200, sophomore Chris Saylor cites young Briony's recognition of a simple truth: "It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (38). Summing up the scene's significance, Saylor writes, "The literary consequences of this realization become obvious to the young playwright turned author. Each character is now allowed to express his life through a unique point of view: 'And only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.'" (38). Saylor adds, "Diverse characters surround the story from all angles: it is now possible to converge on the meaning, rather than trudge down the narrow path of a single perspective." I like Saylor's use of the phrase "to converge on the meaning" as opposed to taking the narrow path of a single perspective. Literature gives us abundant practice in perspective-taking.

In this literary enterprise, the process of perspective-taking and meaning-making, I tell students that "I am not the answer-giver." Students need to forgive my lapses, the times I am moralistic or didactic. I teach, care about my discipline, and want students to care about my discipline. I will compel, when possible, will challenge until the effort is useless. I teach, and I learn. Many times a student's perspective spirals my view to an unexpected newness. When teaching is collaborative in this way, it satisfies entirely.

Last spring students in my Literary Experience course were asked to write a brief statement on the question of how the moral imagination is kindled. Some were perplexed about the modifier *moral*: one felt the word *moral* stifled imagination; another felt that students should not be naïve to the immoral imagination. Several said that the imagination must be free, free to draw from images planted in their heads by those around them and free, furthermore, to be open to others around them. Some said that a moral imagination comes only if the student wants it, that a moral imagination is kindled through showing what is beautiful and innocent, that it is kindled through inspiration or frustration, that it is a natural phenomenon like hunger or desire. Thinking beyond a person's comfort zone, a student wrote, means that the person discovers where she has limitations. Another said that thoughts pass through our minds uncontrolled, but it is our choice which thoughts and desires are allowed to expand. I quote two responses on this informal survey: "Kindling the moral imagination is initiating thought but not restricting thought. We are capable of finding our own unique outlet to share with the world." And, "The moral imagination is kindled when the mind and the heart learn at the same time." These responses converge on the question from myriad perspectives. So be it.

Students sometimes see literature as too monumental for their liking or for their critical capacities. Either view hampers the freedom of their imaginations. Flannery O'Connor once advised a student "to forget about the enlightenment and just try to enjoy [her stories]" ("On Her Own Work" *Mystery* 107). She wrote that she knew the student had a paper to write and was not interested in enjoying the story, but in figuring it out (107). Reading writers' words on their own writing often frees students from overestimating the mystery of reading and interpreting. O'Connor gives students an

approach to literature. She tells them that “the whole story is the experience, not an abstraction” (“The Nature and Aim of Fiction” *Mystery* 73). She warns them not “to read a story and then climb out of it into the meaning” (73). She gives students permission to dislike the characters. She writes as frankly to English teachers as to students. O’Connor advises English teachers to teach the story technically as a discipline, reminding them that “the form of a story gives it meaning which any other form would change” (“The Teaching of Literature” *Mystery* 129). She obviously had issues with English teachers. She challenges teachers “to change the face of the best-seller list” (128). (Perhaps Oprah will meet the challenge English teachers have failed to meet.) And she reminds both students and teachers that “every novelist has his preoccupations, and none can see and write everything. Partial vision has to be expected, but partial vision is not dishonest vision” (133).

Irish poet Seamus Heaney uses the image of stepping stones to describe the process of cultivating the moral imagination. He writes in his Nobel Lecture (1995), “Crediting Poetry,” about his own “journey into the wideness of the world” (416). He names each point of arrival as a stepping stone, not a destination (416). He knows that the consciousness contends with many discourses, adjudicating “among promptings variously ethical, aesthetical, moral, political, metrical, skeptical, cultural, topical, typical, post-colonial and, taken all together, simply impossible” (418). Heaney points up poetry’s importance in keeping us tender-minded, even as we daily surf atrocities on the news channels. He credits poetry with “the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable; in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being” (430).

Heaney's poetic prerogative to cultivate the moral imagination is manifested in his poetry as well as in the poetry of other poets, such as Li-Young Lee and Stanley Kunitz. Taken together, these poets form a life cycle. Li-Young Lee is the youngest of the three. He was born in 1957 and became a strong American poetic voice in the 1970s. He writes about family and about his father in particular. Gerald Stern, Li-Young Lee's graduate professor at the University of Pittsburgh and a poet, writes that the critical event in Lee's poetry is understanding and accepting his father (*Rose* 8). This summer, at the national convention of state poetry societies at Augustana College, Lee spoke of his poems being a negotiation between the personal and trans-personal, as in his poem "The Gift":

The Gift

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he'd removed
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy's palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,
and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
When he's given something to keep.
I kissed my father.
(*Rose* 15-16)

Seamus Heaney's tension as a poet has been between his sense of political responsibility and his sense of responsibility to self. He has painfully negotiated the twin demands. His accusers say he has not defended the nationalist cause in his poetry, a charge he confronts repeatedly. His long poem *Station Island* partially resolves his tensions. In the poem, his mentor James Joyce appears to Heaney, the poet-pilgrim, and urges him to write for the joy of writing, to strike his own note (245). Joyce tells Heaney, "Fill the element with signatures on your own frequency, echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements, elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea" [Elver is a young eel.] (245-246). Heaney nevertheless believes he strikes his own note at the intersection of self and world. In his poem "St Kevin and the Blackbird," he uses a story "true to life if subversive of common sense" to glimpse the ideal of the poet-citizen's responsibility:

St Kevin and the Blackbird

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

(*Opened Ground* 384)

The third poet, Stanley Kunitz, is now a frail ninety-eight. His 1995 book of poems, *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, won the National Book Award. Public recognition came late for Kunitz. It made Kunitz angry to be linked early on with poets who were called confessionals. Kunitz asserts, "Real poets are not confessional. They're interested in writing poems, not confessions of their personal

lives” (Goodyear 110). He writes that self transmutes itself into world: “My concept was to transform the events of my life into legend. I think that was the concept that kept me alive as a poet these many years” (Goodyear 110). Alive and creative he still is.

Kunitz’s later poems are, in his own words, transparent (110). Kunitz writes of the layers of lives he has passed through. No one needs to be ninety to understand Kunitz’s poem:

The Layers

I have walked through many lives,

some of them my own,

and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!

How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road

precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

(*Contemporary American Poetry* 304)

These poems by Lee, Heaney, and Kunitz are attempts “to reconcile the emotional, moral, and existential polarities of experience” (*CAPoetry* 655) into a human whole. In each poem we grasp Briony’s simple truth: “Other people are as real as you.” The words and images open our imaginations to perspective-taking.

Last summer John Brost, a former student, gave me a copy of his favorite book, a book his grandfather had given him. I recognized the sacred succession. I read the book this summer after an e-mail prompt: “Have you read the book yet?” *A River Runs Through It*, Norman Maclean’s story, is set in Montana and concerns his brother Paul. Maclean presents a world of water and rocks and fly fishermen, a world foreign to my world. I sensed the holiness of the time the father and brothers fished together. I felt the pathos of young Paul’s not being able to ask for help and his brother’s not being able to give it. I waited for the blow that was made evident from the beginning. Maclean wrote, “In the end I could not help him” (6). The story offers a testament to the power of story. Their father, a Scottish Presbyterian minister, tells Maclean to write a story. He says,

“Only then will you understand what happened and why. . . . It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us” (104). *A River Runs Through It* is the story a retired English professor writes about the brother who had eluded him. As Maclean’s father knew, underneath the rocks in the timeless flow of the water are the words.

Literature attempts to reconcile the "polarities of experience." It reflects the consciousness that asks, “How then shall I live?” It reflects the consciousness that asks, “How then shall I die?” Recently, I learned of a popular German TV show, called Literary Quartet. The main literary critic, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, is a Jewish Holocaust survivor, who read poetry, even as he was daily threatened, even as he faced death in the Warsaw Ghetto. Poetry, says Reich-Ranicki, gave him strength to withstand the terror. This strength is not one of understanding, but of enduring.

Is the moral imagination cultivated in my classes? My answer is twofold: yes and sometimes. I believe the moral imagination will be cultivated if students are receptive. We work to make them receptive. Words fill, shape, critique, inspire. The power for the moral imagination is in the words.

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