

# On Reading Well



*FINDING THE GOOD LIFE  
through GREAT BOOKS*

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

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## Foreword

Leland Ryken

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In this foreword I have set myself the task of previewing the three things that readers most need to know as they begin to read the book that follows. These three things touch upon the context, the content, and the achievement of the book.

It would be possible for a contemporary reader to revel in this book while being ignorant of the age-old tradition of literary criticism that it represents and also the debate over that tradition in the modern era. The premises that literature makes moral statements, that these statements can strengthen the moral life of a reader, and that literary criticism should explore the moral dimension of literary texts began in classical antiquity and held sway until the twentieth century. For Aristotle, a mark of good literature is that it "satisfies the moral sense."<sup>1</sup>

The Christianized version of this classical tradition reached its climax in the Renaissance author Sir Philip Sidney's treatise *A Defense of Poetry*. Sidney claimed that the very purpose of literature is the "winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue" and inflaming a reader with a "desire to be worthy."<sup>2</sup>

With the Enlightenment and modernity came the collapse of a unified sense of moral standards in the West. Consequently, the idea that literature has moral implications and can influence readers to be virtuous became passé. Morality itself became reduced to Ernest Hemingway's dictum that "what is moral is what you feel good after, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after."<sup>3</sup> This echoed Oscar Wilde's earlier statement that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."<sup>4</sup>

Reacting against this rejection of moral criteria for literature, a towering literary scholar named F. R. Leavis wrote a famous book entitled *The Great Tradition* (1948). What is this "great tradition" championed by Leavis? It is both a literary tradition, represented by great authors and works that portray the moral life, and a type of literary criticism that explores the moral dimension of literature. Karen Swallow Prior's book is squarely within this great tradition.

I have already hinted at the content of this book. There is a theoretic side in which Prior explains the ethical and literary nature of her enterprise. A pleasant bonus is the primer on ethical theory and moral thinking included in the discussion. Mainly, though, this is a book of literary criticism. It is based on what I call "good old-fashioned example theory," which was particularly prominent in the English Renaissance. What this means is that it is in the nature of literature to place examples before us—examples of virtue to emulate and vice to repudiate. In our day, this is stigmatized as "surely a very simplistic view of literature," to which my comeback is, "Tough—this is demonstrably how literature works." On the self-evident nature of this, I am reminded of C. S. Lewis's comment in regard to Sir Philip Sidney that "the assumption . . . that the ethical is the aesthetic *par excellence* is so basic to Sidney that he never argues it. He thought we would know."<sup>5</sup>

In *On Reading Well*, Prior chooses monuments of Western literature and explores a single virtue embodied in each work. No claim is made that this is all that a reader would wish to do with these works. The result of Prior's moral analysis is that our understanding of virtue is increased and our desire to practice it enhanced. Today in the secular literary guild

and public school classroom there is a sustained assault on Christian morality. *On Reading Well* offers a revisionist agenda, which is, of course, nothing less than a return to the great tradition.

As for the achievement of *On Reading Well*, it is of the highest order. The book is a monument to scholarship. Assertions are buttressed with copious research. All of the right sources are incorporated. A particular gift of Prior's is precision of thought and expression. The goal of the book—to enhance both literary appreciation and the moral life of the reader—is a noble one, meeting Sir Philip Sidney's goal of leading a reader to desire to be worthy.

I will confess that as a literary scholar I have always been somewhat resistant to moral criticism of literature because I fear that it will be moralistic. But right from the start, Karen Swallow Prior puts these fears to rest. The moral dimension of literature is only one dimension of literature, she assures us, and it does not exist separate from the aesthetic form of a work. The moral viewpoint of a work is not stated abstractly but embodied in the particulars of the text, especially the characters. And so forth.

It is the nature of scholars to be critical when reading books in their discipline, and it is relatively rare that they end a book feeling that the subject could not have been handled better than it was. I did end *On Reading Well* feeling that nothing was lacking in Prior's treatment of the subject of virtue in literature and that everything essential had been beautifully stated.

# Introduction

*Read Well, Live Well*

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.  
—James 3:13

My first book, *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me*, is a love story, the story of how my deep love of reading slowly meandered into a deep love of God. I retell in the pages of *Booked* how, by reading widely, voraciously, and indiscriminately, I learned spiritual lessons I never learned in church or Sunday school, as well as emotional and intellectual lessons that I would never have encountered within the realm of my lived experience. Most importantly, by reading about all kinds of characters created by all kinds of authors, I learned how to be the person God created me to be.

A central theme of *Booked* is reading promiscuously. This phrase is drawn from one of the books that proved most formative for me, John Milton's *Areopagitica*. In this treatise, published in 1644, the Puritan poet most famous for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* makes an argument that would become a building block for the modern notions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. In the tract, Milton inveighs against parliamentary licensing orders requiring all publications to be approved by the government before being printed (a legal concept that would later be called prior restraint). Significantly, it was Milton's own political faction that was in power at the time, his own people whom he thought to be in error and hoped to persuade to reject censorship.

*Areopagitica* makes a deeply theological argument, one that Christians today, particularly those nervously prone to a censoring spirit, would do well to consider. Grounded in Protestant doctrine (as well as the polarized political situation surrounding the English Civil War), Milton associates censorship with the Roman Catholic Church (the political as well as doctrinal enemy of the English Puritans) and finds in his Reformation heritage a deep interdependence of intellectual, religious, political, and personal liberty—all of which depend, he argues, on virtue. Because the world since the fall contains both good and evil, Milton says, virtue consists of choosing good over evil. Milton distinguishes between the innocent, who know no evil, and the virtuous, who know what evil is

and elect to do good. What better way to learn the difference between evil and good, Milton argues, than to gain knowledge of both through reading widely: "Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with less danger, scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read."<sup>1</sup>

But it is not enough to read widely. One must also read well. One must read virtuously. The word *virtue* has various shades of meaning (many of which will unfold in the pages of this book), but in general, virtue can most simply be understood as *excellence*. Reading well is, in itself, an act of virtue, or excellence, and it is also a habit that cultivates more virtue in return.

Literature embodies virtue, first, by offering images of virtue in action and, second, by offering the reader vicarious practice in exercising virtue, which is not the same as actual practice, of course, but is nonetheless a practice by which habits of mind, ways of thinking and perceiving, accrue.

Reading virtuously means, first, reading closely, being faithful to both text and context, interpreting accurately and insightfully. Indeed, there is something in the very form of reading—the shape of the action itself—that tends toward virtue. The attentiveness necessary for deep reading (the kind of reading we practice in reading literary works as opposed to skimming news stories or reading instructions) requires patience. The skills of interpretation and evaluation require prudence. Even the simple decision to set aside time to read in a world rife with so many other choices competing for our attention requires a kind of temperance.

If, like me, you have lived long enough to have experienced life—and reading—before the internet, perhaps you have now found your attention span shortened and your ability to sit and read for an hour (or more) nil. The effects on our minds of the disjointed, fragmentary, and addictive nature of the digitized world—and the demands of its dinging,

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beeping, and flashing devices—are well documented. Nicholas Carr explains in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* that “the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants

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and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.”<sup>2</sup> Our brains work one way when trained to read in logical, linear patterns, and another way when continually bouncing from tweet to tweet, picture to picture, and screen to screen. These effects on the brain are amplified by technology developers who intentionally build addictive qualities into programs in order to in-

crease user engagement, as some industry leaders have acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> Whether you feel you have lost your ability to read well, or you never acquired that ability at all, be encouraged. The skills required to read well are no great mystery. Reading well is, well, simple (if not easy). It just takes time and attention.

Reading well begins with understanding the words on the page. In nearly three decades of teaching literature, I’ve noticed that many readers have been conditioned to jump so quickly to interpretation and evaluation that they often skip the fundamental but essential task of comprehending what the words actually mean. This habit of the mind can be seen in the body. When I ask students to describe or restate a line or passage, often their first response is to turn their eyes upward in search of a thought or an idea, rather than to look down at the words on the page in front of them where the answer actually lies. Attending to the words on the page requires deliberation, and this improves with practice.

#### TO READ WELL, ENJOY

Practice makes perfect, but pleasure makes practice more likely, so read something enjoyable.<sup>4</sup> If a book is so agonizing that you avoid reading it, put it down and pick up one that brings you pleasure. Life is too short

and books are too plentiful not to. Besides, one can’t read well without enjoying reading.

On the other hand, the greatest pleasures are those born of labor and investment. A book that requires nothing from you might offer the same diversion as that of a television sitcom, but it is unlikely to provide intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual rewards long after the cover is closed. Therefore, even as you seek books that you will enjoy reading, demand ones that make demands on you: books with sentences so exquisitely crafted that they must be reread, familiar words used in fresh ways, new words so evocative that you are compelled to look them up, and images and ideas so arresting that they return to you unbidden for days to come.

Also, read slowly. Just as a fine meal should be savored, so, too, good books are to be luxuriated in, not rushed through. Certainly, some reading material merits a quick read, but habitual skimming is for the mind what a steady diet of fast food is for the body. Speed-reading is not only inferior to deep reading but may bring more harm than benefits: one critic cautions that reading fast is simply a “way of fooling yourself into thinking you’re learning something.” When you read quickly, you aren’t thinking critically or making connections. Worse yet, “speed-reading gives you two things that should never mix: superficial knowledge and overconfidence.”<sup>5</sup> Don’t be discouraged if you read slowly. Thoughtfully engaging with a text takes time. The slowest readers are often the best readers, the ones who get the most meaning out of a work and are affected most deeply by literature.<sup>6</sup> Seventeenth-century Puritan divine Richard Baxter writes, “It is not the reading of many books which is necessary to make a man wise or good; but the well reading of a few, could he be sure to have the best.”<sup>7</sup>

Read with a pen, pencil, or highlighter in hand, marking in the book or taking notes on paper.<sup>8</sup> The idea that books should not be written in is an unfortunate holdover from grade school, a canard rooted in a misunderstanding of what makes a book valuable. The true worth of books is in their words and ideas, not their pristine pages. One friend wisely observed that “readers are not made for books—books are

made for readers."<sup>9</sup> (The sheer delight to be found in reading other readers' marginalia is unforgettably rendered in Billy Collins's poem, "Marginalia."<sup>10</sup>)

Read books you enjoy, develop your ability to enjoy challenging reading, read deeply and slowly, and increase your enjoyment of a book by writing words of your own in it.

### GREAT BOOKS TEACH US *HOW* (NOT *WHAT*) TO THINK

My exploration in these pages of a dozen or so great works of literature attempts to model what it means to read well by examining the insights about virtues these works offer. I have selected from among my favorite literary works those that might help us to understand the classical virtues—the cardinal virtues, the theological virtues, and the heavenly virtues (more about these below). Sometimes the virtues are shown through positive examples and sometimes, perhaps more often (given the exploratory nature of great literature), by negative examples. Literary characters have a lot to teach us about *character*.

To read well is not to scour books for lessons on *what* to think. Rather, to read well is to be formed in *how* to think. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis argues that to approach a literary work "with nothing but a desire for self-improvement" is to use it rather than to receive it.<sup>11</sup> While great books do offer important truths about life and character, Lewis cautions against using books merely for lessons. Literary works are, after all, works of art to be enjoyed for their own sake rather than used merely for our personal benefit. To use art or literature rather than receive it "merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it."<sup>12</sup> Reading well adds to our life—not in the

way a tool from the hardware store adds to our life, for a tool does us no good once lost or broken, but in the way a friendship adds to our life, altering us forever.

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Yet receiving a work of art as an aesthetic experience is indeed "useful," though in a human sense, not merely utilitarian. Thomas Jefferson expresses this idea in a letter written to a friend in 1771:

Everything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue. When any original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence [*sic*] of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body acquire strength by exercise. But exercise produces habit, and in the instance of which we speak the exercise being of the moral feelings produces a habit of thinking and acting virtuously.<sup>13</sup>

Here Jefferson gets at the aesthetic aspect of reading literature. While the ethical component of literature comes from its content (its ideas, lessons, vision), the aesthetic quality is related to the way reading—first as an exercise, then as a habit—forms us. Just as water, over a long period of time, reshapes the land through which it runs, so too we are formed by the habit of reading good books well.

### READING AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The virtue—or excellence—of literature cannot be understood apart from its form. To read literature virtuously requires attention to that form, whether the form be that of a poem, a novel, a short story, or a play. To attend to the form of a work is by its very nature an aesthetic experience.

The content of a literary work is what it says; its form is how it is said. Unfortunately, we are conditioned today to focus on content at the expense of form. When we read (or watch a film or view a work of art), we tend to look for themes, worldviews, gripping plots, relatable characters,

and so forth, but often neglect the form. Part of this tendency is the fruit born of a culture influenced by a utilitarian emphasis on function and practical use at the expense of beauty and structure. Yet we know from real-life relationships and experience that *how* something is communicated is just as important as, if not more important than, *what* is communicated. Form is what sets literary texts apart from informational texts in the same way that a painting differs from paint that covers a wall: same materials, different form.

Compare, for example, the various ways one might experience an encounter with the content of a literary work: through a *CliffsNotes* summary, a film adaptation, or actually reading it. Each of these experiences differs significantly from the others even though the idea communicated is essentially the same. Reading virtuously requires us to pay attention to both form and content. And because literature is by definition an aesthetic experience, not merely an intellectual one, we have to attend to form at least as much as to content, if not more. Form matters.

One of the earliest works of literary aesthetics—the study of literature’s form and how its form affects readers as an aesthetic experience—

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was Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In *Poetics*, Aristotle introduces the notion of literature’s cathartic effect, an idea that has had widespread influence, referring to the way literature trains emotions by arousing and then resolving them through the structure of a well-crafted plot, the element of literature that Aristotle identifies as the most important. Aristotle’s emphasis on plot also bears fruitful insights into character. This is because plot, according to Paul Taylor in his essay “Sympathy and Insight in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” “centers on the fact that the individual actions of characters follow with probability or necessity from a combination of three factors: the characters’ humanity, their individual personalities, and their involvement in the circumstances depicted in the plot.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, plot reveals character. And the act of judging the character of a character shapes the reader’s own character.

Through the imagination, readers identify with the character, learning about human nature and their own nature through their reactions to the vicarious experience. Even literature that doesn’t have character or plot, such as poetry, allows for a similar kind of process: the speaker of the poem is a kind of character whose experience the reader enters into, and the unfolding of the poem in time as it is read is itself a form of plotting.

This is the difference, as Taylor explains, between learning propositional truth through reading history or an argumentative essay and gaining knowledge aesthetically through the process of reading a fictional narrative.<sup>15</sup> Or, in the words of writer George Saunders, “A story means by how it proceeds.”<sup>16</sup> The aesthetic experience of literature—its formative quality—differs from its intellectual or informative qualities. Taylor says

that “we learn from fiction in something like the way we learn directly from real life.”<sup>17</sup> Just as in real life, a work of literature doesn’t assert but presents.<sup>18</sup> Thus the act of reading literature invites readers to participate in the experience aesthetically, not merely intellectually. Our desires as human beings are shaped by both knowledge and experience.

And to read a work of literature is to have a kind of experience and to gain knowledge. Ultimately, this kind of aesthetic experience—formative, not merely informative—“can help to undermine an idealized picture of human nature—one which self-deception, or plain sentimentality, might otherwise sustain.”<sup>19</sup> Visions of the good life presented in the world’s best literature can be agents for cultivating knowledge of and desire for the good and, unlike visions sustained by sentimentality or self-deception, the true.

So while reading for virtue means, in part, reading *about* virtue, in a deeper, less obvious way reading literature well is a way to *practice* virtue. Reading literature, to a certain extent, can inform us about many things (the injustices of the nineteenth-century English court system, the persecution of Christians in seventeenth-century Japan, and the manners and morals of the wealthy class in 1920s America, for example). But

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certainly, literature does not inform on such matters as well as history textbooks and lectures do. Whatever similarities there might be in the content of, say, a documentary on the French Revolution and *A Tale of Two Cities*, the differences between their forms make all the difference in the way we experience them. Reading literature, more than informing us, forms us.<sup>20</sup>

In his important work *A Defense of Poetry*, Renaissance poet and courtier Sir Philip Sidney offers one of the first Christian arguments for the power of poetry, saying that it surpasses the power both of history, which

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teaches by example, and of philosophy, which teaches by precept. "Now doth the peerless poet perform both, for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it by someone by whom he pre-supposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion

with the particular example. A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description."<sup>21</sup> Since history is restricted to what was and philosophy to what could be, Sidney argues, literature exceeds both by offering a picture of what should be. And because "the end of all earthly learning is virtuous action,"<sup>22</sup> poetry is more likely than either philosophy or history to cultivate virtue.

A famous passage on the relationship of virtue, or excellence, to practice comes from Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* in his chapter on Aristotle, in which Durant quotes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Excellence is an art won by training and habituation: we do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have these because we have acted rightly; "these virtues are formed in man by his doing the actions"; we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit: "the good of man is a working of the soul in the way of excellence in a complete life . . . for as it is not one swallow or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or short time that makes a man blessed and happy."<sup>23</sup>

## READING "AFTER VIRTUE"

We would be remiss to examine virtue without considering that virtue in the ancient world existed within an entirely different context from that of the modern world in which we find ourselves. The Aristotelian philosophy of virtue is tied to a sense of human purpose or *telos*—in other words, humanity's ultimate end or purpose. In this understanding, virtues are parts of a whole that is oriented toward one end. For Aristotle, this end is living well, or (as his Greek term is often translated) happiness. Today we might refer to this as human flourishing. For the Christian, however, the ultimate end or purpose of one's life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This end does not always translate to our own happiness or flourishing. Quite the opposite, as the Christians in the novel *Silence* prove, along with a host of believers in the history of the real world.

In fact, a persistent question about virtue arises in most contemporary discussions, a question that will be examined more in chapter 1. This question centers on whether virtue is an end in itself or a means to some other end. The evidence that many think of it as the latter can be seen in the pervasive belief today that if one simply does a certain thing right, the reward will be a particular desired outcome. This way of thinking about virtue owes in part to the fact that we no longer have a sense of our larger purpose. Without knowing what the purpose of a bicycle is, we cannot determine its excellence. Similarly, we can hardly attain human excellence if we don't have an understanding of human purpose. Human excellence occurs only when we glorify God, which is our true purpose. Absent ultimate purpose, we look for practical outcomes.

The modern age that emerged from the Enlightenment stripped humanity of a commonly understood human *telos*, or end, taking with it the shared moral language necessary for agreeing upon and cultivating virtue, as Alasdair MacIntyre explains in *After Virtue*. Apart from a unifying whole, virtues are like lifeless limbs severed from the body that once gave them purpose. Severed from an understanding of human purpose, virtue becomes mere emotivism. MacIntyre describes emotivism as the belief that "moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference,

expressions of attitude or feeling.<sup>24</sup> In other words, without an external, objective source of meaning and purpose, we are left with only our internal and subjective feelings. Emotivism isn't simply having and expressing

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emotions but being overwhelmingly informed and driven by them. And because emotivism appropriates the language of morality, it appears in the guise of virtue, despite the fact that the true foundation of virtue—a transcendent absolute—has crumbled.<sup>25</sup> Because the language of morality has been hijacked by emotivism, giving us a “simulacra of morality” (a mere image or reflection in place of the real

thing), talking about virtue and morality is nearly impossible in a life “after virtue.”<sup>26</sup> It's something like when a kid hears an orchestra perform a Beethoven number and thinks it's a riff on his favorite cartoon song.

#### THE VIRTUES OF LITERARY LANGUAGE

Although now emptied, moral language “was once, too, at the full” (to echo Matthew Arnold in his poem “Dover Beach”). Literary language, inherently resonant with layers of meaning, reminds us what fullness of language looks like. The language of literature can fill this gap between meaningful language about virtue and empty gestures toward it. The ability to understand figurative language, in which “a word is both itself and something else,” is unique to human beings and, as one cognitive psychologist explains, “fundamental to how we think” in that it is the means by which we can “escape the literal and immediate.”<sup>27</sup> We see this quality most dramatically in satire and allegory. Although very different, both satirical and allegorical language employ two levels of meaning: the literal meaning and the intended meaning. In satire, the intended meaning is the opposite of the stated words; in allegory, the intended meaning is symbolized by the stated words. Satire points to

error, and allegory points to truth, but both require the reader to discern meaning beyond the surface level. In this way, allegory and satire—and less obviously, all literary language—reflect the transcendent nature of the human condition and the “double-willed self” described by Paul in Romans 7:19.<sup>28</sup>

Human beings “inhabit language,” explains theologian Graham Ward in an article titled “How Literature Resists Secularity.” He writes, “Although the best writers of literature demonstrate a phenomenal control over their language, associations escape, rhythms beat out older and more sacred patterns, and words carry memories of previous use.”<sup>29</sup> Words carry resonances that spill beyond the bounds of logic and even conscious thought. Ward says of literary texts that “their acts of naming and our acts of reading” cannot but conjure the possibilities of transcendence, “particularly when we attend to experience rather than dictionary definitions, as either a writer or a reader.”<sup>30</sup> The fullness of literary language echoes meaning—and reminds us that there is, in fact, *meaning*.

When Emily Dickinson, for example, writes, “I dwell in Possibility — / a fairer House than Prose,” the suggestive, layered senses of each word expand the meaning of these lines far beyond a mere nine short words.<sup>31</sup> The metaphor of the house links “possibility” with poetry, which, the lines assert, is fairer than “prose,” which is now implicitly linked to the opposite of “possibility.” “Dwell” means both *live* and *ponder*. “Fairer” suggests both *beauty* and *justice*. And the word “in” differs meaningfully from other possible word choices such as “with” or “by.” These echoing meanings mark

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only the beginning of the possibilities poetic language opens up. Many more meanings could easily be drawn out of these two lines and the rest that follow in the complete poem. But even this brief examination shows how literary writing—all literary writing, not just poetry—uses language in a way that relies on layers of memory, meaning, and associations that can be objectively supported once explicated.

In this way, literary language encourages habits of mind, ways of perceiving, processing, and thinking that cultivate virtue by reminding us of the meaning that cannot be found apart from *telos*. To read a literary work well, one must attend not only to the parts but also to the way in which the parts support the whole and meaning accrues. Literary language, as Sir Philip Sidney says, “figures forth good things.”<sup>32</sup> In so doing, it is virtuous in and of itself, and it figures forth virtue in the reader as well. “Figuring forth” refers to the use of the imagination, which in its most literal sense refers to our ability to create a picture or image in our mind’s eye. The stories in which we are immersed project onto our imaginations visions of the good life—as well as the means of obtaining it.<sup>33</sup> We must imagine what virtue looks like in order to act virtuously.

All literature—stories most obviously—centers on some conflict, rupture, or lack. Literature is birthed from our fallenness: without the fall, there would be no story. “Only desire speaks,” writes Jacques Ellul in *The Humiliation of the Word*. “Satisfaction is silence.”<sup>34</sup> Thus it is the nature of literature to express—and cultivate—desire. Marcel Proust says that “it is one of the great and wonderful characteristics of good books . . . to provide us with desires.”<sup>35</sup>

But the desires that are cultivated by books (and other forms of stories, including film, songs, and especially commercials) can pull us toward the good life—or toward false visions of the good life (as Gustave Flaubert shows in romance-reading Emma Bovary).<sup>36</sup> Reading well entails discerning which visions of life are false and which are good and true—as well as recognizing how deeply rooted these visions are in language. Mark Edmundson explains in *Why Read?*, “Such visions are easier to derive from words, from writings, in part because for most of us the prevailing medium, moment to moment, is verbal.”<sup>37</sup> Bucking the fashions in literary theory that have prevailed for decades, Edmundson (a distinguished professor at the University of Virginia) makes an assertion most of his colleagues would deem quaint at best: “The ultimate test of a book, or of an interpretation, is the difference it would make in the conduct of life.”<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, reading great books is not the only way to cultivate virtue and achieve the good life. (Plenty of virtuous people I know and love don’t love books.) But literature has a particular power in forming our visions of the good life. “Once past the issue of sheer physical survival, human lives are about feeling, believing, and judging, and stories profoundly map themselves onto this agenda of human concerns, because at the core of every story is a set of invitations to feel, to believe, and to judge as the story dictates,” explains Marshall Gregory.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, “Our hearts traffic in stories,” James K. A. Smith writes in *Imagining the Kingdom*. “We are narrative animals whose very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories.”<sup>40</sup> We see this storied aspect of our lives in the most mundane, everyday ways—for example, when a loved one relays a funny or interesting incident, not by rushing to the outcome but by re-creating the whole scene, narrating it from start to finish in the form of an entertaining story.

Because we first make sense of the world aesthetically (referring to its root meaning of sensory experience), Smith says, our primary means of processing is “more like poetry than propositional analysis.” Just as our first response to the world comes from its physical shape, so too our first response to literature comes from the way its form shapes our experience of it. Training our affect, or emotions, is a way of shaping our very perceptions, of “training people to ‘see situations in the right way.’”<sup>41</sup> Developing perceptiveness—the sort that literary reading requires—cultivates virtue because action follows affective response. This connection between literary interpretation and affective response is seen in one study in which participants could retain the meaning of a word better if they used facial expressions to match the emotions conveyed by that word.<sup>42</sup> Our actions, our decisions, and even the very perceptions we register in our consciousness have been primed by the larger story—of our family, our community, our culture—in which we imagine ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

Literary form echoes the form of the virtuous life, teaching us “to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing . . . search[ing] for truth,” according to moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum.<sup>44</sup> Literature conveys not life, but

"a sense of life, and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not . . . of life's relations and connections."<sup>45</sup> Echoing Aristotle's argument on the role literature plays in developing virtue, Nussbaum writes:

We have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling. . . . All living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world as something. So in this sense no life is "raw," and . . . throughout our living we are, in a sense, makers of fictions. The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived.<sup>46</sup>

Great books offer perspectives more than lessons. Literature shows us "how a different character, a situation, an event seems from different angles and perspectives, and even then how inexact our knowledge remains."<sup>47</sup> Literature replicates the world of the concrete, where the experiential learning necessary for virtue occurs. Such experiential learning does not come through technique. "One learns it by guidance rather than by a formula."<sup>48</sup>

Reading and interpreting literature notoriously lacks hard and fast rules. It is this very quality that makes literature exciting for some, frustrating for others. There is no one right reading of a literary text—but there are certainly erroneous readings, good readings, and excellent readings. Similarly, virtue ethics, rather than proffering a rigid set of rules by which to determine decisions (deontological ethics) or considering the likely consequences or outcomes of a decision (pragmatic ethics), relies on moral character, developed through good habits, for the governing of behavior. For the most part, this is the hardest and most challenging course. Cultivating and exercising wisdom is harder than consulting a rule book. As Aristotle says, "Both skill and virtue are always concerned with what is harder, because success in what is harder is superior."<sup>49</sup>

Human virtue, or moral excellence, is a habit of moral character; because it is a habit, it becomes a kind of second nature. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle locates virtue, or excellence, between the extremes of excess and deficiency: the virtuous mean.<sup>50</sup> Both the deficiency and the excess of a virtue constitute a vice. For example, the virtue of courage is found between the excess of rashness (a vice) and the deficiency of cowardice (also a vice). Each of the virtues is such a mean. This idea is expressed in the old aphorism "everything in moderation."

Various virtues have been identified and cataloged throughout the history of philosophical thought. The Greeks, Romans, and early Christians all had different but overlapping concepts of virtue as a whole and of specific individual virtues. For this book, I've chosen twelve of the most central virtues and grouped them according to their traditional categories.

The cardinal virtues, the subject of part 1, constitute the most agreed-upon grouping across Greek and early Christian thought. These virtues are prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. They are called cardinal virtues because *cardinal* originally meant "hinge" or "pivot." Philosophers consider these four virtues to be the ones on which all other virtues depend or hinge. And of these, prudence or practical wisdom, the subject of the first chapter, is queen.

The theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—are drawn directly from the Bible. While the Bible mentions other virtues, these three have special significance among the virtues, not only because of the way they are emphasized in 1 Corinthians 13:13, but also because, unlike the other virtues, they occur in their true sense not through human nature but by God's divine power. As we will explore in part 2, the sense of faith, hope, and love as they are discussed in Scripture differs from the abilities and passions that human beings have naturally. In contrast to the other virtues, these virtues can be attained only when granted to us by God through his supernatural grace.

In part 3 we consider what are called the heavenly virtues. There are seven of these (a number of special significance in the Christian tradition, one that symbolizes perfection or completion). These heavenly virtues are charity and temperance (discussed in previous sections of the book),

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chastity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility. Traditionally, the heavenly virtues were cataloged as those that specifically countered the seven deadly sins (a list that has also varied throughout church history).

While each chapter can be read alone, connections and comparisons among the virtues are drawn throughout, making reading the book as a whole from start to finish the most fruitful approach. I've tried to write about the literary works in ways that will interest and engage both those who have read the works and those who have not. For those who have not, a warning: spoilers abound. However, because all of the works chosen are literary works of enduring quality, notable for their form as well as their content, I hope that the practices and images of virtue each offers will serve to invite first readings and rereadings alike.

May these and many other works affirm the words of Richard Baxter: "Good books are a very great mercy to the world."<sup>51</sup>

PART ONE



The Cardinal Virtues