

*FINDING THE GOOD LIFE
through GREAT BOOKS*



On Reading Well

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

© 2018 by Karen Swallow Prior

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Foreword

Leland Ryken

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.”¹

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.”²

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."³ 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."⁴

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."⁵

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.”¹

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, 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 and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.”² 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 increase user engagement, as some industry leaders have acknowledged.³ 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.”⁷

Read with a pen, pencil, or highlighter in hand, marking in the book or taking notes on paper.⁸ 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.”⁹ (The sheer delight to be found in reading

other readers' marginalia is unforgettably rendered in Billy Collins's poem, "Marginalia."¹⁰)

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.¹¹ 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."¹² 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.

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.¹³

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—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."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Or, in the words of writer George Saunders, "A story means by how it proceeds."¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ Just as in real life, a work of literature doesn’t assert but presents.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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 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.²⁰

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 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.”²¹ 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,”²² 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.”²³

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.”²⁴ 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 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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷ 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 7:19.²⁸

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.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 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.”³² 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.³³ 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.”³⁴ 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.”³⁵

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).³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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.”³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ 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.’”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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.”⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸

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.”⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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), 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."⁵¹

Part One



The Cardinal
Virtues



"TOM FOOLERY"

CHAPTER ONE

Prudence

THE HISTORY OF TOM JONES, A FOUNDLING

by Henry Fielding

I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.

—Proverbs 8:12

Rules rule.

We do like our rules. Some rules are strict, some unspoken; some apply to everyone, some to only a few. Some of us like rigid moral rules. Some of us like unwritten rules of political correctness. No matter what, adhering to rules is much easier than exercising wisdom.

A society couldn't exist without the rule of law, of course. And a civilization wouldn't be civil without its informal expectations. The Christian faith is built on laws that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill. Yet, because no number of rules or laws could cover every moral or ethical choice we face, virtue picks up where rules leave off. And where rules abound, virtue, like an underused muscle, atrophies.

Virtue requires judgment, and judgment requires prudence. Prudence is wisdom in practice. It is the habit of discerning the “true good in every circumstance” and “the right means of achieving it.”¹ In other words, it is “applied morality.”² A person possesses the virtue of prudence when “the disposition to reason well about what courses of action and emotion will best bring about our own and others’ well-being” becomes an acquired habit.³ Perhaps Cicero puts it most clearly and succinctly in saying, “Prudence is the knowledge of things to be sought, and those to be shunned.”⁴

Prudence is considered the mother of the other three cardinal virtues.⁵ While temperance, fortitude, and justice are moral virtues, virtues related to doing, prudence is an intellectual virtue, a virtue related to knowing. Prudence is “at the heart of the moral character, for it shapes and directs the whole of our moral lives, and is indispensable to our

becoming morally excellent human persons.”⁶ Prudence measures the other virtues⁷ and determines what “makes an action good.”⁸ It is described as the “charioteer of the virtues,” the basis and the measure of all other virtues, helping us to apply general principles to particular situations in ways that avoid evil and accomplish good.⁹

IS VIRTUE ITS OWN REWARD?

While we hardly even talk about virtue today, in eighteenth-century England, virtue was the center of the biggest literary feud of the age. This debate, carried out on the pages of great books, grappled with the question: Do we practice virtue in hopes of achieving some personal gain, or is virtue, as the saying goes, its own reward?

The furor began in 1740 when an obscure printer’s apprentice named Samuel Richardson published a fictitious series of letters titled *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Written from the perspective of a young servant girl, the letters convey, moment by moment, the girl’s severe trials as her wealthy, debauched master attempts to wrest her “virtue” (or virginity) from her by, at turns, guile and force. Ultimately, Pamela wins him to marriage—an unbelievable turn of events at the time because of their vast difference in social class when rigid class divisions were rarely breached, but also an (almost) unbelievable turn of events to readers today because of how hard it is to imagine a woman falling in love with so vile a suitor.

As unrealistic as the novel seems in some respects, however, *Pamela* offered to readers of its day a dramatic turn toward realism in a novel, a departure from the more typical

fictional tales that had been popular for centuries. By using a realistic form (letters) and employing realistic language (the vernacular of a common servant girl), Richardson composed a story far more believable than the epics and romances of old. But even more pioneering was his combining of this new kind of realism with a powerful moral message about virtue.

Richardson's literary accomplishment was so significant that he is now called the father of the English novel. *Pamela* was a huge sensation. Entire villages read it together, and one even rang the church bell upon reading of Pamela's marriage. Preachers extolled the book from the pulpit. An industry of paraphernalia arose, including *Pamela*-themed fans, prints, paintings, cards, and waxworks. And long before *fan fiction* was a term, *Pamela* inspired volumes of spin-offs, sequels, and parodies.

Two of the best of these parodies were penned by Henry Fielding. Parodying the moral philosophy of *Pamela*, Fielding's *Shamela* roundly satirizes what he saw in the novel as a crude commodification of virtue for the sake of worldly gain. In a longer parody, *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding comically reverses the sex roles with a hilarious depiction of a poor, virtuous young man being pursued by an older wealthy woman. He then turned to a work that would counter Richardson's not merely with mockery but with a competing moral and literary aesthetic. *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* is Fielding's masterpiece.

The literary battle between Fielding and Richardson changed the course of literature. Their skirmish reflected—and shaped—not only differences in literary form but also the ongoing cultural transition from the classical virtues to modern individualistic morality. The debate reflects a

modern cultural shift whereby, as Alasdair MacIntyre explains in *After Virtue*, morality was severed from theology, replacing it with the modern notion of autonomy.¹⁰ *Pamela*, drawing on an earlier tradition of conduct books, promotes individual morality based on what MacIntyre calls “rules of conduct,”¹¹ while *Tom Jones* is built on what was even then a crumbling theological foundation for virtue.¹² The dispute between the two novelists mirrors the Enlightenment-era debate that has ultimately led to our current state of moral discourse. MacIntyre describes this state as the replacement of a transcendent basis for shared moral principles with mere individualistic emotivism.¹³ Paralleling this philosophical development, contemporary Christian practice, particularly as expressed in American evangelicalism, has largely experienced the replacement of orthodox doctrine with what sociologist Christian Smith terms “moralistic therapeutic deism.”¹⁴

A SCHOOL OF VIRTUE ETHICS: *TOM JONES*

While *Pamela* reflects much about modernity and the rise of the individual, *Tom Jones* is a textbook example (literally: I use it as a textbook) of neoclassicism. It is also a veritable school of virtue ethics. Its opening dedication explains that its purpose is to advance “the cause of religion and virtue” by “displaying that beauty of virtue which may attract the admiration of mankind.” While philosophers rightly hold that virtue is developed through actual practice—by which habits become tendencies, which become instincts, which then become essential nature—literature provides a vicarious practice of virtue. After all, as Fielding explains further into

his dedication, “an example is a kind of picture, in which virtue becomes as it were an object of sight,” one that “strikes us with an idea of that loveliness, which Plato asserts there is in her naked charms.”¹⁵

Fielding’s high moral purpose for his novel is reflected in many ways throughout the story that unfolds, but most striking is his narrative technique. A highly involved narrator opens each major section of the novel and interjects throughout to offer explicit commentary (as well as humorous asides). One scholar explains that this intrusive narrator is much more than a clever narrative device in that the narrator embodies Fielding’s theology concerning the character of a God who intervenes and is active in the affairs of humankind—in other words, God’s providence.¹⁶

In fact, the word *prudence* comes from the word *providence*, which means, literally, the ability to foresee.¹⁷ Cicero, a classical orator held in high regard by the neoclassical Fielding, said that what instinct is for animals, prudence is for human beings; and what prudence is for human beings, providence is for the gods.¹⁸ Because it means foreseeing, *providence* has come to refer to the actions of God based on his all-seeing and all-knowing power. The word *prudence* developed an analogous meaning within the human realm, referring to the actions of human beings based on foreseeing the consequences of a course of action and choosing accordingly. Prudence is in human affairs what God’s sovereignty is over all of creation. In *Tom Jones*, prudence becomes the human, finite picture of God’s infinite omniscience.¹⁹ Aptly, *Tom Jones* is a book full of surprises and multiple colorful (sometimes bawdy) threads woven together by a masterful author-narrator whose highly visible presence

reflects a worldview founded on belief in the active presence of an Author-God in the world of human affairs.

It is fitting that a novel whose theme is the acquisition of prudence is epic in length, taking its hero, along with a rich array of major and minor characters, on an arduous, twisting, adventure-filled sojourn from country to urban setting and back again.

Tom's story begins when the noble Squire Allworthy (noble in both his social class and his moral character) discovers a foundling (the term used at that time for an infant abandoned, then found) and decides to raise him like a son. Allworthy's mercy is remarkable in a time when illegitimate children were not treated kindly. Given the name Tom Jones, the boy develops into a high-spirited young man, full of passion but eminently good-natured. As Tom grows, Allworthy's generosity to the child raises the jealousy of other members of the household, however, and they don't let pass any opportunity to shed a bad light on the boy. The imprudent Tom provides many chances for them to succeed. When Tom finally loses favor with Allworthy through a combination of his own bad behavior and the exaggeration of this by his enemies, his benefactor expels him from the estate—aptly named Paradise Hall—after admonishing Tom that he must learn prudence.

Prudence is a form of wisdom. The ancients distinguished between two kinds of wisdom: speculative wisdom (*sophia*), related to the world of abstract ideas, and practical wisdom (*prudentia*), related to the concrete world of particular actions. As Tom pursues the story's heroine, his beloved Sophia (wisdom), he must also pursue and acquire prudence, or applied wisdom.

Wisdom is so rare today that distinguishing between speculative and practical wisdom seems overly nuanced. But we've all heard advice or a principle that seems right—yet is impossible to apply to a particular situation. One notices this often with pundits and commentators who are wont to spout platitudes that sound wise in theory yet prove disastrous when applied to an actual situation.

I think, for example, of a man I know who, after his wife divorced him to be with another man, was fired from his job assisting a ministry leader. The ministry leader thought it wise not to sully his family-centered ministry's reputation by working so closely with a man whose life didn't live up to the ministry's values. Years later, however, when divorce hit closer to home within the leader's family, his understanding of divorce tempered, and he realized that his views, although seemingly wise in theory, couldn't stand the test of application in the real world. By then it was too late. The man he had fired, who had done no wrong, was embittered and hurt beyond easy repair. Another example is the rule among some male leaders not to meet alone with a woman, which sounds moral and wise but generally becomes impossible to practice without falling into other errors such as disrespect or discrimination. Yet many today assume its prudence and adopt the rule without examination. Prudence is wisdom at work on the ground, doing good and avoiding evil in real-life situations.

On the other hand, the practical nature of prudence is the very thing that so easily distorts it. Because prudence is concerned with the means to an end,²⁰ it is easily confused with pragmatism, easily corrupted by justifying the means with the end. Misguided backlash against prudence recasts

the cardinal virtue as crass *quid pro quo* (which is exactly how Fielding viewed Richardson's portrayal of "virtue rewarded" in *Pamela*). Consider the contempt for the related word *prude*, which has no positive connotations whatsoever. *Prudery*, *prudence*, *prudent*: each in today's usage suggests a narrow-minded, slim-souled, hand-wringing Pollyanna. (Being of a certain age, I can't hear any of these words without remembering Dana Carvey on *Saturday Night Live* imitating George H. W. Bush saying, "Wouldn't be prudent!")

Even as far back as 1749, the year *Tom Jones* was published, prudence was viewed cynically. Its ambiguous status is shown in the way Fielding treats it both seriously and humorously in the novel, demonstrating the transition when moral language began being used pragmatically and manipulatively, obscuring the arbitrary and autonomous basis of moral choices by cloaking personal preference in the language of virtue.²¹

One way the diminishing power of virtue in general can be seen is in the narrowing of its definition such that it was often used synonymously with virginity, as in *Pamela*, a conflation that grounded a significant part of Fielding's objection to Richardson's moral vision. (This is an interesting etymological development given that the Latin root for *virtue* literally means "man" or "manliness.") When *virtue* is used as a euphemism for *virginity*, it's inevitable that the concept of virtue is depleted, its practice diminished, and the virginity for which it stands commodified and fetishized.

This points to a problem in the purity culture popular today in some strains of Christianity. The movement's well-intentioned attempt to encourage believers to remain virgins until marriage unfortunately misses the mark by

inadvertently making sexual purity a means to an end (such as alluring a fine marriage partner or being rewarded with a great sex life once married) rather than being a virtue in itself. Furthermore, apart from a more holistic sense of virtue, and in particular the virtue of chastity (the topic of chapter 8), virginity itself means little—as evidenced by the creative ways people maintain their virginity while remaining anything but sexually pure and by a former US president who claimed he'd not committed adultery because he'd engaged in all but intercourse with his mistress, and as further evidenced by situations in which virginity (not chastity) is lost through sexual assault.

Accordingly, in Fielding's view, Richardson's message in *Pamela* is that virtue is not a good in and of itself but is proven in being rewarded—by marriage, wealth, advancement, or praise (or in the case of *Pamela*, all four). *Pamela* offers a more complicated picture than Fielding gives it credit for, but his reading of the novel effectively demonstrates how easily morality slips into moralism, how finely drawn the line is between the law and legalism, and how readily the promise of blessings is mistaken as a contract for material prosperity.

SATIRE AND VIRTUE

Such slippage is ripe fodder for satire, and *Tom Jones* is, along with being epic and comic, satirical. Satire is the ridicule of vice or folly for the purpose of correction. It is a harsh way to communicate truth, but pointing to truth—by first pointing to error—is its goal. Satire mocks—but it does so with a moral aim. And that's a problem in an age with few agreed-upon manners or rules. Unlike a lampoon or a parody or other

forms of low comedy, satire relies on both a shared moral standard and a shared desire to attain that standard. This makes satire tricky for two reasons: first, agreement on moral standards varies from age to age, and second, some simply don't believe that it's anyone's job to "correct" anyone else's behavior. We live today in times that are hard for satire for both of these reasons. Vice and even folly are more and more seen as being "in the eyes of the beholder." Absent agreement on these, satire just seems mean. On the surface, ridicule doesn't seem kind, of course. But to ridicule what is wicked or foolish in hopes of preventing more of the same is much kinder than letting wickedness or folly continue along their merry, destructive way. Moreover, the sharp bite of satire leads some to think satire must be pessimistic, misanthropic even. Yet the truth is that the satirist, someone who tries so hard to improve the world, must, I think, love people very much. Even God's inspired Word contains plenty of irony and satire, such as when Job mocks the worldly-wise friends who've taunted his faith, saying, "Doubtless you are the only people who matter, and wisdom will die with you!" (Job 12:2). The satirist loves in the way of God, who chastens those whom he loves. There is only one thing worse than being chastened: that is, not being chastened.

As with all satire, *Tom Jones* requires readers to distinguish between the narrator's ironic voice and the true one. Sometimes the novel presents an ironic picture of prudence and other times a true one. False prudence is, like irony, a form of misdirection—in this case, directing knowledge toward unjust ends. The burden is on the reader to distinguish between the sincere and the ironic in order to discern what true virtue consists of. (Fielding offers the

reader considerable help with his highly obtrusive, and funny, narrator.) Think of this misdirection as a precursor to *Seinfeld*, modern satire at its finest. *Seinfeld* doesn't affirm the shallow, egotistical, trivial characters of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer—it satirizes them. Humor is closely connected to prudence because “morality is not sufficient for virtue; virtue also requires intelligence and lucidity. It is something that humor reminds us of and that prudence prescribes. It is imprudent to heed morality alone, and it is immoral to be imprudent.”²² By forcing us to test our understanding and application of prudence, satire paradoxically deepens our understanding of prudence.

IN PURSUIT OF PRUDENCE

The word *prudence* appears dozens of times throughout *Tom Jones*, and the reader must prudently discern the tone with each use, for the narrator can rarely be taken at face value. Most often, the word is used satirically in order to correct various forms of false prudence. Fielding believed that “it is much easier to make good men wise than to make bad men good.”²³ Teasing out what true prudence consists of advances Fielding's hope “to make good men wise.”

One early example in the story demonstrates the irony that runs throughout, forcing the careful reader to pause and consider whether true or false prudence is being portrayed. While lecturing her niece on matrimonial affairs, Sophia's aunt tells her that women of the polite world “consider matrimony, as men do offices of public trust, only as the means of making their fortunes, and of advancing themselves in the world.”²⁴ Clearly, this is not virtuous prudence but the

vice formed from its excess: cunningness, shrewdness, or conceit. Its opposite vice—negligence, or rashness—is formed from the deficiency of prudence.²⁵ Prudence, like all virtues, is the moderation between the excess and deficiency of that virtue.

Two of the most comical characters in the novel embody these vices: the household tutors, Thwackum and Square. Thwackum is (as his name hints) a pious legalist who spots sin and corruption everywhere he looks—all of which turns out, not surprisingly, to be a projection of his own vice (cunning) onto everyone else. The negligent Square, on the other hand, ends up being caught, rather imprudently, with his pants down (literally) in the bedroom of Tom's first lover.

Part of prudence is “the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason.”²⁶ Obviously, self-governance is a positive quality. It requires a kind of knowledge of both oneself and the world, which is what prudence essentially refers to. But when such knowledge is used toward unjust or evil ends, it transforms from the virtue of prudence into the vice of cunning. The word *cunning* is etymologically connected, not coincidentally, to the word *knowledge*. The just use of knowledge that constitutes prudence devolves into mere cunning when that knowledge is used for unjust ends.

The excess prudence of cunning and conceit is embodied in the character of Tom's foil, Squire Allworthy's nephew and presumed heir, Blifil. Blifil, whose personality is as limp and lisping as his name, contrasts in every way with the robust, vivacious, and generous Tom. When the novel describes Blifil as “prudent,” this is clearly meant in the bad—ironic—way. Sophia, over whom Tom and Blifil vie, observes that Blifil is “prudent,” but merely as concerns “the interest only of one

single person; and who that single person was the reader will be able to divine without any assistance of ours.”²⁷ While virtuous prudence is characterized by “purity, straightforwardness, candor, and simplicity of character,” false prudence relies on the appearance of these as a tactic toward some other end.²⁸ In this, Blifil excels.

While some of his motive for marrying Sophia is to expand the family estate, Blifil’s cunning should not be confused with the vice of covetousness. Covetousness is “immoderate straining for all the possessions which man thinks are needed to assure his own importance and status.”²⁹ Blifil, however, is so dispassionate and lacking in ambition that his selfish ends—his tutors’ approval, Allworthy’s favor, and the affection of the novel’s heroine, the lovely Sophia—seem almost accidental.

This fact points to an interesting quality of vice: it is just as likely to be accidental as intentional. In this way, virtue opposes vice not only in its moral content but in its acquisition as well. Vice is natural to human beings in their fallen state. But virtue must be practiced, become a habit, and be inhabited by a person in order to attain excellence.

In contrast to Blifil’s, Tom’s deficient vices are rashness and negligence. While he does possess an abundance of charity and generosity, his negligence and rashness, despite his good intentions, nullify his virtuous qualities. Such imprudence leads him to engage in poaching, fornication, and selling gifts Allworthy has given him (albeit in order to help a needy neighbor). Furthermore, Tom’s robust sexual appetite leads him into extremely imprudent liaisons. His intemperate spirits lead him to drunkenness and other excesses. His lack of prudence renders his good intentions either ineffectual or

even harmful, both to others and to himself. In contrast to Tom, the prudent person makes “intelligent judgements regarding the overall trajectory of a flourishing life as well as accurate judgements about how to achieve it.”³⁰

Despite his vices, Tom demonstrates that prudence is formed by charity, or love.³¹ “Prudence is love that chooses with sagacity between that which hinders it and that which helps it.”³² Developing prudence requires Tom to moderate all his passions, including his charitableness, since even love of others must be in proper proportion in order to be just, as Augustine explains in *On Christian Teaching*.³³ Loving oneself in proper proportion is necessary to loving others well. As Allworthy explains to Tom, prudence is “the duty which we owe ourselves. . . . If we will be so much our own enemies as to neglect it, we are not to wonder if the world is deficient in discharging their duty to us; for when a man lays the foundation of his own ruin, others will, I am afraid, be too apt to build upon it.”³⁴ Tom’s lack of prudence proves Sophia’s observation that Tom is “nobody’s enemy but his own.”³⁵

As “the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality,”³⁶ prudence requires some knowledge of the world. In classical art, the goddess Prudentia is often depicted with a mirror (to represent self-knowledge or conscience) and a serpent (an ancient symbol of wisdom). The image conveys the understanding that prudence requires knowledge of both universal principles and the particulars of a given situation, along with the idea that, as Aquinas says, a prudent person is one who sees from afar.³⁷ Prudence concerns the “realities of a life lived within a specific and communal history, wisdom which proceeds to act.”³⁸ It is exercised “within the mix of specific relations and goods that

give the moral life of any person its texture. . . . Hence prudence responds specifically to the concrete particularities of one's life."³⁹ In other words, applying wisdom requires the ability to discern truth and then to act rightly based on truth. This is why John Milton, as we noted in the introduction to this book, distinguishes between virtue and mere innocence. Josef Pieper explains the connection of prudence to reality this way: "There can be false and crooked ways leading even to right goals. The meaning of the virtue of prudence, however, is primarily this: that not only the end of human action but also the means for its realization shall be in keeping with the truth of real things. This in turn necessitates that the egocentric 'interests' of man be silenced in order that he may perceive the truth of real things, and so that reality itself may guide him to the proper means for realizing his goal."⁴⁰

Thus Tom's cultivation of prudence parallels his growth in knowledge of the world as he leaves the rural setting of his birth, travels on the road, and experiences urban life, encountering complex situations and deceptive people along the way. The pickles he gets himself into demonstrate how prudence is an intellectual virtue based in the rational ability, first, to distinguish between competing goods (for Tom, too often, these competing goods are women); then to foresee the consequences of possible actions; and finally, to take the best course of action accordingly. Reading his story allows us to learn about the world along with Tom. Prudence "transforms knowledge of reality into realization of the good."⁴¹ But in the real world, what is good is what is practical, even if it falls short of ideal.⁴² In other words, as the saying goes, the enemy

of the good is the best. If only the ideal will do, the good will likely never be realized. Perfectionism is the foil of prudence.

One way Tom learns prudence, just as we do in real life, is by observing its lack in others. By observing reality, Tom learns that “folly is self-inflicted, due chiefly to our willingly directing our attention to secondary goods, or evils . . . that oppose the divine concerns.”⁴³ When Tom’s companion Mr. Nightingale impregnates his lover and then refuses to marry her because of her loss of reputation (never mind that she lost it to him!), Tom exhorts Nightingale to do the right thing, admonishing him that “when you promised to marry her she became your wife; and she hath sinned more against prudence than virtue.”⁴⁴ Tom comes by this advice honestly, having found himself in similar straits earlier in the story when, believing he had impregnated a woman, he is humble and responsible enough to do right by the young woman (until fate reveals other surprises). Prudence, in fact, has affinity with the open nature of magnanimity. In contrast to magnanimity, “insidiousness, guile, craft, and concupiscence are the refuge of small-minded and small-souled persons.”⁴⁵ Tom is an open book, even to a fault, initially.

The pages are open, but the cover needs repair. Tom must learn that his natural inward state of goodness should be reflected outwardly by mores and morals. Appearances and reputation are not unnecessary adornments but are prudent in making one’s outward behavior and morality conform to one’s inward state. As the helpful narrator of the story tells us,

Prudence and circumspection are necessary even to the best of men. They are indeed as it were a guard to virtue, without which she can never be safe. It is not enough that your designs, nay that

your actions are intrinsically good, [but] you must take care they shall appear so. If your inside be never so beautiful, you must preserve a fair outside also. This must be constantly looked to, or malice and envy will take care to blacken it so, that the sagacity and goodness of an Allworthy will not be able to see through it, and to discern the beauties within. Let this, my young readers, be your constant maxim, that no man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the rules of prudence; nor will virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward ornaments of decency and decorum.⁴⁶

A NOVEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Tom Jones is a traditional bildungsroman, a novel of development. Thus, as Tom's love for Sophia (wisdom) grows, so too does his prudence. Because "the virtue of prudence is dependent upon the constant readiness to ignore the self,"⁴⁷ the more Tom puts Sophia's interests ahead of his own, the more he is able to cultivate prudence (such as by learning to decline the wealthy and worldly women who offer themselves to him). Tom eventually applies wisdom by pursuing all its components—seeking counsel, deliberation, judgment, coming to resolution, and action.⁴⁸

The novel paints a vivid picture of Fielding's own belief that a good-natured soul is capable of great good once virtue is cultivated. This question of human nature—whether it is essentially good or corrupt—is a strong undercurrent in the larger debate between Fielding and Richardson and among their contemporaries. Fielding's more liberal theology emerges in *Tom Jones* in his emphasis on Tom's essential good nature, which triumphs over his moral failures. In contrast to Fielding's high-church Anglicanism, Richardson's theological view of human nature was influenced by the Methodism of

John Wesley and George Whitefield and thus reflects the doctrine of human depravity. The question of whether human nature is essentially good or bad was a pressing one among Enlightenment philosophers and, not surprisingly, made its way into the most influential literature of the day. This philosophical, and essentially theological, debate played a significant role not only in shaping these novels (e.g., the differences between each side's literary style and overall message) but also in the development of the emerging genre of the novel as a whole. Because of such underlying questions, the novel is, in many ways, the genre best representative of the modern condition.

This debate over the essential goodness or depravity of human nature has continued into the present day and is commonly cited as the fundamental division between conservative and liberal theology and politics. However, a question even more significant than whether human nature is essentially good or bad has emerged, and that is the question of whether such a thing as an essential human nature exists at all. If not, then there can be no *telos* or true end toward which human existence and excellence should be directed. And if there is no purpose for human existence, then there can be no unified, transcendent basis for morality or virtue. This, MacIntyre argues, is what places contemporary humanity in the position of being “after virtue.”⁴⁹

But Tom Jones lives in a world in which the foundation of virtue still stands, though crumbling. The story reaches its happy conclusion for Tom (it is a comedy, after all) only when he has recognized and confessed the errors of his ways. In response, Squire Allworthy joyfully tells him, “You now see, Tom, to what dangers imprudence alone may subject virtue

(for virtue, I am now convinced, you love in a great degree).”⁵⁰ The all-knowing narrator informs us that Tom, “by reflection on his past follies, acquired a discretion and prudence very uncommon in one of his lively parts.”⁵¹

Thus the novel demonstrates that the virtue of prudence is indeed “right reason directed to the excellent human life,”⁵² a virtue as uncommon as it is essential to the admirable goal of retaining our lively parts.



"SUCH BEAUTIFUL SHIRTS"

CHAPTER TWO

Temperance

THE GREAT GATSBY

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness.

—2 Peter 1:5–6 (KJV)

Some years ago, I joined a weight-loss program with a couple of friends. Mainly, I wanted to spend time with them and support their efforts. But I figured I could benefit from losing a few pounds too. To stay within the stingy allotment of daily food points the program allowed, I gave up three of my favorite things: Chinese buffets, ice cream, and cream in my coffee. It was hard at first. I wasn't used to going hungry—ever—and doing so made me cranky. So to keep hunger at bay, I filled up on more healthful foods. (Fortunately, I like all food, even the healthy stuff.)

Then, a few months into these changed habits, an odd thing happened. One evening, as usual, hunger struck. Immediately, I was seized by a craving . . . for grapes. Grapes! Not lo mein, not gummy bears, not ice cream—but *grapes*. I actually *desired* more than anything else a food that was good for me. It seemed like a miracle. But it wasn't. In changing my habits, I had developed (at least in this one area) the virtue of temperance.

Temperance is unique among the virtues. Unlike other virtues that are revealed under pressure, temperance is “an ordinary, humble virtue, to be practiced on a regular rather than an exceptional basis.” It “is a virtue for all times but is all the more necessary when times are good.”¹ It is also unlike the other virtues in centering not on actions but on desires. Since we desire what is pleasurable, temperance is “the virtue that inclines us to desire and enjoy pleasures well.”² It helps us to desire pleasures in a reasonable manner,³ desiring them neither too much nor too little, the virtuous mean between the vices of self-indulgence and insensibility.⁴

For Aristotle temperance concerned the physical appetites we share with animals: the desires for food, drink, and sex.⁵ For both humans and animals, these appetites are necessary to perpetuate life (whether individually or as a species), but they are also the source of pleasure. The Catholic Church, following Aristotle's understanding, teaches that temperance "ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable," but expands the role of temperance as governing "the use of created goods."⁶

Temperance is not simply resisting temptation. It is more than merely restraint. Aquinas uses the example of a miser who eschews extravagance because of its expense: such a man is not temperate,⁷ for the temperate man would not desire extravagance. One attains the virtue of temperance when one's appetites have been shaped such that one's very desires are in proper order and proportion.

We can learn so much about God's economy, his nature, and the way to human flourishing by observing the marvelous ways in which God has built balance, a form of temperance, into the natural order. Night tempers day. Water relieves earth. The four seasons comprise two pairs that offset each other in the stages of life: birth, fertility, decay, death. Even creating as male and female those who bear forth his image (instead of making humans capable of reproducing from one rather than two, like bacteria) reveals something about how we are to live. Yet, so often in human affairs, balance seems unnatural, prone as we are to careen from one extreme to another, both as individuals and collectively within culture. The ancients showed wisdom in understanding how foundational temperance is to human excellence.

Temperance is the virtue that helps us rise above our animal nature, making the image of God in us shine more brilliantly. For humans, unlike animals, pleasure is tempered by understanding. Developing desires for the good requires understanding. Human beings are creatures who are rational as well as spiritual and who, as such, do not approach pleasurable activities purely physically. The temperate person is one who “understands these connections between bodily pleasures and the larger human good, and whose understanding actually tempers the desires and pleasures.”⁸ Temperance is liberating because it “allows us to be masters of our pleasure instead of becoming its slaves.”⁹

But while understanding is necessary for the virtue of temperance, it is not sufficient. Even Paul acknowledges the limits our understanding holds over our desires when he writes, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15).

A HISTORY OF INTEMPERANCE

The difficulty of balancing between excessive and deficient pleasures is evident all around us in many ways, not only in the present, but in human history as well. Two ancient schools of thought that demonstrate the extremes of excess and deficiency in regards to physical pleasures are Stoicism and Epicureanism, one advocating restraint and the other indulgence as the way to the good life. We might not adopt their extremes in such intensely philosophical ways today, but the influence of these approaches is all around us. This ping-ponging between excess and deficiency in the indulgence of our animal appetites manifests in endless ways

in American culture today: all-you-can-eat buffets and detox diets, pornography and purity culture, fast food and slow food, the sexual revolution and the death of sex,¹⁰ McMansions and tiny houses, the prosperity gospel and the gospel of self-denial. Even in the longer view of our nation's history, we see this wild pendulum swing: the excesses rampant today are the counter swing to the Puritan roots of our country's beginning. This ongoing tension that has always defined American culture is at the heart of one of the most quintessentially American novels: *The Great Gatsby*.

The defining quality of Gatsby's life is excess. Even the word *great* in the title establishes this (although ironically, as it turns out). We see Gatsby's greatness through the eyes of the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway. A nondescript, struggling businessman who is renting the modest cottage next to Gatsby's lavish mansion, Nick is in every way a foil to Gatsby. The truth Nick slowly uncovers about Jay Gatsby reveals not only the humble origins of a man (whose real name turns out to be James Gatz) but also his excessive efforts both to overcome these beginnings and to suppress the very nature of his past and his identity.

But nature—including human nature—is like a balloon. If squeezed at one end, the air inside simply moves to the other end. If squeezed enough, the balloon will burst. Extremes will eventually out. The virtue of temperance keeps us from bursting at either end.

Aptly, *The Great Gatsby* is set during a time characterized by the impulse to suppress: Prohibition. The historical background to the story exemplifies in itself how excess in one direction can lead to an equal and opposite excess in the other direction.

Prohibition grew out of the more moderate movement called Temperance. The American Temperance Society was founded in 1826 as a call, first, to temper (or moderate) excessive consumption of alcohol, but eventually to total abstinence (teetotalism). The push toward complete prohibition developed as a reaction against another excess: the growing drunkenness (often resulting in domestic violence and familial neglect) that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. In previous ages, it was common, even among some Puritans, to imbibe mild wine, mead, and beers from breakfast till nighttime with little effect. However, what had long been a healthy and relatively harmless social and gustatory custom turned into an addictive and dangerous habit for many when modern means of producing alcohol increased the potency of alcoholic beverages.¹¹ In addition, the Industrial Revolution's increasingly rigorous and dehumanized systems of labor prompted more workers to seek even more relief in alcohol, and an epidemic began. Alcohol consumption was so rampant in the early decades of the nineteenth century that the average American consumed 7 gallons of pure alcohol each year (compared to 2.32 gallons consumed in America in 2014).¹² Efforts to address the problem culminated in 1920 with the Eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which made the manufacture, transportation, and sale of intoxicating liquor illegal. The law was so intemperate that it could only result in vice. Prohibition was an ill-fated but short-lived social experiment that, in effect, replaced virtue. In 1933, the Twenty-First Amendment repealed Prohibition.

A CORRUPTED AMERICAN DREAM

This is the setting for *The Great Gatsby*. Written in 1925 and set in 1922, during the time between these two Amendments, the novel presents a society that replaced moderation with excesses on both ends of the spectrum. Self-governance, the principle many observe to be the foundation of the American experiment, diminished, and with it the virtue of temperance to which it is connected. *The Great Gatsby* interrogates, eerily and prophetically, the reckless excesses of American life during the Prohibition era, excesses that would contribute to the economic crash a few years later, bringing about the Great Depression and the tumbling down of the American Dream.

The American Dream takes various forms, of course, and has not vanished entirely. But some forms of that noble ideal are corrupt, as Gatsby's version is. Gatsby's life is essentially a lie, one told in the service of a distorted dream. Not only does this false dream take Gatsby's life, but it prevents him from truly living even when he is alive. His "intemperance has consumed him from his youth," leaving his mind and spirit always "in a constant, turbulent riot." The mad dreams and desires that fill his soul are but "founded securely on a fairy's wing."¹³

Even his sexual appetites were intemperate from the time of his youth: "He knew women early and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them, of young virgins because they were ignorant, of the others because they were hysterical about things which in his overwhelming self-absorption he took for granted."¹⁴ Yet Gatsby considers himself "careful" in his liaisons because he refrains from any among the wives of his friends.¹⁵ His intemperance leads him

to regard women as objects that either belong to other men or are free for the taking.

Even the mean of an intemperate life is intemperate.

A poster boy for the American Dream, young Gatsby envisions for himself some vague “future glory.” Lacking the patience and humility to work his way up from his job as a college janitor, he chooses to ingratiate himself to a wealthy millionaire to become his heir.

After he has gained wealth and reinvented himself, Gatsby meets Daisy, “the first ‘nice’ girl he had ever known,” who from the start inflames Gatsby’s desires more.¹⁶ With their first kiss, Gatsby vows that the act would “forever wed” his immortal dreams to her mortal being, and consequently, “his mind would never romp again like the mind of God.”¹⁷

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Gatsby’s lust for Daisy is not merely sexual, however. Daisy, an upper-class Southern belle, is part of a world Gatsby wants to enter but can never be from. Gatsby’s worldview is the product of the new culture of consumer capitalism where, “rather than wealth or political or economic power,” *desire* had become democratized. The rising consumerism of these years turned desire into “a spur to effort, forcing people to compete, discipline themselves, and deny present comfort for future pleasures.”¹⁸ Thus when Gatsby loses Daisy to a man who comes from long-standing wealth and power, Gatsby devotes his life to accumulating even more wealth in hopes of regaining her. We meet Gatsby five years later when he has succeeded in this goal to a level that can only be called obscene.

His enormous mansion's "purposeless splendor"¹⁹ includes music rooms, salons, a pool room, dressing rooms, period bedrooms, and bathrooms with sunken baths.²⁰ Preparations for his weekend parties begin each Monday when eight servants and a gardener begin their daily labor. Crates of fruit are delivered from the city each Friday, and each Monday carried out "in a pyramid of pulpless halves." Caterers cover buffet tables with appetizers, meats, salads, and pastries. An orchestra performs as guests arrive in cars parked five deep in the driveway. Fashionable people fill the rooms, and "the air is alive with chatter and laughter and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names."²¹

Gatsby's excessive materialism reflects the culmination of American history decades in the making. Between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century, capitalist ventures birthed a new ethos in America. This "consumer capitalism" created "a culture almost violently hostile to the past and to tradition, a future-oriented culture of desire that confused the good life with goods . . . one moving largely against the grain of earlier traditions of republicanism and Christian virtue."²² This old culture, based on values rooted in tradition, community, and religion, was replaced by a new culture that promoted "acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness."²³ A few years before the time of *The Great Gatsby*, the term "conspicuous consumption" originated in economic theory to describe the values of this new culture, in which those who were made wealthy through opportunities offered by the Industrial Revolution sought to acquire and flaunt material possessions as symbols of their

new economic power. America became what the turn-of-the-century marketing pioneer John Wanamaker called the “land of desire.”²⁴

Today conspicuous consumption has spread even more throughout American culture. A recent four-year study, for example, found that the lives of the middle class are “overwhelmed” by stockpiled supplies, clutter, and toys. Three out of four garages are too full to hold cars, and while the United States has 3.1 percent of the world’s children, it has 40 percent of the world’s toys.²⁵ Consumerism sells the idea that material things will make us happy. To counteract this excess, an entire industry in minimalism promises to rescue those drowning in stuff. The downside of this excess stuff is more than simply material or financial, however. “Economic plenty seems to impose materialistic limits on imagination and people devote themselves to recreation, entertainment, and physical pleasure. Freedom consequently becomes trivial. . . . Everyone lives in about the same way, and it may be difficult even to think of a different way.”²⁶

Intemperate consumption and accumulation is something I struggle with in my own life. My grandparents, who lived through the Depression and lifelong poverty, threw nothing away. Whatever potential value even junk might hold was enough value to justify keeping it. My mother, despite rising to the comfortable middle class, was habituated by this upbringing to seek and buy bargains, an example I followed from early on and have continued far past its necessity or even its usefulness. Only in recent years have I slowly begun to shed the irrational sense that not taking advantage of a good deal is a loss, whether I need it or not. In fact, owning far more things than I need has become a great burden. Even

so, changing my thinking has proven easier than changing my practices. (Although it is nice to know we will never run out of toilet paper in this house.) Temperance is, for many of us raised in a culture birthed by consumerism, a virtue difficult to attain.

The Great Gatsby offers a larger-than-life picture of a life spun out of control by excess. If temperance is “selfless self-preservation,” then Gatsby is the epitome of intemperance: “self-destruction through the selfish degradation of the powers which aim at self-preservation.”²⁷ Nick recognizes the fatal nature of this intemperate world when he observes that in it “are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy, and the tired.”²⁸ Consumption does indeed consume us.

An early scene in the novel reveals the suffocating weight of excess consumption. A small, drunken party takes place in an apartment kept by Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, in New York City where he and his married mistress, Myrtle Wilson, have their regular rendezvous. The apartment is crammed with people and stuff, “crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it so that to move about was to stumble continually.” The passage brims with words suggesting oversaturation, such as “large” and “full.” There is even an “over-enlarged photograph” of a “hen sitting on an enlarged rock.” One day, Tom takes Nick there, and Nick drinks excessively for only the second time in his life.²⁹ The apartment is a microcosm of the larger world Gatsby inhabits, a world riddled with vices: materialism, adultery, drunkenness, organized crime, and domestic violence.

TEMPERANCE AND TIME

Yet temperance is more than merely restraining from vices. While restraint is one aspect of temperance, there is more to it than simply negation. Inherent to temperance is balance, as evident in the Old English word *temprian*, which means to “bring something into the required condition by mixing it with something else.”³⁰ This is why the process of strengthening a metal is called “tempering.” Evenness or balance brought about through mixing diverse elements can be seen in many spheres: the truth spoken in love, vegetation that flourishes in receiving both sun and rain, the one-flesh relationship formed by the marriage of a man and a woman, or the distinct satisfaction of a salty snack chased down by a sweet beverage.

Temprian is derived from the Latin *temperare*, which means to “observe proper measure, be moderate, restrain oneself” or to “mix correctly, mix in due proportion; regulate, rule, govern, manage.” This word, in turn, may come from another root, *tempus*, from which we get the word *temporal*, related to time and seasons.³¹ (Interestingly, the original meaning of *tempus* is likely “stretch” or “measure.” From this comes the word *temple*, a space made sacred by being marked out and marked off.³²)

The motif of time, or tempo, is prominent in *The Great Gatsby* and echoes throughout the novel in several ways. First, tempo characterizes the language of the novel, language sometimes effusive, sometimes economic, often delivered in measured beats that achieve powerful effect. Similarly, heavy use of symbolism compresses time by packing much meaning into few words. Tempo is at play, too, in the many polarities of the novel: ideal and real, myth and truth, hero and anti-hero, the upper and working classes, old money and nouveau

riche, East Egg and West Egg, the Old World of Europe and the New World of America, the American Dream as materialist and the American Dream as transcendent, the American West and the American East. The failure of the characters to harmonize the tensions within these pairings is part of what destroys everyone caught between them.

Probably the most significant of these polarities is past and present. The sense of time is, in fact, a prominent theme in the novel, as seen in one of its most famous lines, which occurs when Nick tries to temper Gatsby's expectations regarding his reunion with Daisy:

"I wouldn't ask too much of her," I ventured. "You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past?" he cried incredulously. "Why of course you can!"³³

The novel makes many such explicit references to time. Gatsby talks of the past often, Nick says, observing Gatsby's longing for something passed: "I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself."³⁴ Gatsby is "never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand."³⁵ Nick feels the oppressive weight of time when he says that the "relentless beating heart was beginning to confuse me."³⁶ And, of course, the novel's last line closes on this theme: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."³⁷

SELF-IMPROVEMENT

But time is not on Gatsby's side. This is the story of time running out. When Gatsby dies, a scant few attend his funeral. One person who does show up is Gatsby's father. He shows Nick an old book Gatsby had as a boy.

He opened it at the back cover and turned it around for me to see. On the last fly-leaf was printed the word *Schedule*, and the date September 12, 1906, and underneath:

| | | |
|-----------|------|--|
| 6.00 | A.M. | Rise from bed |
| 6.15-6.30 | " | Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling |
| 7.15-8.15 | " | Study electricity, etc |
| 8.30-4.30 | P.M. | Work |
| 4.30-5.00 | " | Baseball and sports |
| 5.00-6.00 | " | Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it |
| 7.00-9.00 | " | Study needed inventions |

GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafers or [a name, indecipherable]

No more smokeing or chewing

Bath every other day

Read one improving book or magazine per week

Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week

Be better to parents

Gatsby's father says he found the book by accident. "It just shows you," he explains to Nick, "Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something."³⁸

This notion of self-improvement is woven deeply into the fabric of American culture, beginning with the arrival of the Pilgrims and their Puritan work ethic. It advanced with Benjamin Franklin's famous program of "moral perfection" that he began at age twenty and continued through most of his life. In his autobiography, Franklin explains, "I wish'd to

live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other.”³⁹ Franklin lists thirteen moral virtues with brief descriptions. First on his list is temperance: “Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.”⁴⁰ Franklin’s plan was to work on each virtue, one week at a time, and improve in each area over the course of his life. Born poor and receiving little formal education, yet becoming one of the most respected intellectuals of his time, Franklin is perhaps the best success story for the school of self-improvement.

For the Puritans, virtue could not exist apart from God—specifically, faith in Christ. For Franklin, Christ was not so much a source as an example worthy of emulation, no different from Socrates. By the time we get to *Gatsby*, God—or religion or faith—is utterly effaced, replaced by the gods of materialism and self. The source, motive, and goal for *Gatsby*’s virtue is himself. Even attainment of Daisy is less about her than it is about him. Indeed, *Gatsby* does not even seek the real Daisy, but merely a fantasy of her.

FANTASY NOT REALITY

Gatsby has been obsessed for five years with winning Daisy back. (The fact that she is married does not factor into his thinking. She is not married to one of his friends, after all.) He has read the newspaper faithfully for years in hopes of coming across Daisy’s name. *Gatsby*’s lavish home, outrageous parties, and ostentatious lifestyle are all to fulfill

the fantasy Gatsby has for their eventual reunion. But Gatsby loves an ideal, not a woman. He loves an idea—winning the prize that to him symbolizes the attainment of his dreams—not flesh and blood. Daisy is for Gatsby like the volumes of books that fill his library shelves: with pages uncut and unread, their value is in what they symbolize, not what they are. Gatsby’s vision of Daisy, and of love and life itself, is disconnected from reality. This disconnect began in his youth, when his sense of shame over his “shiftless and unsuccessful” parents inspired a revisioning of himself and his own origins, and “to this conception he was faithful to the end.”⁴¹

Gatsby’s faithfulness to this false vision continues through and beyond his faltering reunion with Daisy. His desire has been for something that does not even exist, and he has no taste for what really does exist. It’s significant that when they meet for the first time all these years later and she puts her real arm through his, Gatsby cannot enjoy the connection. Instead, he is “absorbed in what he had just said.” Not surprisingly, his long-anticipated reunion with Daisy is a devastating letdown. After Daisy leaves, Nick reports,

As I went over to say good-by I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby’s face, as though a faint doubt had occurred to him as to the quality of his present happiness. Almost five years! There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way.⁴²

Daisy, a flat, two-dimensional character, becomes a canvas upon which Gatsby paints the false visions of his imagination. The real presence of Daisy shatters “the colossal significance” of the symbol of her—the green light at the end of her dock, situated across the sound from the mansion Gatsby bought precisely so he could gaze at her dwelling place. That symbol has “now vanished forever.” Gatsby’s “count of enchanted objects had diminished by one,”⁴³ for intemperance is “a disease of the imagination.”⁴⁴

Like Gatsby, Daisy is materialistic, although she is cut from different fabric. She is as ungrounded in anything substantial or real as Gatsby is. Nick’s first sight of Daisy, accompanied by her friend Jordan Baker (soon to be Nick’s lover), captures her ethereal fairy nature: “The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.”⁴⁵ Daisy’s shallowness culminates in one of the novel’s most famous passages, which takes place when Gatsby takes her for the first time on a tour of his magnificent home, purchased and outfitted for the sole purpose of someday winning her back. When Gatsby and Daisy, accompanied by Nick, arrive finally at Gatsby’s bedroom, Gatsby throws open two cabinet doors:

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, . . . and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, and monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.⁴⁶

Daisy's response is odd for two lovers reunited at last in the bedroom. But it is fitting for someone consumed by materialism: "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before."⁴⁷ This image—of Gatsby carelessly throwing his costly shirts into the air and Daisy clutching at them in ecstasy (material rather than spiritual in origin)—is as inevitable as it is startling.

Daisy's response to the shirts can be understood in terms offered by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*. Consumerism has created a society, Debord argues, in which appearance has replaced both being and having.⁴⁸ "The satisfaction which no longer comes from the use of abundant commodities is now sought in the recognition of their value as commodities," Debord explains. Consequently, "the consumer is filled with waves of religious fervor for the sovereign liberty of the commodities."⁴⁹ Daisy's ecstatic worship of the shirts reflects a society in which commodities have become god.

THE GOD OF CONSUMERISM

This false, modern American god is displayed in the novel as leering over the aptly named "Valley of Ashes" in the form of a billboard bearing the spectacled eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg. Notably, not long before the time in which the novel is set, prior to the rise of consumerist capitalism, such a garish sign would have been scorned as the stuff of "circuses and P. T. Barnum hokum."⁵⁰ The symbolic connection of the billboard to God becomes explicit after Daisy accidentally strikes and kills her husband's mistress with Gatsby's car. The dead

woman's distraught husband, George Wilson, says to his friend Michaelis, about Myrtle,

"I told her she might fool me but she couldn't fool God. I took her to the window"—with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it—"and I said 'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!'"

As he speaks, Wilson is "looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg."⁵¹ But while the "God" of Gatsby's world sees, he does not act. Therefore, Wilson takes justice into his own hands. Repeating "God sees everything," Wilson draws a false conclusion based on what he himself sees and takes Gatsby's life—and, in the process, his own.

HOW THE STORY IS TOLD

While Henry Fielding's conception of God in *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* is reflected by an omniscient and authoritative narrator, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* embodies a modern worldview that cannot conceive of a God who acts and intervenes in human affairs. The paradox is that even a view of God as impersonal and distant affects the course of human affairs, a paradox reflected in the way that the unreliable, passively observant narrator Nick Carraway changes the course of the story.

Unlike God, Nick does not see everything. Moreover, he cannot even be trusted to report what he does see. For good reporting requires good judgment, and Nick refrains from judging. The novel opens on this very point, with Nick confessing that his father cautioned him against being too quick to criticize others. As a result, Nick is "inclined to