

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Philosophy Faculty Research

Philosophy Department

2008

Literature and the Passion of Virtue

Lawrence Kimmel

Trinity University, lkimmel@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/phil_faculty



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Kimmel, L. (2008). Literature and the passion of virtue. In A-T. Tymieniecka (Eds.), *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research, XCVI: Virtues and passions in literature: Excellence, courage, engagements, wisdom, fulfilment* (xi-xxv). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Literature and the Passion of Virtue

--Lawrence Kimmel

Let others complain the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is wretched, for it lacks passion. —Kierkegaard

Introductory Note

There has always been a reasonable concern that passion constitutes a challenge to the ordeal of civility—that passion and pathology are close cousins if not twin siblings. But in a time and place where political correctness seems to be replacing moral sensibility and political biases are hawked as the morality of family values, it is reasonable to redirect attention to a world of literature in which morality has never been reduced to norms of social currency and where virtue still embodies a passion of commitment that aspires to excellence.

As a codicil to Nietzsche's argument for the moral imperative of revaluing all values, our own time begs recourse to a world of literature in which actions are not simply recast in the idols and ideologies of the age—a diverse and contradictory world that holds some promise of rediscovering a moral touchstone for critical understanding. Moral insight, not social respectability has always been the appeal of literature and we would do well to rediscover its sustaining spring. The world's great literature is a resource for stretching imagination to test the limits of moral intelligibility. Setting aside the commanding and comfortable authority of prescriptive righteousness in favor of a broader and deeper understanding of the complex virtues of moral life is the risk of literature well worth taking. It demands only that we search for a moral compass informed by literature and life no less than politics and polls. In this light we will

proceed to analyze the idea of virtue in its original meaning of “human excellence”, which requires passion in its expression.

Although our primary point of departure is the archaic literature and not classical philosophy of Greek culture, a good deal of the earlier literature is in concert with Aristotle’s “virtue ethics”, which contends among other things that virtue is not a function of action but an activity of the person. It is the excellence of character that defines the moral life and virtue of human beings, not the correctness of a particular action. If we are to speak meaningfully of virtue, of the excellence of a human being, we require an understanding of the full range of passions of which human beings are capable. There is an apparent contradiction in the usual way of understanding moral virtue, the resolution of which will help to make this point.

The character of Achilles portrayed in Greek literature is whole cloth: the excellence or virtue of his character includes his faults as well as his “virtues.” This is no less true of Odysseus or of Oedipus: their faults are also their strengths. The virtue of these exceptional characters transcends, nor is it defined by observance of normative prescription. A simpler way of putting this is that the excellence of a human being is not limited to nor discovered by an analysis of her several virtues. Moral excellence is manifest only in the fullness of its expression, in the “vices” no less than “virtues” of the person. Part of the task of this essay is to resolve the apparency of this contradiction.

I

Background argument: Mythical and Homeric roots

Philosophical literature from the time of Plato regards passion “*pathos*” as a *happening*—as passive, as an experience that interferes with the active rationality of virtue. Passion here is most often associated with pain and pleasure; to the degree it is

associated with desire (again as something that is passively *suffered*) its occurrence is a challenge to be overcome by rational deliberation and control.

The question to which this essay is a response is whether there is rooted in the literature of Greek Epic and Tragedy a different account to be given of virtue/excellence, one in which the passion of the hero is not passive suffering but an active engagement in the project of his or her life. One need only consider *Medea* to see the point of this. The word used in the acknowledgment of heroic character is “*agathos*” (Good/Great!), for example “*Achilles agathos!*” In later tragic literature, a similar meaning is invested in praising great passion at the heart of some courageous or memorable action. So even if one agrees to the conceptual limits of *pathos* as “passive”, the active and generative passion of the heroic requires an accounting. The passion of virtue can be alternatively framed in the language of the times, for example, as a divine energy that flows through the actions of the hero—that is, that the heroic action is magnified through the invasive and compelling will of the gods. Once the gods drop out of moral life, however, we must continue to account for passion as formative in the excellence of action and discernable in the judgment of that character.

Although *Arete* was a female *daimon*—the spirit of virtue, excellence, goodness and valour—the word *arête*/ virtue is related to the Greek god of War *Ares*. This is partly explained in that virtue was first associated with a warrior culture. This odd masculine/feminine conceptual confluence of *arête* attests to the complexity of the Homeric concept of virtue but even so it is a difficult fit. *Ares*, as the god of war, is attended by Terror and served by Eris/ Strife. His character is decisive but impulsive, fearless but combative, determined but bloodthirsty. The Homeric *arête*—virtue understood in this range of excellence—is a far stretch from the later period of Hellenic philosophy in which virtue or excellence is limited to *arête* that is more and more comparative and descriptive in its valuative use. Indeed one seemingly can speak equally of the virtue of a man (the comparative and functional excellence of *sophrosyne*, good judgment) or of the virtue of a knife (the comparative and functional excellence of good cutting.)

In terms of moral life, one may wonder what may be lost in moving to this latter and now common functional domestication of the concept of virtue. My concern here is

to restore a broader and more complex idea of the excellence of character which is manifest throughout the world of literature. What I have in mind is suggested in the following comment from Nietzsche:

It is not in satiety that desire shall grow silent and be submerged, but in beauty. Gracefulness is part of the graciousness of the great-souled... There is nobody from whom I want beauty as much as from you who are powerful: let your kindness be your final self-conquest. Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you. Verily I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.

--Nietzsche, "On those who are sublime" from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

This angular concept of excellence/virtue in literature finds expression well beyond the range of tragic heroes and Nietzschean *Übermensch*, for example in the following ordinary of the Elizabethan sonnet:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces

...

They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence.

--Shakespeare, from *Sonnet XCIV*

II

In opposition to the standard view that character is formed through the rational constraint and domestication of passion, I will try to show how the poetic imagination in Western literature transcends the ethics of the disjunction of passion and reason in its examination of moral life, which in turn will show an essential connection between passion and virtue.

Although some modern naturalist views tend to locate virtue in feeling, with rational reflection as a developmental addendum, the division of passion and reason invariably reasserts itself in favor of reason when general rules of valuation are formed and virtues normatized. However, it can be argued that virtue itself is an expression and modality of passion even within the foundational Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions. The importance of this recognition of a fundamental and essential connection between

passion and virtue is that it provides the imagination with a poetics of moral sensibility independent of the inhibitions and prohibitions of custom and free of social embarrassment or excuse for public sanction.

The first expressions of virtue in Western literature—that is, of the excellence of character distinct from praise in honor of the attributes of the gods—is found in the heroic literature of the archaic Greeks. Recent scholarship suggests that Greek literature is not independent of ties to the Levant, however, and so its substance and form has elements of even earlier oral traditions. For example the epic of *Gilgamesh* may be argued as a formative model for part of the language and structure of the Homeric epic. Should this be so, and some aspect of it is surely so, then Greek literature and the language of passion and virtue that we discover in the Greek world bridge earlier cultures, and associative expression extends back into the Sumerian mists of oral culture and story telling. At the very least, this line of research re-connects the sometimes hermetically sealed literatures of Hebraic and Hellenic cultures.

Within the Greek literature available to us, virtue only later in the classical period of philosophy came to be analytically classified as commonly normative, a matter of public *ethos* (character) and social *mores* (customs.) Earlier, however, virtue is expressed in the epic literature of the *Iliad* in uncommonly singular terms: the virtue of the hero, whether Achaean or Trojan—swift-footed Achilles or man-slaying Hector—is embodied and recognized in the unique character of his passion: Achilles *agathos*; Hector *agathos*. The expression here is an affirmation in praise of unique stature. The *virtue* of Achilles is of a piece, the whole of his character embodied in the passion of its expression. Nietzsche famously laments the re-framing (and de-fanging) of the *agathos* of warrior

culture into the rationalized *arête* of the classical *Polis* where the emphasis is on the civil virtues of harmony and justice in human community (the meaning of *polis*), rather than the unique character of heroism that distinguished the individual warrior. But even this reconstituting of virtue—of *agathos* into the civilizing *arête* of political life—is arguably a matter of transformed not mitigated passion. The ironic voice of Socrates, the censorious preclusions of Plato, the therapeutic revisions of Aristotle all attest to a shift in which the collective and distributive passions of political life displaced the bellicose passions that once rose above the sound and fury of the killing fields. Even so, the bond of virtue and passion common to both cultures—albeit transformed—is preserved. The resolute courage of the embattled statesman is not the sustaining courage of the embattled warrior, but the excellence of virtue in both is manifest in the different passions of their engagement.

Virtue/ *arête* in the Classical Greek world is most often referenced by the “cardinal virtues” of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. It is significant, of course, that these are virtues attributable to the male citizen of the *polis*—a woman’s *arête*, for example in Aristotle’s account, is to observe the decorum of obedience. The cardinal virtues are familiar to us through Plato’s analysis in the *Republic* where he aligns each virtue as the excellence of that activity natural and appropriate to defining aspects of the individual as well as the sustaining resources of the state. Recall that in the individual the virtue of intellect is wisdom, the virtue of will is courage, the virtue of appetite or desire moderation, and each has an analogue within the organic totality of the State. Justice, finally, is a comprehensive virtue that ensures the harmony and health of the individual and state by giving each functioning part its “just” due. On this reading of

Plato, the virtue of justice is not simply that of rational constraint, but rather an active ordering of the passions as well as the faculties of intellect, spirit, and appetite.

It requires little argument to show that wisdom is a virtue: excellence in the exercise of intellect. It is only slightly more of a task to show that wisdom is equally a *passion*—an expression of the aspiration, in Plato’s terms, to *understand* what it is we already in some sense *know*—to transform knowledge into understanding—to make knowledge part of our very being. This is the rationale of Plato’s claim that Virtue is Knowledge. Knowledge is only virtue, however, when it becomes embodied in character. Aristotle later provides just this rule: that some subjects (ethics, politics) can be understood only by being made part of the learner’s very nature and he adds... this takes time. Much the same can be argued of courage. The virtue of courage is manifest in the passion of engagement in the face of fear. Courage must become a disposition to act, that is, be made an indelible feature of character; but we must be *moved* to act, and reason alone, as Hume has persuasively argued, is insufficient to move us to action. Courage consists precisely in the passionate conviction that one must act notwithstanding a cognitive awareness of danger.

The critical culture of modern ethics began with Descartes’ attempt to demonstrate that Man exists as a thinking being, such that will or volition functions only as an on-off switch, an executive ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ to the rational cognition of clear and distinct ideas. This skeptical turn helped to further divide reason and passion and conceptually divest virtue of the energy needed to realize action. Hume’s corrective reminder that Man is not only a thinking being, but a feeling and deciding agent and that

passion is required as a motive to action served to conceptually reconnect passion and virtue in the ordinary of moral life.

In this light, virtue is portrayed and explored in literature in terms of the full and variegated passion of human beings. It thus provides a field of meaning within which the moral character of virtue and passion is mutually and fully developed. Virtues expressed in the context and time of their portrayal in drama or the novel make no specific claim on our allegiance, but appeal rather to a critical range of imagination and understanding. Achilles remains “*agathos*” in all his tent-hiding, back-sliding resentment, no less than in taking up arms in personal vengeance and desecrating the body of noble Hector. We are not invited to judge nor are we inclined simply to admonish Achilles, and so his actions remain full bodied and fully articulate in their human expression. Literature rarely is saddled with sorting between virtues and vices. The passions that engage human beings in life as they are expressed through literature are allowed a depth of expression in which we recognize that excellence may be over-determined and other directed, that virtue may turn vicious in the energy of its excess. The lesson of literature (beyond the domain of morals and legislation) is that there is a continuum in the energies of passion such that “virtues” become “vices” and vice-versa: both can contribute to without diminishing the excellence of character.

III

One way to approach the great history of Western literature from the Epics of *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*, from tragic and comic drama through medieval passion plays to the pulp novels and popular theatre of today is to note that human beings have grown no new emotions since coming out of Eden (or down from the trees.) This is part of the

explanation of how it is we can respond to literature written thousands of years ago yet we will not pick up much less read a computer software book a year after its publication. We find ourselves responsive to the outrageous courage of Gilgamesh whatever its excess and arrogance, and are drawn into the great wrath of Achilles however irrational its provocation. In each case we are moved by archaic passions that still haunt the human heart and mind and so find resonance with the literature of its expression. However one defines the virtues—as human excellences of mind and spirit that variously inform and direct—the response of action is inclusive of the divergent energies that contend with the order of our individual and communal lives.

We have noted that the originating discourse about virtues in the archaic Greek period developed into the Classical ideal of the four cardinal virtues, which in turn and in one or another way find a place within the expanded empire of the Roman World. At the advent of Christianity, however, a dramatic and creative break occurs in the relocation of passion and virtue. Christianity, which brought Judaism directly into contact with Classical Greek thought, proclaims a different spiritual sense of passion and transforms the cultural expression of moral life into new and very different virtues under the aspect of a very different Deity. The generative Christian virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love include others equally divergent from the cardinal virtues of the classical Greeks. The Christian virtue of *humility*, for example, makes the Greek virtue of *pride* into a vice. In general, Christian virtues have the effect of turning away from public disclosure (a primary element in the Cardinal virtues), and so the discourse of passion turns intimately inward to a concern for the secret soul.

This exchange of gods and the transformation of the passions of virtue also breeds a change in and of literature. One is no longer living a public life disclosed in the free and open venue of the *polis* where actions are to be judged and character assessed under penalty of utter visibility, nor morally ordered within the vast space of the Roman Empire where prudence is the common coin of virtue. Rather, in Christian community one lives the private life of the soul, whose secrets only the God can know. In this new moral scheme the pain of viciousness is not from the shame of public disclosure, or from stoic disharmony from nature, but from an absolute alienation from God, the source of all value and life. The difference between Hellenic and Hebraic cultures is usually indexed in terms of “shame culture” (Greek) and “guilt culture” (Hebrew). Arguably the Christian synthesis incorporates both, so that the individual is now subject to cycles of guilt and shame—guilt for what one has done; shame for what one has become in the doing (no longer that of public disclosure, but as it were naked before God.)

The relational convergence of passion and virtue is in some ways clarified in this transition from the cardinal virtues of Hellenic culture to the ordinal virtues of Judeo-Christian Culture—from the Classical imperatives of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance and Justice, to the Christian commandments of Faith, Hope and Love. It is clear in context that the latter are not to be understood as feelings but passions, not descriptions on what to feel but prescriptions on how to live, and as such they constitute an order of virtue in the passionate resolution of commitment. Conceptually, the way has already been prepared in the religious expression of the Passion of Christ, understood not merely as a passive suffering, but as a willful offering that confronts the violence of office with the charity of forgiveness. It is in that symbolic event that the passional virtues of faith,

hope, and charity find completion. In each tradition—profane and political/ religious and scriptural—the excellence of life although differently construed in emphasis, requires the passion of virtue for its realization.

The truncated scheme I have presented so far concerning the historical foundations of Western cultural values should at least suggest that guilt and shame are two sides of the same coin in the critical framing of human passion. Clearly guilt frames the actions of Achilles dragging the dead body of great Hector around again and again before the Walls of Ilium venting his rage, exulting in the blood lust of victory, though it is shame and a concern for honor that will move him later to relent and give over the warrior's body to his father, Priam. This is a complex scene in which one might argue that Achilles' action is less one of compassion for Priam than it is a recollection of his own father—that is, that this whole issue remains one about Achilles.

Passions of vengeance and rage—the reflective guilt of excess and the shame that attends dishonoring another—is presented in the literature of the *Iliad* in a way that exemplifies rather than undermines the virtue of Achilles. Moreover this paradoxical expression of virtue is recognized and understood through the timeless quality of its passion. In literature, a response of approbation or disapprobation remains much the same however much the particular historical priorities of virtue are altered or realigned. That the virtue of pride is given one valuation in the warrior cult of Greek culture and the virtue of humility its seeming opposite is valued above or in place of it in Christian culture does nothing to affect the force of the expression of both in world literature.

Aristotle's familiar classification in the *Poetics* which determines the genres of literature in how characters are depicted—as superior, equal to, or inferior to nature or to

ourselves—is still broadly accepted. This classification makes it possible after more than two thousand years to continue to discuss virtue and passion appropriate to and expressed in each genre from epic literature to tragic and comic drama. Nietzsche makes use of Aristotle's categories in a parallel account in the *Birth of Tragedy*, and Northrop Frye's contemporary explication of "fictional modes" in *Anatomy of Criticism* directly mirrors Aristotle's description. Whatever historical emphasis may be accorded the value of virtues they remain within the literary constants of Aristotle's relational description.

Although it is true that archaic passions remain at the heart of what is moving in literature, and the virtues which refine the passions remain similarly accessible to ancient or modern literature and life, we have acknowledged that inversions and distortions occur as well. It is a familiar feature of literary criticism to contrast the classical idea and ideal of the heroic with the ironic expression of the anti-hero in contemporary literature, although clearly there are strands of irony already in the work of Euripides where the focus becomes more one of psychological than spiritual analysis. In any event, the great deeds of warriors unique in their attributes no longer frequent the battlefields of our age; they are replaced by soldiers in uniform functioning as replaceable parts in an indifferent machine that mass produces death and destruction. Even so, we still speak of courage in the face of fear, of loyalty to comrades standing in the ranks of death and of honoring those who died however unwilling in service to a cause however meaningless. But *Walkuries* no longer ride out to carry the fallen dead to *Walhalla*; in our time there are only weary death-details that toe-tag naked remains for the body-bags that mark the effluence of war. Thus it is hardly surprising that a later literature, accustomed to peace and aware of the mindless destruction and the anonymity of its victims finds the passions

of war and the romance of victory less inspiring to virtue. It is only within a sustained and brittle sometimes bitter irony that such virtues find a voice. Compare only the opening lines of the *Iliad* ‘Sing, Muse, of the wrath of Achilles...’ with the closing lines of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* : the words ‘honor’, ‘courage’...became meaningless and profane...only the names of places had any meaning... Or again, compare the dramatic intensity of Hamlet’s engaged deliberation with the wages of life and death—whether nobler to take up arms against a sea of troubles...or turn those arms against oneself and end it—with the ironic meditation of J. Alfred Prufrock’s disengaged contemplation of a life measured out in coffee spoons: No I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be... We have already noted the remove from the ancient warrior in armor to the modern soldier in uniform; consider the further remove from the immortality of remembered heroes of the *Iliad* to the mortality and anonymity commemorated in the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the even further remove to Auden’s ironic depiction of the Unknown Citizen. But with all the revisions, revaluations, and re-versioning of virtue, the passion of literature in the expression of these values and virtues remains intact. The virtues and passions of Hamlet are not those of Prufrock; the moral exhaustion of Hemingway’s soldier is not the moral exhilaration of Homer’s warrior; each man on the battlefield of Ilium is not the Everyman of *Pilgrims Progress*, much less the Anyman of Auden’s citizen. But the passion of their expressions in literature gives voice to the character of an age and forms the substance of our moral heritage as human beings.

IV

Man is an adverbial creature in the sense that his defining activities are valued in terms of how they are done. Well or ill, courageously or cowardly, wisely or foolishly, justly or unjustly, gracefully or crudely, courteously or rudely, viciously and cruelly or gently and graciously. We speak casually of “*the virtues*” or conversely of “*the seven deadly sins*” but of course there are no such things. Such words are linguistic reminders about human activities; in refinement they function in the valuation of human action.

Virtue, first analyzed in Classical Greek philosophy as an excellence of the human mind and spirit is not that which sets the animal man apart from other animals—the possession of *logos* (language, reason) already does that—but rather that which attests to the possibilities of greatness in human kind. When Homer earlier remarks that of one race are gods and men, he has in mind those characteristics of spirit in action that mark the possibility of transcendence of the commonplace. Shakespeare speaks to the point in a similar way in Hamlet’s memorable declension of ‘this paragon of animals’:

What a piece of work is man: How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! And yet...this quintessence of dust...”(*Hamlet*: II, ii 115-117.)

It is a mistake to think that virtue has to do only with “the good” in the sense of respectable or allowable and that a check list can be made of the virtues to measure the acceptability of character much less the depth of the human soul. There are two primary sources for this mistake—Rational philosophy and Biblical scripture. In the pre-judicial analysis of Greek philosophy the bifurcation and preference for reason over passion insisted on rational moderation as the defining feature of virtue. Scripture, on the other hand, requires obedience to God in place of or in addition to reason, which makes the

good life one sanctioned by divine will. So the “good life” is marked out in both Hellenic philosophy and Hebraic scripts as one of rationality and obedience. We have insisted that Greek literature, in contrast with classical Greek philosophy shows a preference for passion over reason as a defining feature of moral life. In a similar fashion the flesh and blood characters of the Old Testament, in contrast with the purities of Hebrew law, and exceeding the pieties of the New Testament, provide additional cultural testimony that the depth and worth of life is fully understood only within the reach and extremes of human passion.

In fact, any and every human activity can be done well or not. The remarkable and distinctive genius of world literature is its capacity to demonstrate the full expression of human excellence in conception, resolution, and action. We may find admirable and feel resonance with the actions and personalities of the most demonic of creatures: with the fallen Angel who proclaims that it is better to reign in hell than serve in heaven; with the misshapen form of a King whose winter of discontent is turned glorious summer only in the contrivance of malice; with the sea captain whose life becomes an obsession with vengeance, and with the savage genius of an ivory hunter who can embrace the heart of darkness and pronounce judgment.

Literature, broadly speaking is an investigation of the moral life of human beings where “moral life” is understood to encompass all activities of consequence to human beings—a use of “moral” familiar to 18th century Enlightenment. Virtue portrayed in literature as the excellence of action and character, examines the depths of moral life found in the passions at the heart of human aspiration—whether they be for good or ill, whether generated by an overweening pride and ambition, or by humility and reciprocity,

whether motivated by lust and greed, or intended with benevolence and generosity. In the world of great literature there are no simple bifurcations of vice and virtue, of good and evil. Acknowledging with St. Augustine, that all being is good, literature proceeds without the Augustinian apologetics that evil exists only as an absence of good. Both good and evil exist fully in the world of literature as positive forces and not necessarily in opposition. That is to say, the moral interest of literature is not normatively prescriptive. The insight as well as attraction of literary expression is discovered more often in the exception than the rule. Heroic character, for example, is embodied in an excess that violates the norm of expectations, whether in terms of nobility or villainy. The exemplary figures in literature from Greek myth, classical epic and tragic literature, and from Biblical scripture through fairy tales to modern fiction are notable *not* for their “moral goodness”, but for the exceptional passion of their projects. Consider the history of this assemblage in ancient myth and literature: the fateful ‘parricides’ of Uranos and Kronos, the arbitrary injustices of the Olympians, the thieving of Prometheus, the ecstasies of Dionysos, the wrath of Achilles, the connivings of Odysseus, the audacities of Agamemnon, Orestes, Oedipus, and Antigone... It is much the same with the principals of Hebrew literature and scripture, from the first rebellion of Satan and the disobediences of Adam and Eve, through the treacheries of Cain and the ensuing events east of Eden. It is not that evil is more attractive or exciting than good, it is that good and evil are not opposites but inclusive if sometimes limiting concepts that constitute the moral lives of human beings. Both are requisite to a creature who must find a resource of energy in the full scope of human possibility.

There is arguably a learning factor that contributes to the human interest in exception. Whether or not exception proves the rule, those things learned as exceptional are indelibly imprinted in ways that routine occurrences are not. Tolstoy makes this point memorably in the opening lines from *Anna Karenina* that every happy family is happy in much the same way, whereas every unhappy family has an unhappiness all its own. Paradoxically what we learn most and best about ourselves through literature comes through an embodiment of the exception for it is the intensity of difference that imprints the virtue of passion on consciousness.

V

It may be useful, in discussing virtue in the context of moral life, to distinguish between passion and emotion in terms of both degree and kind. Ethics is prescriptive of normalcy and as such it focuses on obligation, on what binds action to a rule. Emotions present a problem in that they are variable and not subject to rule, hence the contrast of emotion and reason, the latter being the predictable domain of moral deliberation. Occasionally there are forceful counter arguments presented against this configuration, which reject reason as definitive of morals. The most persuasively famous is that of Hume, who suggests rather that reason is a slave to the passions, and who argues that reason has no moral force, and so locates moral life and sense in feelings.

Hume makes point that if we do not respond sympathetically to the pain of another person, no amount of reason will move me to care about her plight. But having said this, we are a long way from understanding the passion of virtue. Feeling, emotion (*pathe*) has as its central meaning something endured or something that happens to one. It is, if not negative or neutral, then reactive to some event or situation. Aristotle remarks

relative to this point that one cannot be blamed for feelings only for actions. Even Aristotle, however, has insisted that emotions themselves must become rational in the well tempered soul, which indicates that reason is not an independent faculty, or at least that emotions somehow partake in and are not simply subject to reason.

The point here is that even in its philosophical framing passion (*pathos*) has an active connotation—a positive energy that is not merely reactive. This suggests, for example, that the essential difference between anger and wrath is one of kind, not degree. The wrath of Achilles with which the *Iliad* begins is anything but passive, and not merely reactive; passion here is not limited to a sense of offense, but marks a positive and generative force only occasioned by that offense. It is this passion that is the source of the judgment or acclamation “*Achilles agathos!*”; passion is the way in which Achilles proclaims himself, the measure of his character. It is here and in this sense that passion and virtue converge. In the milder culture of later times virtue is more generally recognized, for example, in the passion for justice. Finally, in its most comprehensive and universal sense, the virtue of humanity is realized in the passion for life.

Plato famously distrusted and devalued passion, particularly in its characteristic poetic expression, which he nonetheless credited as a kind of divine madness. But in the *Symposium* Plato dialectically develops the journey of the philosophical spirit toward the beauty of truth, in which *Eros*, desire, remains at the root of what moves and provides the energy of that spiritual quest. In this context *philein sophian*—the love and pursuit of wisdom that defines philosophy for Plato—serves to qualify his earlier rejection of passion and existentially anchor wisdom in *pathos*. It is passion for the beauty in life that

leads to the love of wisdom and the truth of understanding—to the *eidos* of the Good which in turn is the source both of enlightenment and the virtue of a fully *human* life. So understood, the *quadrivium* of excellence in the classical world—wisdom, courage, temperance, justice—owe their existence and force in the life of individual and community to *pathos* (passion), no less than *logos*(reason.)

Whether one aspires to a greatness of soul (the tragic hero) or only to the excellence of a particular spiritual endowment (the range of humanity), movement only begins in the passion of that commitment. Justice in the state or in the soul of the individual is never realized without such commitment. The road to virtue, to the excellence of character in action, whether for the tragic hero or the stoic everyman, must overcome obstacles, excuses, occasions and all the other roadside distractions that imagination can invent. The world of literature is a collected canon of investigations of the lateral movements of human passion, a comprehensive and dynamic manifold of heroic achievement and ironic failures in the human aspiration to virtue. In its positive form, however, passion attests to that most common and ordinary virtue that defines humanity—a tenacity of spirit and resolve that affirms the beauty of life in the face of inevitable defeat.

It would be appropriate for my point to quote the whole of William Faulkner's memorable remarks on his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for literature. You may remember that he ends with this:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

If the rational imperative of *logos* in philosophy is “Only connect!” its mirror image in literature is the poetic imperative of *pathos* in poetry: “Always affirm!”

However tragic the realization of the hero, the anguish of her cry is still an affirmation of the beauty and sublimity of life. The classical Greek insistence on this point is confirmed in the practice of ending the trilogy of each tragic drama during the festival of Dionysos with a Satyr play in which life is again affirmed in all its primal and libidinal passion.

The contrast in the modern ironic turn of culture and literature is only apparent in this context. In *The Heart of Darkness*, for example, in which the tragic and ironic are contrasted in the characters of Kurtz and Marlowe—two faces of the human spirit: participant and spectator—the tragic affirmation of Kurtz “The Horror!” is followed by the ironic commentary of Marlowe on his own confrontation with the heart of darkness “Droll thing life is...” But Conrad finds poetic affirmation in both characters: the virtue of passion is discovered both in action and reflection, in the character of the tragic figure who can look into the heart of darkness with complete conviction, and in the ironic figure who can only go on to tell the story. It is arguably a further remove from the classical passion of the tragic hero to the ironic anti-hero of modern poetic fiction—from Prometheus to Prufrock—but the passion of virtue is found still, if only in the ironic beauty of its expression.

Even in the most despairing moments of tragic drama in which man but frets and struts his hour upon the stage in a life full of sound and fury there is no remorse in the journey that has led to this revelation. Even in the recognition that all our yesterdays have but lighted fools the way to dusty death, there are still no vapid regrets or recriminations. This, simply, is how it is with human kind. But in the interim between

birth and death the human spirit has been shown to reach beyond its limits to rival the gods and in this recognition is an affirmation of the passion of human virtue. The gods have no need to try and fail, to live and die—indeed have not the capacity to do so. The passions of the timeless gods are pale by comparison to those of a creature caught in the ravages of time, in which passion is all that sustains him. The gods are without virtue, not because they lack restraint, but because only human beings must risk and suffer and fail in aspiring to become what they can only imagine.

The tragic and comic masks of dramatic literature serve finally as expressions of the conflicting and inclusive faces of humanity. As a poetic prism of the human condition, literature embodies an affirmation of passion, an expression of that singular virtue that ennobles the character of the human spirit.

Lawrence Kimmel
Trinity University
April, 2006