

## introduction

The central effort of liberal ways of doing ethics has been, as Alasdair MacIntyre argues, "to specify universally binding principles or rules whose universality has the scope of humanity itself."<sup>1</sup> Both Kantianism and utilitarianism identify ethical action with what can be justified from the standpoint of anyone. Another way to put this is that liberal ethics has tried to do without a sustaining narrative or story. As Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas likes to say, the liberal story is that there is no story.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the primary task of liberal ethics has been to give an account of obligation sufficient to enable diverse groups of strangers to live together without violence. And this has been no mean task. What the dominance of liberal ethics has done, however, is to render the specific convictions of particular communities irrelevant to moral deliberation. No longer is there any intimate connection between right action and the kind of people we understand ourselves to be.

I subscribe to George Grant's sense that insofar as "liberalism' is used to describe the belief that political liberty is a central human good, it is difficult . . . to consider as sane those who would deny that they are liberals."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is now a substantial body of opinion in the universities, if not yet in the general populace, that we have moved to a postliberal period. The Enlightenment metanarrative of tradition-free reason has lost its credibility for many elites and largely been replaced by frank commitment to Nietzschean will to power, "that power over ourselves and everything else which is itself the very enhancement of life."<sup>4</sup> No doubt this movement from liberalism to postliberalism is part of the logic of technology itself, as that blending of *techne* and *logos*, making and knowing, fashions the subjects it requires. Following Heidegger, Grant has been particularly prescient about the way technology puts into question liberal reason. "The chief fact," Grant writes, is that "technology organises a system which requires a massive apparatus of artisans concerned with the control of human beings . . . The machinery reaches out to control more and more lives through this apparatus, and its alliance with the private and public corporations necessary to technological efficiency."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the irony of liberalism is to prepare for the regime of

technology that undermines it. Or, to put this another way, perhaps liberalism served technology by providing an account of reason that enabled the relentlessly manipulative quality of human relations to be screened from view.

In any case, postliberal or postmodern teachers of literature and other "humanistic" disciplines increasingly argue that manipulation or transformation of the students is their primary goal. The dominant model of the classroom is often quite different from that of liberal education as classically understood. On the one hand, the conversionist pedagogue's explicit confession of ideological aim seems refreshing. Surely all teaching in the humanities involves, in some way, moving students toward implicit or explicit goods. But there is an important difference between teaching that aims at goals shared by student and teacher within a common account of authority and the kind of elitist pedagogy that assumes "the teacher must recognize that he or she must influence (perhaps manipulate is the more accurate word) students' values through charisma or power." "Otherwise," as one "emancipationist" pedagogue puts it, "one must depend on the assumption that those values are latent in students, and the teacher's job is merely to help the student bring them to the surface. It must be recognized, then, that emancipation is not a transcendental vision, but is a value, which, like all values, is contingent, and that if the teacher wishes to instill such a vision in students, he or she must accept the role as manipulator."<sup>6</sup> The elitist and Gnostic assumptions of such pedagogy are too obvious to need remarking. What the writer misses is the possibility that students and teachers might work together in a mutually enriching way from within a shared tradition of value. The passage resonates with anxiety over loss of cultural authority, the one shared ground between defenders of "liberal" education on both the right and the left. What needs to be asked of the transformationists, in my view, is the following question: Absent a tradition devoted to defending and upholding the unique unsubstitutable identity of every person, what prevents those to be transformed from becoming what Heidegger called "standing reserve," material "to be done with," resources to be transformed into power?<sup>7</sup>

It is little wonder, then, that students seem increasingly uninterested in the humanities, literature especially. Students are generally quite willing to regard their lives as projects to be fashioned, but they see little reason to let others do the fashioning. Like Thoreau when he "knew for a certainty that a man was coming" to his house "with the conscious design of

doing [him] good," they run for their lives.<sup>8</sup> Such reading as continues becomes purely a private pleasure, a subversive activity that escapes the corporate realm dominated by the powers that claim our lives. How completely English departments have become part of the technocracy is illustrated rather drearily by the stream of articles assessing the state of the profession through such measures as wages, benefits, ratio of doctorates to "dignified" professional positions, and "market share" of resources relative to other disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

If literary study is not to become an exclusively private pursuit, it must be brought into more explicit relationship to the substantive ethical convictions of various traditions. We must learn to read very specifically in relation to the varying accounts of the good that remain in this culture. To what degree this involves reorganizing learning communities is a matter that university departments might fruitfully discuss. MacIntyre's idea of the "university of constrained disagreement" offers a model for reconfiguring communities that would enable more specifically traditioned literary and ethical studies. I make some proposals drawing on MacIntyre's ideas in the last part of my first chapter. At the same time, I recognize the seriousness of theologian John Milbank's explicitly Christian reservations about MacIntyre's paradigm of the virtues.<sup>10</sup>

This study seeks to articulate a particular moral vision, a Christian one, and discover what it entails for reading texts. To be thus explicit and particular about my position seems to me the only honest way to recognize the truth of Stanley Fish's contention that the ethical can never be free from political and ideological construction, for anyone seeking to construct the category is always already embedded in a "local network of beliefs, assumptions, purposes [and] obligations."<sup>11</sup> Hauerwas has argued that "ethics always requires an adjective or qualifier—such as Jewish, Christian, Hindu, existentialist, pragmatic, utilitarian, humanist, medieval, modern."<sup>12</sup> A Christian ethics will be that marked by the specific convictions of a body of people formed by the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Church. The narrative of Scripture that forms Christians does move from a local and particular history to universal claims. But that history is ongoing, not yet complete. The Kingdom has appeared in Jesus, who invites us into His life, but it awaits its definitive fulfillment in God's own time. Any Christian reflection about the universal, then, should occur from within Jesus and the community formed by his life, death, and resurrection: the church.

The approach to Christian ethics I explore in the following chapters is

greatly indebted to the work of Hauerwas, the main proponent of a Christian ethics whose central terms are narrative, vision, character, the virtues, community, and church. For Hauerwas, doing ethics is *not* primarily a matter of developing principles by which quandaries or dilemmas might be resolved by impersonal choosers. Rather, Christian ethics is a practical activity—closely allied to the practical activity of theology, or, I might add, literary criticism—whose “first task is to help us rightly envision the world.”<sup>13</sup> Doing Christian ethics, then, involves giving people the linguistic skills to understand “what is going on,” in H. R. Niebuhr’s phrase, in relation to the narratives and traditions that form the Church.<sup>14</sup> Even what we define as moral decisions depends on the kinds of people we have learned to be and thus on the descriptive skills we have learned from the communities that form us—communities that are themselves sustained by narratives. The questions that arise for a community and its members are a function of the practices and commitments of the community: “Only in view of baptism,” for instance, does the question of military service become a question for the Christian at all. Similarly, “people consider questions of sexual immorality only if they first presume that those in their community are pledged to live lives of fidelity.”<sup>15</sup> Christian ethics, in this view, is not about what we can justify doing in our freedom, or justify doing to others; rather, it is part of the ongoing effort of a community to get its descriptions right as it lives out a substantive understanding of the good.

This book is devoted, then, to articulating a way of doing Christian ethics and literary criticism in conjunction with one another. The studies that follow represent attempts to get the descriptions right from a Christian point of view. I am concerned throughout with the kinds of questions Hauerwas teaches us to ask: How will readers formed by Scripture, by the narrative of Israel, Jesus, and the Church, go about reflecting on this text? What kinds of questions will they ask? How will they construe the complex, manifold realities confronted by the figures in this fictional world? This is not to simply invite Christian interpreters to pour into the text whatever content they wish. They will be prevented from doing so precisely by Christian themes: hospitality to the stranger, love of the neighbor, a fidelity to the other rooted in the “discipline of repentance.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, there will be some consistent features of Christian insight into literary texts, and thus readers will find me turning repeatedly to several concerns: the insufficiency of liberal ideas of autonomy, the consequences of creatureliness, the cruciality of forgiveness to life conceived

as a narrative unity. These are matters involving the closest kind of relationship among the narratives of the books we read and love, the narratives we live, and the great narrative that seeks to incorporate Christians within it: that of Israel, Jesus, and the Church.

To some extent, I share Edward Said's concern about the "disappearance of literature itself" from the curriculum and its replacement by "fragmented, jargonized subjects."<sup>17</sup> An Arnoldian return to a high culture version of literature, the kind implicitly advocated by the genre of literary jeremiads, seems to me, however, neither possible nor desirable in today's university. Such a return is prevented, on one hand, by the increasingly multicultural character of the university and, on the other, by the presentist provincialism of suburban students. In short, I think the only way to revive literary study in the university is to bring literature back into connection with what Martha Nussbaum calls "our deepest practical searching," our basic ethical questions about how we should live.<sup>18</sup> To do so will be a difficult matter, however, for liberal culture has itself encouraged the increasing privatization of those very questions: "how one should live" is, for most people, not a public, civic, communal, or religious question but a purely private one—at least as long as one refrains from overt harm to others. Moreover, this privatization of ethical questions is a perfectly understandable response to the increasing manipulation and domination of life by corporate and state powers in modern mass society. Sensing the impotence of individuals in the public sphere and also perhaps the "aridity" of a realm where all relations are purely contractual, individuals retreat to the private.<sup>19</sup> In a recent lament called "The Decline and Fall of Literature," Andrew Delbanco comments on "the mysterious and irreducibly private experience" of literature without recognizing how his very description undercuts the reason for studying literature in a classroom or within a discipline or tradition.<sup>20</sup> If literature is primarily about "irreducibly private experience," why talk about it? Moreover, why pay the extraordinary fees charged by contemporary universities to hear a professor talk about it, particularly if one knows in advance that the sum of the teaching is likely to be the confirmation of an ideology already clearly understood without reference to the literature?<sup>21</sup>

Today's literary Jeremiahs infrequently confront the issue of the authority to teach. Delbanco is a case in point. He cites approvingly a journal passage of Emerson's from the period in which Emerson was moving from being a preacher to a lecturer: "The whole secret of the teacher's force lies in the conviction that men are convertible. And they

are. They want awakening." Delbanco believes that we have forgotten this, but I suspect just the opposite is the case. The students have been awakened, specifically to the broadly relativist understanding, itself indebted to Emerson, that authorized ways of reading are the more or less arbitrary behaviors of disciplinary communities—and that part of their function is to determine who counts and who does not. The problem is not that we have forgotten Emerson, but that everyone has become Emersonian. Students generally accept the Emersonian notion that all history is merely biography, and they sensibly concentrate on the biography that concerns them most: their own. Many unthinkingly accept, with American naïveté, that genius amounts to believing that what is true for them in their "private heart is true for all men." The result is solipsism and a lack of interest in what would take them out of themselves. Elsewhere, Delbanco quotes Emerson saying that "the use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it."<sup>22</sup> Surely there is today no shortage of students seeking to use knowledge of one sort or another as a tool to move the present, but students so motivated wisely choose the technological subjects rather than literary study. In short, a definition of literature that positions it as a kind of technology is unlikely to compete well against more powerful and rewarding technological disciplines.

My own approach is to confront the issue of authority directly by locating it within a specific tradition, the Christian one. No doubt my literary-ethical descriptions will be of most interest to Christians, but I offer them, too, as hopeful enrichments of a conversation that has not often welcomed explicitly religious interpretations. If they serve no other purpose for non-Christian readers, perhaps they can at least provide interpretations for criticism in a process of "teaching the conflicts" along the lines advocated by Gerald Graff.<sup>23</sup> The challenge for all nonscientific disciplines in the university, and for our democracy as a whole, is to devise forms in which people can contribute to the ongoing conversation without ceasing to be the people they are formed to be by their particular commitments. I hope in this book to suggest how Christians can contribute to the conversation about ethics and literature without bracketing the convictions that define who they are.

One final word here about my title. Doing Christian ethics and literary criticism in conjunction with one another seems inevitably to involve working out concrete, particular correlations between love and good reasons. Each of the studies that follow this introduction will, I hope,

make some contribution to our thinking about these terms, even though I do not take them up in the abstract way more appropriate to a systematic work. I do want to focus attention, however, on how Christian accounts of action—the good reasons we are rightly compelled to offer—are related to love. To be sure, the God who loves in freedom needs no good reason to love us, and we need no good reason to love one another except that God commands it, appears in the very form of love, and teaches that to fail to love is to remain in death.<sup>24</sup> But, to the Christian, these will appear the very best reasons of all, and thus all our good reasons for acting, our ethics, will be rooted, in some way, in the love that moves the universe and comes to us in the rabbi Jesus from Nazareth.