
REVIEWS

Fritz Oehlschlaeger. *Love and Good Reasons: Postliberal Approaches to Christian Ethics and Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 314p.

ALAN BLACKSTOCK
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

In the interest of full disclosure, Professor Oehlschlaeger identifies his purpose and intended audience at the outset of the book: “This study seeks to articulate a particular moral vision, a Christian one, and discover what it entails for reading texts.” This Christian moral vision is one “marked by the specific convictions of a body of people formed by the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Church” (3). (Oehlschlaeger never specifies which church he means by this, but his appeals to the authority of Pope John Paul II and neo-Thomist philosophers and theologians Alisdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas are suggestive, as is his dismissal of non-Trinitarian religious perspectives as “Gnosticism.”) Readers who share these convictions will find *Love and Good Reasons* edifying, but those who do not, though equally interested in the relationship between ethics and literature, might be better served by reading the critics with whom Oehlschlaeger takes issue here: J. Hillis Miller, Wayne Booth, and Martha Nussbaum, to name a few.

Oehlschlaeger begins his argument by endorsing the idea (derived from MacIntyre and others) that, in the universities at least, “the Enlightenment metanarrative of tradition-free reason” (which Oehlschlaeger identifies as the liberal Kantian approach) “has lost its credibility for many elites and largely been replaced by a frank commitment to Nietzschean will to power” (1). Oehlschlaeger sees this Nietzschean model as having led professors to regard students not as ends in themselves but “resources to be transformed into power” (2) and concomitantly resulting in a waning interest in literature among today’s students: “there is 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 technological subjects rather than literary study” (6). As opposed to this “will-to-power” approach to literary study, Oehlschlaeger proposes one (again borrowing from MacIntyre) based on the Christian tradition of the virtues, and his method in the remainder of the book is to examine a variety of texts to demonstrate how they can be used to illustrate the Christian virtues and how an understanding of these virtues can help elucidate the texts.

The bulk of the book is devoted to interrogating texts by five 19th-century English and American writers—Melville, Austen, Trollope, Henry James, and Stephen Crane—who were “formed by the culture of Christendom” and “offer rich, extended opportunities for loving attention and moral discernment” (45). Oehlschlaeger uses the occasion of Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” to discuss the virtues of prudence and charity, Austen’s *Emma* to explore love and respect for others, and Trollope’s *The Warden* and *He Knew He Was Right* to investigate honor and constancy. Oehlschlaeger also employs the texts to examine the other side of the coin—the vices: wrath in *He Knew He Was Right*, envy in James’ *The Portrait of a Lady*, and lying in Crane’s “The Blue Hotel.” While some of this discussion is illuminating, little of it seems particularly original or compelling when compared with the critical readings Oehlschlaeger challenges, particularly J. Hillis Miller’s reading of “Bartleby” in *Versions of Pygmalion* and Wayne Booth’s readings of *Emma* in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. In many cases, Oehlschlaeger’s differences with these readings turn on a quibbling or reductive representation. In calling for a Christian ethics of reading in his discussion of “Bartleby,” for example, Oehlschlaeger quotes at length Hillis Miller’s description of the guilt readers experience at being forced to choose one text from among the thousands of texts demanding to be read, and then challenges his conclusion that “[t]here is no initial way or principle, other than arbitrary or contingent ones, by which I can decide an order of priority” (qtd. 49). Oehlschlaeger responds, “It is difficult to see how one could follow such principles in the practice of reading” and suggests that “Christian readers . . . put their reading to the service of God and human beings by following [their particular] gifts rather than adopting the procedure of reading every fiftieth book on the library shelves” (50). But Hillis Miller has advocated no such practice. Shortly after the passage quoted by Oehlschlaeger, Hillis Miller continues, “*Tolle, lege* is the first law of reading” (20). Schooled as he is in St. Augustine, Oehlschlaeger surely must have recognized the reference to the *Confessions* when Augustine is commanded by God to take the Bible and read it, but he chooses not to recognize this as a possible point of convergence between his and Hillis Miller’s views of the ethics of reading; instead, he invokes Romans 4:25 to support his claim that the Christian reader is absolved from the sense of guilt Miller has described by the knowledge that “Christ has been raised ‘for our justification’” (51).

Oehlschlaeger’s criticism of Wayne Booth’s reading of *Emma* turns on a similar quibble. Again, he quotes the critic at length in order to pronounce his analysis illogical, while conveniently omitting passages that provide the rationale he finds lacking. Oehlschlaeger finds fault with Booth’s defense of the ending of the novel,

which “seems to endorse the romantic ideology whereby a woman finds supreme happiness in a relationship of willing subordination to a man” (85). Booth’s attempt to salvage the ending by calling for readers to enter wholeheartedly into the romantic plot, while simultaneously maintaining an “ironic vision,” seems “impossibly schizophrenic,” says Oehlschlaeger, and “asserts a complete discontinuity between the world of Knightley and Emma and the rest of the novel’s world (as well as our own)” (85-86). Again, however, Oehlschlaeger has ignored passages that make perfect sense of the allegedly incoherent positions his fragmentary quotations have constructed. In *The Company We Keep*, just before the passage Oehlschlaeger quotes, Booth writes, “The saving truth is that *Emma* contains within itself the antidotes to its own potential poisons. While it does not in any sense repudiate the fun of pursuing the conventional form, it works hard to alert the careful reader to the need for a double vision—a combination of joyful credulity about the love plot and shrewd sophistication about the characters of men and women” (432).

I fail to see how the double vision Booth advocates here is in any way schizophrenic, and I submit that any reader who attempts to read Austen without it suffers from tunnel vision. And as regards Oehlschlaeger’s charge that Booth’s reading creates a discontinuity between the worlds of the characters, the text, and the readers; on the contrary, Booth writes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the marriage of Knightley and Emma “fulfills every value embodied in the world of the book.... It is a union of intelligence: of ‘reason,’ or ‘sense,’ of ‘judgment.’ It is a union of virtue: of ‘good will,’ of generosity, of unselfishness. It is a union of feeling: of ‘taste,’ ‘tenderness,’ ‘love,’ ‘beauty’” (259).

Here again, rather than finding ground for convergence with Booth on the importance of the virtues in *Emma*, Oehlschlaeger chooses to pose against Booth’s double vision a providentially-based faith that Emma’s marriage will result in “increased happiness for all”:

If one believes that God is the lord of history, and that He is working through such forms as Christian marriage, then one can say that “increased happiness” must redound to all when two people like Emma and Knightley unite love and respect in a form that answers to the witness of true friends. We may not understand, at present, how this can be, but we look to see it accomplished further on in the story. (125)

Readers who share this providential view of history and this commitment to traditional forms in maintaining and transmitting the virtues may find Oehlschlaeger’s reading of the ending convincing. For others, however, Booth’s double vision will be more satisfying, in allowing readers to enjoy the romantic culmination while simultaneously recognizing that “[u]nless we somehow incorporate something like

an ironic version of the ending ... we are indeed confirming its capacity to implant a harmful vision of the sexes" (435).

In his afterword, Oehlschlaeger envisions a "university of constrained disagreement" (MacIntyre's phrase) in which competing ethical visions could be examined in an atmosphere of respect (something that Oehlschlaeger has found impossible under the present university system). This is an idea worth exploring, and books like Oehlschlaeger's can play a valuable part in such exploration. But although Oehlschlaeger marshals an impressive range of scholarship in articulating his position, every text he touches becomes an opportunity for homiletics, so readers outside his target audience would be well advised to turn instead to writers like Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, who have managed to articulate compelling arguments for ethical criticism without invoking any explicitly religious doctrine or dogma. ✱