

Imaginatio et Ratio



There, in the Shadows:

The Grace of Art in *A River Runs Through It*

“Any man - any artist, as Nietzsche or Cezanne would say - climbs the stairway in the tower of his perfection at the cost of a struggle with a duende - not with an angel, as some have maintained, or with his muse. This fundamental distinction must be kept in mind if the root of a work of art is to be grasped.”

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One more summer is closing quickly, and one more summer I have not made my annual pilgrimage to Montana. I live in the south again, happily this time, and it is well-nigh September, and even though the days are hot and muggy these very same days betray certain changes to come. The air is a bit drier, almost crisp; the bitter black walnuts are thumping the ground like some mad god thumping the earth; the days are growing shorter and darker; and yet, the leaves on some of the trees are stirring belly side up sending out silvery flickerings even as twilight sets in. Maybe that is why Montana is on my mind or, rather, why Norman Maclean is. I come back to him every August whether I make it to Montana or not. Since the summer of 1995 off and on I have been fishing a section of the Blackfoot River that I will not divulge, but suffice it to say that I am one of the luckiest men on the face of this earth if for no other reason than I discovered Maclean early on, and in so doing, I found a river and a way to bring grace and art to my life. But I have also learned that with that river comes riffle and deep pool, the dance of light and shadow. Norman Maclean understood this, never let go of it, and I think it was his brother, Paul the so-called “prodigal” son, who taught him this.

In many ways, I don’t know why I come back to Maclean every year around late August. Of course, this is the time to fish in Montana, but my summer is almost over, and the new semester of teaching is staring me in the face. I think *A River* speaks to me as “deep speaks to deep.” Reading Maclean the first time blew a hole right through me and altered my consciousness and called me to something missing in my life. I have to agree with Pete Dexter that the first time reading Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It* was stunning and moving: “It (*A River*) is about not understanding what you love, about not being able to help. It is the truest story I ever read; it might be the best written. And to this

day it won't leave me alone" (Dexter, 88). I concur. Maclean continues to speak to me and teach me—especially now that I am older, and my own shadows and their mysteries are increasing.

How do we answer the questions that don't have answers? How do we understand those places in our lives that we will never comprehend? As we get older, can we dispel the dark places, or even, should we?

I would agree with Wendell Berry's assessment that Maclean, as opposed to Hemingway, will fish into the paradox, the metaphorical canyon; he will step into the dark shadows of the river or the "dark swamp." "'Big Two-Hearted River' seems to me, then, to be a triumph of style in its pure or purifying sense: the ability to isolate those parts of experience of which one can confidently take charge. It does not go into the dark swamps because it does not know how it will act when it gets there" (Berry, 65-66). Even more, I would add that Maclean does not wrap the tragedy (ies) of his narrative into a tidy package. Norman gently but persistently refuses to bring some kind of final closure or answer to his younger brother's death; and yet, Norman does not let go of his search for understanding.¹ Why is it that the beautiful and graceful fly fisherman dies an early and brutal death? The grace of Paul's fishing does not match the tragedy of the world. "That Paul seeks answers in fishing leaves his brother wondering about the questions being asked. Somewhere in Paul's shadowy inner world is chaos that the four-count rhythm of casting has not disciplined, *a hell that grace has not transformed*" (Simonson, 152, emphasis mine). Yes, what questions *does* the prodigal ask?

Wendell Berry's wonderful little essay rightly teases out the classic(al) trajectory of tragedy within this story, a story about the "relentlessness of tragedy" but then he softens the blow by naming Paul a "failure" and "compulsive gambler" and then without missing a beat theologizes this story: "But the relentlessness of the tragedy is redeemed by the persistence of grace" (Berry, 68). It is at this point that my own reading of Berry stutters to a halt. Reading Maclean's novel and reading his meta-discourses, one can plainly see that Paul's death is "relentless" all the way to Norman's last words: "I am haunted by waters." But what do we make of this "persistent" grace? Mr. Berry is accurate to center upon grace, but my question is, "What grace persists?" As I read and re-read *A River Runs Through It*, I do not, perhaps cannot, see the grace in Paul's death. Nor do I think Maclean did either. We see grace in Paul's mastery of the fly rod and the river, and we see grace in Maclean's artistry of words. Are these graces enough? Must we "redeem" Paul's death, or do we admit that perhaps the closest we will ever get to grace is the beauty of artistic expression be it with a rod or a pen?

Maclean's "little novella" is at first a "love poem to his family" and a search for answers that Maclean knows will never be found. Maclean mentions this many times in both speech and writing in his later years. As he discusses his own particular art in *A River Runs Through It* for his Wallace Stegner lecture, he speaks of his brother's death. Maclean has just reviewed the process of Paul reading and

¹ I think Hesford recognizes this point but then also removes the tension: "It is Maclean's brother Paul who comes to embody the beautiful. He may be a doomed sinner in the judgment of the world and the judgment of his father's congregation, but in the eyes of both father and brother he seems redeemed by his beautiful fishing" (38). Notice Hesford's word "seems." And then further, "Paul could enjoy God by perfecting his chosen art, even while, *as a natural man*, he entangled himself in affairs and in gambling debts" (38), emphasis mine).

fishing the water with perfection and then landing the big, his last, fish. “I also wanted toward the end for him to fade away as a body and become as befitted a master fisherman: just an abstract in the art of fishing in the most climactic act of the art—landing a big fish” (McFarland and Nichols, 33). And then in typical Maclean style—with few words—he speaks of his brother’s death. “I will read now the next to last scene of the story, and I will say not a word about the last scene, his death. If there is any art to it, let it remain hidden and be buried with him” (McFarland and Nichols, 33). A decade earlier, in his lecture at the Institute of the Rockies, Norman persists: “Paramount is asking for an option to put this story into film, and I have made a requirement that they must not change it from a tragedy about someone you loved and did not understand and could not help” (McFarland and Nichols, 74).

The narrative is about a beautiful man who found his own rhythm, partly, mostly, to use Berry’s expression, because Paul was “inflexibly self-ruled.” If we listen “carefully” we hear a fundamental disagreement between father and son woven throughout the novel. Even to the end, Maclean the Aristotelian disagrees with his Presbyterian father. No doubt both author and narrator love his father, but he will differ mightily nonetheless to the very end. “My father asked me a series of questions that suddenly made me wonder whether I understood even my father whom I felt closer to than any man I have even known. ‘You like to tell true stories, don’t you?’ he asked, and I answered, ‘Yes, I like to tell stories that are true.’ ” (103-104). We miss the shadow on this one. I know this is dangerous, but I think we need to look at what he says and what he does *not* say.

I have to come to recognize that naming something or someone “tragic,” “broken,” or “prodigal” comes far too easy, and this kind of naming is really about something else. The tragic, the broken, the prodigal simultaneously unnerve us in our comfortable worlds and yet somehow comfort us that we are not such. This is, I think, crucial to understanding Maclean. To read some literary critics of *A River*, Paul is a tragic figure who is “beautiful” yes, but in the end, damned. But was Paul a tragic figure to Norman and his father?

We know without a doubt even as we begin Maclean’s novel that things are going to end badly. He lets us in on that one right away: “He was never ‘my kid brother.’ He was a master of an art. He did not want any big brother advice or money or help, and, in the end, I could not help him” (6). “The boy was very angry, and there has never been a doubt in my mind that the boy would have taken the Episcopalian money” (5). Notice that Maclean who lives and dies by economy of words says twice: “the boy.” But Maclean goes on to add in the very next paragraph: “I knew already (Paul is still a boy) that he was going to be a master with a rod. He had those extra things besides fine training—genius, luck, and plenty of self-confidence” (5). If we were to use the father’s calculus stated in the very beginning, Paul did find grace and art and rhythm even more than the father and the brother. But Paul found his *own* way. “Long ago, he had gone far beyond my father’s wrist casting, although his right wrist was always so important that it had become larger than his left. His right arm, which our father had kept tied to the side to emphasize the wrist, shot out of his shirt as if it were engineered, and it, too, was larger than his left arm” (21). The prodigal becomes the prodigy.

Paul wasn’t tragic in the sense that he was a failure—Neal, Norman’s hapless brother-in-law was a failure and embarrassment. No, Paul was unruly and inscrutable, and I think it was his understanding

and mastery that finally did him in and not his foolishness. What does a beautiful man do in a nasty world populated by beastly men and women who have not bothered to learn and follow a code?² Paul's death was tragic. I think we could call his death an "ultimate tragedy" to use the essayist George Steiner's phrase. Paul's death is juxtaposed against one who was so beautiful and so masterful, and he actually saw things that most men could not see. Paul knows what his father knows but eventually he surpasses his father, his mentor. Paul's tragedy is promethean—he will reach great heights and descend accordingly: "the halo of himself was always there and always disappearing, as if he were candlelight flickering about three inches from himself" (20). Paul, the "shadow caster" is not a damned failure, even though his death left his family to grapple and grieve with not only his death, but the death of a beautiful man. On the other hand, his life and art were anything but tragic. This to me seems to be the haunting irony in the novel and the narrator's questions. "Its (*A River's*) narrator is working his way through problems within the context of a finely realized outer scene that is the setting for the triumphs of the brother who is both the subject of the story's panegyrics and the main source of the narrator's internal difficulties" (Ford, 1993). As a counterpoint to brother Paul, Norman's erstwhile brother-in-law, Neal, was one of those men who faked beauty and rhythm because he did not or could not take the time to follow the Presbyterian father's code: "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy" (4). Throughout the novel, Maclean uses a literary device to bring this to light. Time and again Paul's beauty will be juxtaposed with the ugliness of life whether it is Paul's choosing or not.

The first time we see this juxtaposition is when Norman drives down to Helena to retrieve his brother and girlfriend from jail. The couple lands there because of a drunken brawl the night before. At this point in the novella, Norman has just finished his elegiac portrayal of Paul's shadow casting over the fast water in the canyon. Maclean shows us this gorgeous image through the eyes of the "woman in overalls" who stopped on the river bank and "marveled" at Paul's fishing. "She kept watching while groping behind her to smooth out some pine needles to sit on. 'My, my!' she said. Her husband stopped and stood and said, 'Jesus.' Every now and then he said, 'Jesus'" (22). And then immediately we see Paul in a different shade. The phone call from the police station awakes Norman as he "ascended through rivers mists and molecules until I awoke catching the telephone" (23). Norman makes his way to the station to retrieve the couple from jail. Yet he does not diminish them in their beauty—he the master with a rod and she a prodigy on the dance floor, "she was as beautiful a dancer as he was a fly caster" (26). This image clashes with the image he sees now. He finds them drunk, hung over, smelling "worse than the jail" (26). Are these characters elegiac or tragic? How does one rectify the shimmering river with the dank cell? With juxtaposition and paradox Maclean makes his point that light brings shadow; and yet, the shadows enhance the light.

² In one of the major scenes of the story, Paul and Norman take Old Rawhide and Neal home after they had fallen asleep near the river and sunburned themselves badly. Norman gives us Paul's code in the following description: "It was the bastard in the back seat without any underwear that he (Paul) hated. The bastard who had ruined most of our summer fishing. The bait-fishing bastard. The bait-fishing bastard who had violated everything that our father had taught us about fishing by bringing a whore and a coffee can of worms but not a rod. The bait-fishing bastard who had screwed his whore in the middle of our family river. And after drinking our beer" (72).

But there is a more subtle image here. Paul's hand—his casting hand. "He (Paul) was standing in front of a window, but he could not have been looking out of it, because there was a heavy screen between the bars, and he could not have seen me because his enlarged casting hand was over his face. Were it not for the lasting compassion I felt for his hand, I might have doubted afterwards that I had seen him" (25). The hand, his glorious hand, would now shadow his face from his brother much like an actor's mask in some Greek tragedy. Paul cannot see his brother, and now Paul stands in a far different light looking out a window he cannot look out. In this shadow he cannot see the light, and he cannot see his brother who loves him. Is this Promethean tragedy or the inanity of Antigone? Is this a beautiful man who just ended up a drunk and squandered his mastery? We have to remember how, exactly, Paul and his "half-breed Indian" girlfriend landed in jail. They enter a restaurant and a customer makes a derogatory, racist comment. Paul proceeds to loosen a few of his teeth and sends him across a table. The big beautiful hand impulsively, naturally brought street justice to some stupid bastard who deserved a dental adjustment. Perhaps this is Paul's flaw, his hubris, his *hamartia*. He has mastered the art of the beautiful and refuses to live in a world of ugly bastards, and so he impulsively casts his oversized fist into the face of stupidity. "I (Norman) was tough by being the product of tough establishments—the United States Forest Service and logging camps. Paul was tough by thinking he was tougher than any establishment" (7). This will be Paul's demise—perhaps— but we the readers, not even his own family, know exactly why Paul was beaten to death. Did he die because of a drunken brawl, an unpaid gambling debt, or did he ruffle the feathers of an establishment? We already know Paul sees the absurdity of any establishment be it marriage, racism, the corporate world, and he will not join or participate. Did his demise come by the hands of folly or inflexibility? Maclean does not tell us and leaves us with this gap in the narrative.

Much has been made of the conversation between Norman and his father on the riverbank as they watch Paul catch his great, but last fish. Ironically, the Presbyterian father who most assuredly believes in predestination not only knows that Paul is beautiful, but also knows that Paul understands something Norman does not. This fact remains one of the most troubling aspects of the narrative, but if we tease this out, we might get closer to understanding what Norman is saying.

"What have you been reading?" I asked. "A book," he said. It was on the ground on the other side of him. So I would not have to bother to look over his knees to see it, he said, "A good book."

Then he told me, "In the part I was reading it says that the Word was in the beginning, and that's right. I used to think water was first, but if you listen carefully you will hear that the words are underneath the water."

"That's because you are a preacher first and then a fisherman," I told him. "If you ask Paul, he will tell you that the words are formed out of the water."

"No," my father said, "you are not listening carefully. The water runs over the words. Paul will tell you the same thing. Where is Paul anyway?" (95-96)

To use a word my southern grandmother would say, I have been "studying" this mysterious interchange between the responsible, Aristotelian Norman and the somewhat neo-Platonic,

Presbyterian pastor. One cannot help but think of the great parable most people call the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke. Norman is the responsible son who stays home on the farm, though Norman does not begrudge his brother but is dazzled by his mastery and loves him also. One would think that Norman would agree with the father, the very stylish and disciplined teacher. But no, it is Paul, the supposed “prodigal,” “failure,” and “damned” who understands something his father understands. For a very long time now, I have been asking the question, “What did Paul know that Norman did not?” I think this is the reason why I return annually. How could the one who drank too much, was behind in the big stud poker game, the one who was a pugilist outside of his family know something that Norman did not know? Do tell—what could a prodigal tell the responsible? And what is it that he knew? Are there any clues in the text?

You ask certain theologians which character they think comprehends the *light* of truth, and the answer is simple: the responsible one, the one who obeys and surrenders to the establishment of God—submits to religion and its virtuosos. *That* one understands the truth. But the deviant, the miscreant, the self-actualized is blind and rushing toward damnation. Maclean takes this assumption head-on. Norman is at odds with both his father and brother. He cannot see what Paul sees, and he disagrees with his father. “That’s because you are a preacher first and then a fisherman.” Norman, the Aristotelian, the naturalist and scientist, knows that the world came first—not the word. And yet, he is still missing something that Paul could “tell” Norman. “The young Maclean feels his father is biased because he lives by words, and thinks Paul, a man of action, who lives most fully when fishing the water, will support the liberal, empiricist, naturalistic position he himself apparently holds. The father thinks not” (Hesford, 44). I think, though, as Norman’s life and novel come to a close, he will finally join his father and Paul in this understanding. I do think there is a clue there in Norman’s tight prose.

There is a hint—one right before Paul’s elegiac, last scene. Paul and Norman are fishing after the disastrous day with Neal. The two brothers fish together to wipe that last day with Neal off the books. Neither one is catching fish—not even the master Paul. And then Paul begins to hook into fish and Norman does not. We have seen this earlier in the novel when Norman is hesitant to fish, in particular to roll cast, in front of his brother. No doubt Norman is a fine fisherman, but he is fishing with a master. Norman, though, is studying his problem very carefully and the best he can. Paul wades the river toward Norman to get a fly. “My big question by the time he got to me was, ‘Are they biting on some aquatic insect in a larval or nymph stage or are they biting on a drowned fly?’ ” (92). Don’t forget that Norman and Paul are dry fly fishermen which means they are accustomed to fishing on top of the water in what is called the “dun stage” of the fly. But the fish are taking flies underneath and unseen. Paul figured this out, and Maclean slows the action down to give us a detailed account.

He gave me a pat on the back and one of George’s No. 2 Yellow Hackles with a feather wing. He said, “They are feeding on drowned yellow stone flies.”

I asked him, “How did you think that out?”

He thought back on what had happened like a reporter. He started to answer, shook his head when he found he was wrong, and then started out again. “All there is to thinking,” he said, “is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”

I said to my brother, "Give me a cigarette and say what you mean." (92)

It is the errant brother who sees what is not seen, sees what cannot be seen and feels the contours of the shadows. He understands that a shadow, though, still—just a shadow, is real and very much there, and he brings metronomic discipline to the rod and in so doing he brings beauty, and he discovers rhythm in the rod and on the river. Paul knows grace and redemption and art—even his predestinarian father said so. Perhaps Paul sees the darkness related to light and the shadows resident and necessary within truth. We can't say here, but father and older brother confess that the younger son knows *something*. I cannot help but think of Heidegger here and his obsession with truth—*aletheia*—and it means an uncovering which of course means the very thing we are talking about, that which we are looking at, is covered and concealed. So, to Heidegger, every truth reveals and simultaneously the very same truth conceals. I like this because every truth promises to shine a light in the darkness.

There appears to be no meaning to Paul's death—it is truly absurd and a grief for the family that will reside in their minds until their own deaths. One can tell that Norman never recovered. Nor did his father and mother. And so, yes, there is sin and grace, hubris and redemption in *A River*, but there is also the sheer insanity, even banality of a brother's death that we are left to live with. And no sacrament or sentiment will even come close. This is the *passion* of the novel—*A River* stares unspeakable grief in the face and moves far beyond sacrament and sentiment—Lorca's "sacrament of the angel and sentiment of the muse." Looking at what is not there—peering into the shadows and, by seeing what is not there, one sees what is there. *Duende*. Darkness does not impede or diminish, or worse, destroy great art—it compels and completes great art delivering us from a banal world of kitschy, easy answers. Cheap answers lie about the shadows and betray the darkness. Great art is born out of attempting to answer persistent questions that will *not* be answered. In Maclean's words, "It's not fly fishing if you are not searching for answers to questions" (43). Ironically, any easy wrap-up of *A River* apes the pretentious and lost brother-in-law Neal who approached life and relationships with something glib. Norman will take questions, questions as old as humankind, questions with unseen answers, and he will weave a masterful work of fiction.

At this point I don't want to communicate that one does not have to be deviant or prodigal to see the darkness, to feel the shadow. However, darkness and shadow approach every human being, and we do well to understand as best we can. The shadows come early and persistent for Paul, but the shadows are coming for father and older brother too. Even as Norman and his father sit high on the bank and watch Paul fish his last time in the full light of the day, soon both father and son will be enveloped in the approaching shadows. "In the slanting sun of late afternoon the shadows of great branches reached from across the river, and the trees took the river into their arms. The shadows continued up the bank, until they included us" (102). The shadows embrace Paul immediately after his glorious and last moment in the sun, yes, but the shadows are coming for the responsible brother and the Presbyterian father too. Responsibility and religion will not, cannot hide the darkness—it can only pretend that the darkness is not really there. Norman will have none of the pretense and so he holds

fast to the shadows. And yet there is great art here in his words, and we have learned from Norman's father that where there is art, there we will find grace also.

Of course, we are not talking about the darkness of a religious leader abusing a child, or a government oppressing its populace, or a Hitler committing genocide or a Stalin starving an entire people. No, this is not the darkness of Paul and Norman. True stories are obsessed with "truth" whereas stories that are true are haunted by love. Paul and Norman's shadows are vulnerable. This is a tragic story that admits to the deep questions of life and then the final fading away of the body. Moreover, it also pulses with the human possibility of loving in the ruins. We can create, even master the beautiful even if just for a few moments, and most importantly, we create in the face of death. Paul's life and death are not the tragedy—everyone dies and passes away in one form or another. His death is a tragedy not necessarily because he dies an early, violent death, but rather that which is noble about him, that which is "beautiful" casts him into his inevitable demise. As much as Paul joins the rhythm of the universe when he fishes, even to an almost godlike statue, he will also join the rhythm of the universe in his death. He will rage against a world full of racist bastards and corpulent bait fisherman, and he will find some strong sense of identity, but never refuge, in his family. "Whether his is original sin or flawed pride, he is unable to accept succor from any source outside himself" (Blew, 200). Norman tells us time and again that Paul did not want help; he refused to find refuge in anyone but himself.

Eventually and ineluctably, society, the establishment, is going to beat the hell out of this beautiful yet implacable man. Because he is a master trained by a master, he sees what others cannot see. If Neal conforms and acquiesces to the moment and society's expectations then he is truly blind, and in the end one who evokes pity, and Nietzsche reminds us that pity is rife with the inauthentic, and those we pity we actually despise. Norman does not pity his brother nor does he look down on him even though Paul is younger. Paul sees what is not there, the shadows, and in so doing he understands the rhythm of the universe—the dance of light and dark, shine and shadow. It is interesting to note that Norman, who in his own right is a master fly fisherman, will not propel himself into the fast waters or the deep canyons. Paul not only sees what most untrained eyes do not see—he will even dare to wade where few would ever wade. *He* fishes into the canyons—into the dark and dangerous places.

Let us not forget the scene of the father and Norman watching Paul catch his last fish. Just before, the father reads the Greek New Testament and the Gospel of John in particular. Undoubtedly Maclean references "In the beginning was the word" of John 1:1. But we cannot forget the rest of that passage. "Everything came into being through the word, and without him (the word) nothing came into being. That which came into being was life, and the life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not understand, comprehend, appropriate, overcome it" (John 1:3-5, translation mine). The Greek word I have given multiple translations is, of course, a word of paramount importance, but equally mysterious in its exact meaning. The word is *katalambano* (καταλαμβάνω) which can mean appropriate, comprehend, understand and in extra-biblical writings the word can even take on the connotations of "visit" someone or "arrest" a lawbreaker.

And yet, Norman the author and Norman the narrator do not end the story in pieces and fragments—"eventually, all things merge into one" (104). It may not be a true story. But it is a story that

is true. At the end of his life and now at the end of his story he fishes in the “Arctic half-light of the canyon.” Fishing now is what Berry calls a “solitary rite,” but Norman also calls it a memorial to his family, and he fishes to remember and join the rhythm of the universe the only way he can now—in memory and ritual. “Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them” (104). They are gone forever, and yet he still reaches out to them. And Norman, still, and rightly in my opinion, remains the naturalist and the Aristotelian, but he also understands what his brother, long gone now, knew early on: “Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.’ (104) The words do come first, but as opposed to the Presbyterian father’s Word, the words belong to his family, his loved ones, his brother Paul. “Not the Word, but the words” (Hesford, 45). Truth, according to Norman, does not solely bask in the light of day, but is also concealed in the darkness and under the rocks. Yes, the light will shine a light into the darkness, but the darkness will not comprehend it, *and the darkness will not disappear.*

Very early in the novel, Norman as he thinks about how to help his brother, alludes to that “Arctic half-light” resident within every bright light. He is driving across the Montana mountains after retrieving his brother from jail, and as he drives in the early dawn Norman searches for answers. The sun is on the rise but light and shadow vary dramatically as Norman drives over pass and through canyon. “Sunrise is the time to feel that you will be able to find out how to help somebody close to you who you think needs help even if he doesn’t think so. At sunrise everything is luminous but not clear” (28). In *A River*, a story that is true finds its “truth” there, in the shadows too. It is luminous, but it will never be clear. And so I return again and again, every year, to this little novel because for me, it leaves the darkness alone. It is one of those “classic” stories where the darkness shadows the light, and the light cannot comprehend it.

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