LITERATURE AND NARRATIVE BIOETHICS

NARRATIVE, ETHICS, AND HUMAN EXPERIMENTATION IN RICHARD SELZER’S “ALEXIS ST. MARTIN”: THE MIRACULOUS WOUND RE-EXAMINED

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The accidental shooting of the fur-trapper, Alexis St. Martin, his unexpected survival under the care of the army surgeon, William Beaumont, and the subsequent "observations and experiments" conducted by Beaumont on St. Martin between 1825 and 1834 is one of the most famous stories in the history of American medicine. St. Martin was struck below the left breast by a shotgun blast at a distance of three feet. Two years later he had fully recovered except for a permanent gastric fistula. Beaumont, although situated on the Michigan frontier and lacking both formal medical education and scientific training, seized on this opportunity to study the physiology of digestion. Over the course of ten years, Beaumont successfully isolated pure gastric juice, demonstrated the duration and processes of normal digestion, recognized the influence of emotions and environment on digestive actions, and established a foundation for future developments in biochemistry, experimental technique, and neurophysiology (1). The account of his efforts, published as a monograph in 1833 (2), was among the very few contributions to medical science by an American prior to the Civil War.

Beaumont himself first shaped the narrative of these events. His account was elaborated but little changed by the revered physician Sir William Osler in 1902 and then further enriched by the popular historian James T. Flexner in 1937. Where Osler celebrated Beaumont's scientific achievement, Flexner's retelling in Doctors on Horseback elevated Beaumont's biography into the realm of American myth. Like other "pioneers of American medicine," Beaumont's absence of formal education was his advantage: unfettered by theoretical learning or establishment beliefs, forced by necessity into self-reliance and pragmatic invention, driven by frontier opportunism, Beaumont made medical history in the unlikeliest of places (3,4, pp. 237-92). These remained the standard views until 1979, when the surgeon turned author, Richard Selzer, rewrote the tale with a new, albeit imagined, perspective.
Selzer published "Alexis St. Martin" in his third anthology, *Confessions of a Knife*. He included the usual facts and quoted familiar excerpts from Beaumont's monograph and published letters, but he also created "dramatic personae" for the two actors, granted St. Martin title billing, and freely indulged in poetic license. Typical of Selzer's writing, "Alexis St. Martin" is a mix of essay, short story and history/memoir genres. Also typical, the story is dense and multi-layered, achieving its purposes through complex metaphors and ornate language. Of special significance is the centrality of the famous "wound," for this is also a palimpsest in the Selzer canon. It is variously and sometimes simultaneously a symbol of the surgeon's work, the writer's task, and the pain of self-examination. In his story of Beaumont and St. Martin, the wound is the literal point of intersection in these men's lives and the medium of medical history, but it is also a literary vehicle through which Selzer reflects on the profession of medicine. More specifically, it is an occasion for imaginative contemplation on bioethical issues in human experimentation.

Approaching "Alexis St. Martin" with an ethical agenda reminds us that the subject of narrative ethics has been a matter of lively debate among medical humanists in recent years (5). The foci and parameters of this debate will be found in Hilde Lindemann Nelson's recently published anthology, *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics* (6). What most unites the proponents of narrative in bioethics is "the association of narrative properties (epiphany, multiple perspective, and textual tapestry) with emotional, psychological, and individual needs that are deemed absent from abstract moral principles and deductive reasoning" (5, p. 164). Opponents respond that textual complexity and interpretive uncertainty -- the attributes that most distinguish narrative from principle-based reasoning -- are the very reasons why narratives provide inadequate ethical guidance. But even the most skeptical of the philosophers represented in this volume concede that narratives may supplement or enrich principlist reasoning. In this regard, Michael Potts has found a recent Selzer story, "Whither Thou Goest," a valuable source for expanding discourse on the bioethics of heart transplantation (7). Following Ronald Carson, Sidney Callahan, Martyn Evans and Leon Kass, Potts insists that narrative sensitivity to human "sentiments," individual "feelings," and symbolic meanings is a necessary corrective to "propositional discourse." Selzer's story tests the limits of plausibility, but in exploring the symbolism of the heart and the inner life of a heart donor's surviving wife, a new and challenging perspective is added to