

THICK NARRATIVES

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That literary content is often a kind of ethical content seems in one sense obvious. After all, if literary works concern themselves with the stuff of human experience, they could as much ignore the ethical as they could the psychological, familial, social, or political dimensions of life. On one sense of “ethical”, the ethical just *is* the particular relationship that obtains between these and similar aspects of life in a given community: it is what constitutes its “ethical life”, as certain philosophical traditions have it. If this is so, then the very act of offering a representation of cultural activity or a vision of life – in literature or elsewhere – is nearly always stamped with a kind of ethical significance.

The problem the philosopher of art faces is not whether ethical concerns are *ever* relevant to the evaluation and appreciation of literary works. Contrary to a certain rumor, few philosophers have ever denied this.¹ The problem, rather, is to account for the ethical dimension of literature in such a way that we can accommodate certain curious features of literary experience. Chief among these features is the plain fact that there are many successful literary works – works we value *as literature* – that seem vicious if judged from a purely moral point of view. One should think here not only of the often cited examples, such as expressions of anti-Semitism and fascist sympathy in the work of high modernists like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis (the last of whom wrote the lovingly entitled *Hitler*²). If one were to mine the great works of the Western canon from antiquity to the present, the list of works in which one finds content that is from the moral point of view odious or at least highly suspicious – works that seem to endorse or aestheticize forms of sexism, racism, violence, intolerance, classism, and all other manner of moral nastiness – would likely be considerably longer than the list of those we would take to be on the side of the angels. Observations such as these have led many philosophers to embrace a version of *immoralism*, a position that has been given a wide range of senses but that share the belief that, all things being equal, literary works can survive their moral flaws. Indeed, they often thrive pre-

¹ See Guyer (2008) for an excellent discussion that shows that even historical figures often cited as progenitors of the idea of the “autonomy” of art (Kant, for example) would have found it bizarre to deny the relevance of ethical concerns to the criticism of art.

² In fairness to Lewis, he later came to see his folly and in 1939 published *The Hitler Cult*, in which he disavowed much of what he said in 1931 when he published *Hitler*.

cisely on account of them.

What I want to show here is how to reconcile the plausible insight of the immoralist with the lingering sense that literary content may at a deeper level still be shot through with ethical significance. It is possible, and in fact happens quite frequently, that literary works that “fail” in the respect immoralists deem relevant can still be engaged in important ethical labour, and so the sorts of concern that guide immoralism (and its competitor positions³) are not always decisive when trying to determine the ethical character of a literary work. The immoralist is impressed by the fact that literary works can get away with saying Yeah where morality says Boo.⁴ I do not think that the immoralist is wrong to find significant this freedom that literature enjoys from the burden of speaking always on the side of morality. But I do think that the nature of literature’s relation to morality is much more complicated than this. This is because there are, or so I shall argue, two potential centers of moral gravity in the literary work of art, and the contemporary debate surrounding immoralism – and the ethical value of art more generally – has largely concerned itself with only one of them. My goal here is to expose and argue for the significance of the other.

The contemporary debate tends to conceive of literature’s ethically relevant activity as having an essentially *evaluative* character, consisting at root in the ways in which a work manifests attitudes of approbation and censure in respect to the social practices it explores and casts in shades of good and evil the forms of behavior it represents.⁵ Literary works can clearly go about this well or badly, from the moral point of view, and hence it is natural to look here when trying to identify exactly how literature opens itself up to moral assessment. A more technical way of

³ Daniel Jacobson puts the difference between immoralism and its chief competitor positions – autonomism and moralism – in the following way: immoralism “holds that although the moral qualities of art are sometimes aesthetically relevant (contra autonomism), its morally dubious features can be among its aesthetic merits and its morally salutary features among its aesthetic flaws (contra moralism).” (Jacobson, 2008, online review) On this sense of immoralism, many versions of so-called “moderate moralism” and “moderate autonomism” count as versions of immoralism, since they deny precisely what the immoralist denies: that there is a categorical or, in Jacobson’s terms, “invariant positive” link between the moral success (or failure) of an artwork and its aesthetic success (or failure). I will follow Jacobson’s use of ‘immoralism’ here, though I will reserve the term “moralism” to mark a slightly different concept.

⁴ None of this should be taken to imply that novels (or readers) treat these morally suspicious “yeahs” as asserted of reality, as though being an immoralist about literature makes one an immoralist about life.

⁵ Recently many philosophers have argued for response-dependent accounts of art’s relation to morality according to which the objects of moral evaluations are the responses an artwork calls on a reader to have towards its content so that it can work its intended magic. I take response-dependent theories not to be an alternative to, but a more sophisticated version of, what I say above in my characterization of the contemporary debate. To give a sense of why I think this, a novel, for example, must at some level express a pro (or con) attitude towards, say, a sexist character if it is to call on us to respond to him with admiration (or disgust); otherwise it is utterly unclear how the novel could be said to be trying to extract an admiring (or disgusted) response from the reader. So the attitudes a novel expresses in respect to its content and those it tries to call forth from a reader usually turn out to be the same. For a compelling recent treatment of response-dependent moralism, see Allan Hazlett (2009).

putting what this amounts to is to say that the contemporary debate treats the ethically relevant features of, say, a novel as in an important respect analogous to moral *judgments*, with the immoralist's insight being that novels can apply moral concepts – “judgment” taken broadly, as the considered application of a kind of concept to some state of affairs – in ways that are unwarranted, false, or simply bizarre.⁶ This is in essence the immoralist's entire point: an artistically successful novel can often get away with casting a murderer as *heroic*, a misogynist as *enlightened*, a pedophile as *amusing*, whereas by the lights of our best moral theories and soundest moral intuitions *contemptible, ignorant, repulsive* (or whatever) ought apply to these representations.

I think that all of this is reasonable, and it has at any rate been thoroughly and competently studied by others.⁷ But the alternative picture I will develop will part with it in a fundamental way. It locates an ethical dimension of literature that does not at all consist in the ways in which literature gives expression to moral judgements, manifests virtuous or vicious attitudes, or anything of the sort. Rather, it concerns a specific sort of *meaning* literary works can bestow upon the events they relate, a kind of *narrative sense* that, I hope to show, reveals how literature may bear a significant kind of ethical value even when it goes rogue in exactly the respect the immoralist brings to our attention.

Self Narratives

The area of contemporary philosophy in which narrative theory has been most exciting is arguably not the philosophy of literature but the philosophy of the self. It has been a particularly fruitful area of research because the narrative turn in the philosophy of the self has shown us how to ask the traditional questions of the field without leading one into the thick of metaphysics. When a contemporary philosopher asks what a self is, she often has in mind a kind of narrative achievement rather than a kind of entity; and when she wonders how this self might persist over time, she often asks this as a question about the extension of a kind of story and not about the perdurance of a peculiar kind of substance. It goes without saying that there is much controversy concerning just what a narrative self might be, and I won't be taking much of a stance on it here. But I do want to bring to light a few respects in which narrative approaches to selfhood open up ways of understanding what literary narratives can accomplish ethically.

Before beginning I need to introduce a basic distinction in narrative theory, the distinc-

⁶ I am indebted to Alice Crary (2007) for her discussion of this, as well as to her arguments against conceiving of moral thought narrowly, as concerned primarily with the making of moral judgements.

⁷For work (more or less) in this vein to which I am sympathetic, see Noël Carroll (1996), Marcia Muelder Eaton (2001), Berys Gaut (2007), James Harold (2008), Matthew Kieran (2003), and Elisabeth Schellekens (2007).

tion between a story and a narrative.⁸ The distinction is not altogether natural in English, where the two terms are more or less interchangeable (hence some scholars prefer to use *fabula* and *sjuzet* or to use expressions that combine the two ideas, for example “story-telling”). But the point, if not the terminology, is clear enough. A story is what a narrative relates. It is the material out of which a narrative is woven, the constellation of events a narrative shapes in the act of recounting them. The distinction is similar to that of *content* and *mode of presentation*, though the concept of narrative is richer and has a more focused extension than that of mode of presentation. By making this distinction, we open up the possibility of seeing how a story is *transformed* by the narrative that recounts it, not in the sense that it becomes a different story, but in the sense that in the act of narration a story becomes freighted with patterns of meaning and significance (emotional, for example) that are not properties of the mere story itself.⁹ In this respect, there can be different narratives of the same story, though not quite different stories of the same narrative.¹⁰ This idea of the “transposability” of a story is familiar enough as the practice of retelling traditional tales. Think of the genre of the *chanson de geste*, the various versions of Socrates’ trial, or the many incarnations of *Romeo & Juliet* – set either in Verona or the Bronx – with Shakespeare’s own version a retelling of a prior Italian tale.

It should be noted that in practice stories usually cannot be neatly distinguished from the narratives that relate them. For one thing, stories are usually *created* by the very narratives that recount them and never go on to achieve existence independent of those narratives. This is the case of most works of fiction that are not retellings of older tales. For another, the presence of a story almost always indicates the presence of narrative agency. The events we treat as constituting a story are selected from endless other candidate events, and this act of selection would seem to be an act of *narrative* selection, a kind of executive decision as to which events will find a home in the story one wishes to relate. For example, you likely will not include in the “story of your life” the event of being served a salad the last time you ate at your parents’; but you probably will include that it was at this meal that your parents told you that you were adopted. This decision will be a

⁸ The distinction is often cast as tripartite, between story, narrative, and narrative discourse. Since I will make no use of the notion of narrative discourse in what follows, I shall ignore it here. Some useful discussions of this distinction can be found in Gérard Genette (1980), Gerald Prince (1987), and H. Porter Abbott (2002). Though it was published too late for me to be able to use it here, see Gregory Currie (2010) for an excellent treatment of contemporary issues in the philosophy of narrative.

⁹ Many would argue that any minimally organized linking of events counts as a narrative. As Peter Lamarque puts it: “All that narratives have in common are minimal formal conditions about the ordering of events in a story.” (Lamarque, 2004, 19). The tradition I am appealing to is only willing to call this a “story”, though the issue here seems purely semantic. One can, if one wishes, think of what I am calling a “story” as just the most basic expression of narrative.

¹⁰ Though it is easy to imagine skepticism in respect to the idea that different narratives can literally share the “same” story. See Aaron Smuts (2009) for an interesting discussion of this.

narrative one, a decision concerning the events you deem essential (or irrelevant) to the story you must tell if you are to succeed in conveying a sense of who you are. For these reasons, it would be a mistake to think that stories always predate their narratives or are logically separable from them. Since the ideas are so intertwined, the distinction should be heard as one of convenience and not of kind.

With this in mind, I want to bring to view a precise kind of sense narratives can convey, extracting my point from a few rather simple reflections on the role narrative can play in helping us form a particular kind of self-concept.¹¹ I will do so with the aid of an example, one that is plausible in fiction if not in fact. Imagine an amnesiac. He has, of course, no memory, and with the loss of his memory he has also lost his sense of self, that is, he has lost his understanding of the kind of person he is. Now imagine that he is given a certain drug, one that *almost* works. His memories come flooding back but not his sense of self. The memories are scattered and disjointed, like a box of photographs emptied onto the floor. The obvious question is: What does the amnesiac have to do to forge a sense of self out of this mess of memory?

I would think that the first thing we should say is that it would not take very long for a rudimentary sense of self to appear. If memories are essentially experiential and perspectival,¹² the person who has them cannot help but see the memories as *his*. It is, as it were, written into our memories that they are ours, expressive of our experiences and perspectives as subjects — otherwise they'd hardly be intelligible as memories. This reflexive identification with the content of his memories would help the amnesiac to begin to reconstruct a story of his life.¹³ Importantly, he would have access to basic causal-psychological information concerning his role as an agent in the events he now recalls. His memories would include first-personal information about how he felt during certain experiences and the desires and intentions that underwrote many of his recollected actions. It would be difficult for him to remember an especially destructive relationship without also remembering the love that gave him the desire to continue in it despite everything; and recalling those endless hours of running in a crowd would likely also be to recall his passion for marathons.¹⁴ In this respect, the recovering amnesiac will soon have not just a basic *chronicle* of his life, an ordering of many of its key events. He will also be able to detect in his life something

¹¹David Velleman (2006) distinguishes three guises of the self: self-image, autonomous agency, and self-sameness over time. I am considering only the first here.

¹² At least memories of the sort relevant here, variously called “recollective”, “episodic”, or “personal” memories. If so-called “semantic” memory (“I remember that 4+4=8”) is memory of impersonal fact, personal memory is a record of lived experience (“I remember being afraid of algebra as a student”).

¹³ I say “a” rather than “the” story of his life because memory is clearly fallible, and denial and repression can rear their heads here.

¹⁴ If this causal-psychological information would not be recalled directly, then a simple act of induction would make it available to him.

that resembles a *plot*,¹⁵ a sense of the standing goals and pursuits that explain why he acted as he did; and this, in turn, will endow his chronology with an air of purposive movement. The understanding he will acquire about his past will surely not be as detailed as it was before his accident. And the amnesiac's labor, one would think, will involve as much reconstruction as it will retrieval of his past, and there is clearly room for error here. But it will suffice to give him a serviceable *story* of his life, the odd lacuna and misremembering notwithstanding.

But if this is all that our amnesiac has, he will have a very thin sense of self. He can identify himself as an agent in the events he now recalls, but he does not yet have a conception of why he was the *kind* of person to have acted as he did. Without this, his sense of self is preposterously episodic, limited to knowing no more about himself than that he did this on that occasion.¹⁶ That is, his self-concept will be no broader than his awareness of the desires and impressions that happened to have passed through him during those moments he now recalls. As such, it hardly resembles the form of articulated self-awareness we imply we have when we say, to ourselves or to others, *this is who I am*. When our amnesiac looks at the story of his life he now possesses and then asks, "but who am I?" we understand perfectly well what he is after. He wishes to be able to see something *general* about himself reflected in the various events that constitute his story, an image of the *kind* of person he is. In trying to recover his sense of self, he is struggling to see his story as expressive of what he is made of, in the sense we intend when doing moral psychology. So the question becomes: what does the amnesiac have to do with his story to arrive at this richer sense of self?

This is where narrative comes in. The crucial thing when one has a story is to determine *how to tell it*. When we tell our stories, we do not just list off their key events: we inevitably *interpret* them. This is not interpretation of an especially technical sort, unless we are in for a bit of professional help. In its most basic form it is interpretation as, and following David Velleman, *construal*. For example, say our amnesiac comes to find that the story of his life includes a great number of run-ins with the law, so many in fact that he cannot help but take them as defining who he is.¹⁷ This is important, but note how little this gives him by way of a self-conception: "law-breaker" or

¹⁵ This isn't to say that his *life*, or any other life for that matter, has this plot-like structure in the same way in which a literary work has the structure of plot, which is surely too strong. See Bernard Williams (2009) and Peter Goldie's contribution to this volume for a critique of this view.

¹⁶ I ignore here the arguments of Galen Strawson (2007) to the effect that episodic selfhood is not a bad thing. On Strawson's account selfhood turns out to be a much thinner notion than it is for just about all those who would take issue with his claim, and so his provocations turn out to be much less radical than they first seem. For Strawson, as for Dan Zahavi, the notion of a self is much more basic than the notion of a person (see Strawson 2009 and Zahavi 2008): it picks out the locus, in effect, of subjective or first-personal awareness, and the term "person" is reserved for more articulated forms of (culturally mediated) identity. If one is sympathetic to this idea – in other contexts I am – then one can just as well read "person" wherever I write "self": my general point will remain intact.

¹⁷ See Velleman (2003).

some similarly vague self-description might follow from it, but not much else. It is in the narrative he weaves that this is made into a story of a specific kind of self, and there is much room for maneuver here. He might feel constrained to tell it as the tale of misguided, petty criminal: of a life wasted. Or with some charity he might find that it is best cast as the heroic story of a romantic rebel. Or perhaps he will blame his criminality on his parents, his genes, or on “society”, and offer up the image of a life ruined by regular visits from Bad Luck. One could go on imagining possible narrative construals of his story, all more or less within the realm of rational possibility for a history such as his. What is important for our purposes is to note how different the story becomes upon each telling, and that each of these differences in construal marks an important difference in self-conception, in the amnesiac’s sense of who he basically *is*.

It is through this narrative act that the recovering amnesiac fashions an image of himself that looks like what he is after when he asks, “who am I?” What the amnesiac is in effect doing here is making the story *his* story. In deciding how his story is to be narrated, the story becomes *about* the sort of person he takes himself to be. The self-concept he acquires through this narrative act accomplishes at least two things. Firstly, it represents the *moral* to be drawn from the story of his life: if the moral we derive from artworks is a kind of meaning, the moral we derive from our life stories is a kind of self-conception. And secondly, this self-concept in turn offers an orientation towards the events of the story themselves, a way of understanding their significance and import. The self-concept in effect represents what the story is *about*. In this respect, the kind of sense these self-narratives communicate has little to do with the *connection* (causal, emotional, or otherwise) between the events of a story, contrary to a common view of what narratives concern themselves with. These narratives have as their goal the attribution of sense *to the story itself*. They essentially concern the whole and not the links between the various parts.

I do not wish to claim that all narratives have this as their goal; surely many do not. But this discussion of selfhood does bring to view a very interesting narrative power, and this is its value. We might call the kind of narratives I am discussing here *thick narratives*. Gilbert Ryle introduced the distinction between thick and thin descriptions, and, following him, the sort of narrative I am exploring here is “thick” by virtue of possessing an especially rich kind of descriptive content.¹⁸ To use an example in the style of Ryle himself, consider the evolving thickness of the following descriptions of Φ : (i) a flutter of an eyelid, (ii) a conspicuous wink, and (iii) an incorrigible flirt who is again making inappropriate eyes at you. Likewise, when the amnesiac turns his story of a generic “law-breaker” into the tale of a fiercely individualistic enemy of authority, he has offered up a thick narrative. In thinking this of himself he may reveal that he is delusional, depending on the facts of his life. But it will be a decidedly thick delusion, and it will be that by

¹⁸ See Gilbert Ryle (2009).

virtue of the thickness of the narrative he has woven.

It was Bernard Williams who made fashionable philosophical talk of the thick and thin, in his case in respect to kinds of concept.¹⁹ For Williams, thick concepts are ethical concepts like *courageous*, *cruel*, *generous*, and *compassionate*, and one can easily imagine extending the list to include aesthetic and emotional concepts like *rude*, *inelegant*, *graceful*, *joyous*, and *melancholic* — here in the realm of value the distinction between the emotional, aesthetic and moral blurs very quickly.²⁰ The first thing to note about thick concepts so conceived is that they pick out the kind of qualities we attribute to our selves and to others when weaving these narratives of selfhood I am exploring here. Unlike thin concepts, which merely evaluate an object (he is a *good* father, that painting is *ugly*, and so forth), thick concepts, because of their descriptive richness, can cast their objects as having highly defined sorts of *character*: hence it is often said that they represent a fusing of fact and value, of description and evaluation. It is for this reason that thick concepts offer a more internal perspective on the self to which they are applied, giving a sense of how the individual hangs together as a person, such as when we call someone – and mean what we say to pick out something basic about the person – cowardly, spiritual, or poetic. This is one of the reasons these concepts, and by extension the narratives that make use of them, are *thick*: they convey information about the object under scrutiny that is sufficient to situate it at a precise point in the space of value.

I will work out the ethical significance of thick narratives in my discussion of literature, which I turn to next. But one thing is worth mentioning briefly before concluding this discussion of selves. These thick narratives have as their goal the articulation of a kind of content that is clearly ethical but that has very little to do with the specification of duties, obligations, or methods for determining the moral worth of possible courses of action. In fact, it has very little to do with ethics conceived as a matter of making moral *judgements*, of offering verdicts concerning the rightness or wrongness of actions and intentions (or representations of them, such as we find in art). It is a conception of the ethical in the ancient and expansive sense of the term. When we weave these thick narratives, we are not attempting to offer an insight into the realm of oughts but to cast into relief the specific arrangement of desires, passions, hopes, beliefs, and values that define us. The self-image we offer up in these narratives is our attempt to reveal the ways in which we embody these and similar features of moral character, that is, of the ethical structure of a person. An insight into this is an insight into something not of theoretical but earthly ethical significance: a sense of what we amount to as agents, as people.

¹⁹ See Bernard Williams (1985).

²⁰ I borrow some of these thick aesthetic terms from Peter Lamarque (2008, chapter 7) and Roman Bonzon (2009), and some of the thick emotional ones from Peter Goldie (2008).

Literary Narratives

I can now return to literature, and my discussion will shift focus from narratives that try to make sense of one's self to narratives that try to make sense of one's culture. The leap from the personal to the social here is unsurprising, at least if we recall that the term from which the English word "ethics" ultimately derives is *êthos*, which for a speaker of attic Greek could be used without much change of meaning to refer to the moral character of a self or a society. The analogy I shall argue for is the following: just as thick narratives allow us to express how we are (or take ourselves to be) constituted as selves, literary works often employ thick narratives to convey a sense of how a culture is constituted ethically. This is a mouthful, so let me explain, beginning, again, with the importance of stories.

Until modernism stepped on the scene it would have seemed quite natural to claim that to be a literary work is, among other things, to have a story to tell. And while we should be sceptical of easy identifications of literature with narrative – it is common to speak of non-narrative poetry, for example²¹ – in a comfortable majority of cases literary works tell a story, however unorthodox or avant-garde their telling may be. And one option writers frequently take up is that of telling the tale of some aspect of common experience: those stories of loss, love, exploitation, alienation, hard-won happiness, et cetera that define us. One way of putting this is to say that writers often assume the guise of a documentarian. They try to "bear witness" through their stories, and, to this extent, one of the *narrative goals* of many literary works is to explore the practices, institutions, and forms of interaction that shape our world and structure our experiences and relationships.

The pursuit of this narrative goal requires a number of things of a literary work. The actions and experiences at the core of the story must be such that they can represent or otherwise stand for *general* kinds of actions and experience: those that typify the region of culture a writer wishes to explore. A writer in pursuit of this narrative goal will commonly try to throw light on the norms, attitudes, habits, and values that sustain the practice she is attempting to document. And in getting us to see something general in the events of the story, a writer will also have to decide on how to tell the story itself. As we saw above, this is a crucial step, since it is through narration that a story becomes interpreted and hence that a distinct conception of the meaning, of the

²¹ For example, the sort of lyric poetry typified by John Ashbery and much of the New York School. Whether poetry of this sort turns out to be non-narrative will naturally ride on what one thinks a narrative is, and I am sceptical that the forms of subjective experience this kind of poetry often explores do not make for the stuff of a narrative: they strike me as narratives of the self, however fragmented and de-centered these selves, and so their stories, are shown to be. See John Koethe (2000) for an excellent discussion of John Ashbery and the philosophical significance of his poetry, a discussion that touches on many of these issues.

point, of a story is forged. Like a person in search of a self-concept, a writer in pursuit of this narrative goal will struggle to find a way of recounting the events of her story so that a specific purchase on them can be communicated, a purchase that is usually as much emotional and aesthetic as it is cognitive.

Think, for example, of the presentation of Southern culture in William Faulkner's 1948 *Intruder in the Dust*. The structure of this story of racial injustice is hardly original: a black man is wrongly accused of murdering a white man, and a lawyer who reluctantly comes to believe in his innocence fights against a community set on lynching him. We've heard this story (or at least seen the movie) before, in one form or another. Faulkner's accomplishment was not to construct a terribly original story but to tell a story in a particular way, a way that rendered intelligible how certain features of Southern culture give rise to these familiar, intractable problems of race. Faulkner was a writer of fiction and not a sociologist, so his work consisted not in statistical surveys but in telling a story that reflects in a general way how Southern culture hangs together: that reflects its *character*, at least once upon a time and from one vantage-point. Faulkner situates the events of his story in a certain atmosphere of feeling, as all literary narratives do. He presents the reader not only with a sense of characteristic actions, thoughts, and forms of interaction but also with a feel for the fabric of the culture, the primitive allure of its clannish values, the suffocating yet protective weight of its traditions, and the hesitant, measured exchanges across racial lines. The formal features of Faulkner's narrative technique (stream of consciousness prose, and modernist in that uniquely Southern way) contribute much to this, creating as they do an unsettling sense of both transparency and remoteness: of bearing witness to events that despite being brought into plain view remain fundamentally ambiguous and inscrutable, as certain features of postwar Southern culture surely were.

Now all of this is admittedly unremarkable literary criticism. But it does give a sense of what it means for a writer to take up this narrative goal, and that will lead a write to weave a thick narrative. Faulkner's tale is descriptively rich in much the same respect thick narratives of the self are. It offers up an image of something general about the culture it explores, fashioned out of the highly original way in which Faulkner narrates his rather common story. Faulkner's achievement was to elicit from this tale a very precise conception of the cultural space in which stories of this sort play out, stories that belong as much to the real world as they do to the fictional world of Faulkner's novel.²² It tries to give us a sense, in short, of how the culture it explores is constituted, at least in respect to the questions Faulkner asks of it.

It is worth acknowledging that there are many literary works with no interest in weaving

²² I leave aside here the question of truth, of how we can *know* whether writers get these cultural practices right. I deal with these and similar questions in Gibson (2007).

thick narratives of this sort. But it is also worth noting that the point of many literary works is virtually unintelligible apart from a conception of this narrative goal. Novels, plays, and poems as varied as *Paradise Lost*, “Howl”, *Hard Times*, *The Man Without Qualities*, *Uncle Vanja* and *Waiting for Godot* (the last of these just in a particularly symbolic manner) are in their own ways all in pursuit of this goal. Needless to say, this narrative goal exists alongside the various aesthetic, dramatic, and imaginative goals that are also at play in the literary work of art. Literary works that document but do little else tend to be quite bad literary works, forgetting as they do that readers generally prefer their course of insight to be served with lots of art. And it is also worth pointing out that while writers often exploit the conventions of literary realism to accomplish this goal, it is not necessary they do so. In *The Lonely Girl* Edna O’Brian explored gender roles by trying to show men and women as they are, at least in a certain neck of the woods; in *Cock & Bull Will Self* found that having women grow penises and men vaginas (behind the knee, no less) can be an effective way of exploring more or less the same thing. It is a testament to the power of the literary imagination that writers have devised endlessly inventive ways of constructing a representation of the human situation, and realism is only one of many devices writers employ when going about this.

Morality & Ethics, Briefly

It is in respect to this narrative goal that literary works have an obvious claim to ethical significance. But explaining how they bear this value requires saying something brief about what the term “ethical” means here. It is true that in contemporary English, and indeed in much contemporary philosophy, the term “ethics” is conterminous with the term “morality,” but there is a tradition in modern philosophy that distinguishes the two in a way that is especially helpful for the point I am pursuing about literature. The source of the particular way of thinking about the difference between ethics and morality that I have in mind is Hegel’s distinction between *Sittlichkeit* and *Moralität*²³ – in effect between “ethical life” and morality – and Bernard Williams’ critique of the “modern morality system” in favor of a return to “thicker” and less intellectualist conceptions of ethics²⁴ is the most obvious twentieth century contribution to this tradition, though one can see something of it in the thought of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Alex Honneth, and Alasdair MacIntyre, among others.

The particular way this tradition frames this distinction usually makes things rather worse for morality;²⁵ and every way of putting it that I am aware of requires making both “morality”

²³ For a treatment of Hegel’s ethics that informs much of what I say here about ethics and morality, see Allen Wood (1990) and (1993).

²⁴ See Williams (1985).

²⁵ This is because the distinction is usually employed in the service of building a sceptical case against (modern notions of) morality.

and “ethics” mean something they do not mean for many philosophers who make a living using these terms. For these reasons, the distinction will inevitably strike nonbelievers as contentious, even invidious, at least until one provides much more argument in support of it than I can offer here. Since I wish to make use of this distinction but avoid the controversy, what I shall do is use it to build a Wittgensteinian ladder, borrowing it just long enough to make my point and then returning “moral” and “ethical” back to common usage. At any rate, what I describe here should not be read as an outline of a position one would be advised to take in moral philosophy but as groundwork for an account of two basic ways in which literary works open themselves up to ethical assessment.

The outlook that this tradition associates with modern moral thought (modern because it really begins with Kant and is typified by his project) is the attempt to specify, in the words of Samuel Scheffler, a “normative intellectual structure” by virtue of which the common questions of morality can be answered. It is concerned especially with understanding how we can determine what we *ought* to do, and what it means for this “ought” to be a genuinely moral one. This naturally leads to questions concerning what makes our actions morally *good*, our responses morally *right*, as opposed to, say, “good” or “right” from the perspective of pure self-interest or an arbitrary social code.²⁶ Moral philosophy, on this picture, is the branch of philosophy that searches for a source from which spring answers to these questions; and it conceives of this source in highly cognitive terms, for example as a very precise employment of reasoning or a principle accessible only through philosophical reflection. The categorical imperative is a good example of this, as is the principle of utility. This view of morality tends to treat moral thought as most naturally and perfectly expressed in moral *judgements*:²⁷ in those activities of thought that underwrite, or should underwrite, our application of moral concepts. For this reason moral philosophy, again so conceived, labors to identify the sorts of consideration (“can I will the maxim of my action to be universal law?”, “would acting thus promote more pleasure or pain?” etc.) that give moral judgments a claim to moral *truth*: to getting the demands of morality *right*.

The outlook that has its roots in certain strands of ethical thought in classical Greek and German philosophy – Aristotle and Hegel, in effect – takes as its starting point not the search for an abstract source of our obligations but the structure of actual *ethical life*. That is, it treats as the stuff of ethical insight the complex tissue of norms, customs, and interests that give our cultural practices their point. What I above described as the “cultural space” in which our various stories play out is, on this view, fundamentally an *ethical* space. Contrary to the quite formal approach of morality, ethics so conceived has as its target the cultural grounds of human action and experi-

²⁶ See Samuel Scheffler (1987), 412., 412.

²⁷ Here I am again indebted to Crary (2007).

ence, and it explores the “living” arrangement of values operative in a community. On this view the ethical is what we uncover when we begin to query the purpose of our practices: the forms of life they make possible, the kinds of experience they structure, and the sorts of value of which they are expressive. As Simon Blackburn puts it, the ethical is in effect a kind of “climate” or “environment” in which our social practices and personal pursuits are carried out.²⁸ This view treats the ethical as distributed more or less holistically throughout a culture: it is the structure of guiding values, desires, and habits that hold us together as societies or, for that matter, as selves. This is, one will have noticed, in effect the view of the ethical I have been working with in my discussion of thick narrative.²⁹

I would think that the smart money is on seeing these two views not as competing but complementary, and one would expect a serious moral philosopher to have much to say about the ways in which they interlock. At any rate, ethics without a dash of what this tradition calls morality runs the risk of being reactionary, unable to critique effectively many existing practices because it can produce no standards of moral evaluation external to those practices.³⁰ As Bertrand Russell once said of Hegel’s ethics, it gives us the “freedom to obey the police.”³¹ And moral thought untethered to the concerns of actual ethical life can run the risk of being too formal, too abstract (and so perhaps empty), and to issue demands that cannot be squared with human nature or that are destructive of the very practices – friendship, for example – that give our lives meaning. Happily, these and similar issues are for Moral Philosophy (or is it Ethics?) and not the Philosophy of Literature. For my argument to go forward, all one need concede is that an insight into ethical life is of obvious value, and that the sort of thick narratives literary works can weave appear intuitively well-suited for offering this form of insight. But before one can grant me this, I need to spell out just what all this amounts to as a claim about literature, and this is what I shall clarify next.

Let me quickly introduce two terms of art before moving on, each corresponding to the two different forms of emphasis this discussion of morality and ethics brings to view. I will use the term *moralism* to refer to a critical stance that evaluates literary works in line with the concerns of morality, as described above; and I will use the term *ethicism* to refer to a critical stance that evaluates literary work in line with the above vision of ethics as primarily concerned with the fabric of

²⁸ Simon Blackburn (2001), 1 - 2.

²⁹There is much more to this view of ethics than this, of course: in addition to culture, one will have to say something about virtue, at least if one is to remain true to its Greek origins. But it is the idea the ethical structure of culture – of those aspects of the Greek view that inform the Hegelian conception of *Sittlichkeit* – that I shall take from this and apply to literature, and so I will permit myself to stop the story here.

³⁰ This is not to deny the possibility of “internal” critique on such a model of ethical life. I thank Bernard Harrison for pointing out that an earlier version of this essay suggested this.

³¹As quoted in Robert Pippin (2004), 1.

actual ethical life.³² A distinction of this sort is essential to literary aesthetics, as I hope the following will make clear.

Being Right & Being Understood

Consider the following example. In a letter of 1940 George Orwell expressed intense, though not uncritical, admiration of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*,³³ and he contrasted it with a work that is in one respect kindred to Miller's and in another poles apart from it: Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of Night*. Though more fascinated (and perplexed) by Miller's novel, Orwell was interested in how each of these writers responded to the same basic problem. The problem, in a word, is the problem of modernity: the perceived collapse of value, meaning, and moral order that occurred, depending on who you talk to, either with onset of the industrial revolution or when people stopped going to church. Here is how Orwell put it:

Voyage au Bout de la Nuit is a book-with-a-purpose, and its purpose is to protest against the horror and meaninglessness of modern life—actually, of *life*. It is a cry of unbearable disgust, a voice from the cesspool. *Tropic of Cancer* is almost exactly the opposite. The thing has become so unusual as to seem almost anomalous, but it is the book of a man who is happy [...] With years of lumpenproletarian life behind him, hunger, vagabondage, dirt, failure, nights in the open, battles with immigration officers, endless struggles for a bit of cash, Miller finds that he is enjoying himself. Exactly the aspects of life that fill Céline with horror are the ones that appeal to him. So far from protesting, he is *accepting*.³⁴

As a staid British socialist, Orwell likely found the histrionic excess of each of these writers amusing, as characteristically French or American as they were. Céline's response was to shout obscenities at the space where Value, Decency or whatever once resided. Miller's response, how-

³²These labels are not entirely fair to the use of "moralism" and "ethicism" favored by some aestheticians (no label will be entirely at home here, and at any rate there isn't uniformity of use among aestheticians). In recent debates *moralism* and *ethicism* are often used interchangeably, to refer to positions that endorse what James Harold felicitously calls a "valence constraint" according to which: "if a moral flaw of a work affects that work's aesthetic value, it reduces that value; if a moral virtue of a work affects that work's aesthetic value, it increases that" (Harold, 2008, 46-47). While I am not here interested in discussing the valence constraint (apart from expressing a degree of admiration for the immoralist, who denies it), either moralism or ethicism, as I use them here, could be expressed in terms of a valence constraint, with each marking a distinct conception of the kind of moral/ethical success (or failure) that can affect the aesthetic success (or failure) of a literary work.

³³ An example of Orwell's characteristically intense yet tempered praise is: "Here in my opinion is the only imaginative prose-writer of the slightest value who has appeared among the English-speaking races for some years past. Even if that is objected to as an overstatement, it will probably be admitted that Miller is a writer out of the ordinary, worth more than a single glance; and after all, he is a completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer, a mere Jonah, a passive acceptor of evil, a sort of Whitman among the corpses." Orwell (1968), 527.

³⁴ Orwell (1968), 498.

ever, was what every college-age American knows as Spring Break Fever. If Céline's response is like that of an atheist who is furious at God for not existing, Miller's is the response of a child who has just figured out that no one is watching. For Miller the collapse of moral order is a good thing. He can treat people instrumentally, either for sex or for money, move to Paris and drink all day, and, most importantly, he can produce art that celebrates a life lived like this (censorship notwithstanding). For Céline, it is people like Miller that make modern life unbearable.

If we think of sameness of story, if just for a moment, in terms of sameness of narrative goals and not sameness of content, then Céline and Miller told the very same story – *The Collapse of Civilization* might be the title – and what so interested Orwell was how different their tellings of this story were: in one case the story is told as a tragedy, in the other it is told as a story of liberation. Both authors elicited powerful images of the ethical constitution of the world they took themselves to live in. In Céline's case, it is a world that is fundamentally evil, dehumanizing, and ugly. In Miller's it is free, honest (since aware that nothing is to be taken seriously), and beautiful, even, or precisely, when at its dirtiest and meanest. In each case these images are wrought by bringing to view the practices and forms of experience that these writers take to be characteristic of the modern world: Céline largely explores the economic and social; Miller, the sexual, artistic and, for lack of a better term, Bacchic. These are excellent examples of thick literary narratives, and surely one of the things Orwell was responding to was the clarity and power of these writers' visions, different though they were, of the character of late modern culture.³⁵

We are now in a position to see something interesting. Consider how different our assessment of a literary work looks when we plug in the evaluative perspectives offered by moralism and ethicism. From the moral point of view Céline is not beyond reproach (his ranting betrayed a conservatism that in real life took the form of supporting the Vichy government and writing the occasional anti-Semitic pamphlet), but Miller's is clearly the more morally unnerving of the two novels. *Tropic of Cancer* is often criticized for its sexism, but Orwell points out that there is much more to worry about:

To say "I accept" in an age like ours is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin, bombs, aeroplanes, tinned food, machine-guns, putsches, purges, slogans, Bedaux belts, gas-masks, submarines, spies, *provocateurs*, press censorship, secret prisons, aspirins, Hollywood films and political

³⁵ It is true that Miller and Céline offer radically different takes on ethical life in late modernity, but this is an example of difference without conflict, and it would be silly to think that logic dictates that at best only one of their views can be *correct* or *true*. Again, the goal of the sort of thick literary narratives I am examining here is to document some general aspect of our way in the world, and there is more than one way in which people generally find themselves in the world.

murders.³⁶

Though one might wish to rescue aspirins from this laundry list of evil, the sentiment is sound. Miller's is an acceptance of what we should reject, or at least thumb our noses at, should we wish to do the *right* thing. In this respect, the moral vision of the book is clearly *false*, since it gets the demands of morality wrong, confounding at quite basic levels what we *ought* to do: what we owe one another, and what our duties and obligations amount to. But it is important to note what "false" means here. It means something like "false by the lights of the best moral theory or soundest moral intuitions." This is the domain of *moralism*, as defined above, and so to say that it is false here is to say it only in a normative sense. This says very little about whether it is false to life.

From another perspective, that of ethicism, it seems altogether wrongheaded to call it false. Indeed, if Orwell is right about the value of Miller's novel (and assume he is, for the sake of argument), Miller's vision of modern life is *true*, at least in respect to a certain slice of it. The very moral madness of Miller's novel is, for Orwell, symptomatic of the late modern world, *a feature of it*, and Miller is of significance precisely because his novel bears such perfect witness to it. Orwell's praise of the novel is incomprehensible apart from a conception of Miller's documentary success. If it weren't revelatory of something general about our culture, it would just be a well-written statement of one pervert's fun, and this sort of thing never appealed to Orwell. The form of life Miller documents may be "wrong" by the lights of moralism, but then much of what we humans do will be. We do not live in a world of just saints and angels, and so if we are to have a record of our way in the world, a novel like Miller's that reveals to us unsettling features of our ethical climate offers an important insight. It is an *impoverished* ethical climate – surely that was Orwell's point, though not Miller's – but this too is a kind of ethical insight, since this too tells us something about the ethical constitution of our culture.

Literary moralism and ethicism offer these very different evaluative frameworks because they are, strictly speaking, logically independent of one another. And they are independent of one another because they have distinct criteria of success. The criterion of success for moralism is in effect *rightness*, and the criterion of success for ethicism is at root *intelligibility*. I do not mean anything especially technical by these terms. Moralism, as a normative enterprise, assesses the merit, legitimacy, appropriateness – *rightness* – of the morally relevant attitudes, ideas, and beliefs manifested in a work. Miller, one would think, fails wildly by this criterion of success. Ethicism, on the other hand, casts literature's ethically relevant activity as residing in its ability to bring to light the structure of our cultural practices and the values, beliefs, and norms that sustain them. It

³⁶Orwell (1968), 500.

assesses literature's ability to offer a purchase on kinds of human experience by bringing to clarity the cultural space in which they take place and against the backdrop of which they make sense. Neither Céline's ranting nor Miller's gallivanting are intelligible for what they are without a grasp of the features of culture that prompted them. It is this attempt to fill out our sense of the ethical character of a culture – to render it intelligible – that literary ethicism, as I have defined it here, evaluates. And this shows, I think, that there is no tension in saying that a literary work might be morally insolvent but ethically rich, as long as we understand that we are speaking about two evaluatively distinct phenomena. Assuming Orwell is right, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* is an excellent example of this.

If we are uncomfortable saying of a work like Miller's that it bears ethical value, it is likely the moralist in us who is making us feel this way. A good way to assuage the moralist is to remind him that standards other than his own guide ethical evaluation of the sort I arguing for. What would be naïve, I think, is to suppose that literary works of the best sort must always be those that are successes from the standpoints of both moralism and ethicism. This would be to think, for example, that Miller would have produced a better work had his novel expressed the right moral attitudes toward the content of the story, condemning instead of reveling in the events it recounts. It is naïve because the pursuit of one kind of value often requires the abandonment of the other, and so in some cases it would be impossible to line them both up on the side of the good. Orwell's point is that Miller's work is so clarifying because it reveals the allure of the kind of life Miller documents and the sense of freedom it offers those who embrace it. This is why it has a claim to rendering intelligible something important about the ethical climate of modern life. Had Miller busied himself with condemning this climate, his work would not have been able to accomplish this so effectively or so vividly. It is perhaps the case that in many, though certainly not all, of the great works of the modern literary canon, the moral and ethical dimensions are in harmony, expressing just the right combination of approbation and admonishment in respect to the features of ethical life they explore (think of almost anything by Dickens, Dostoevsky or Austen, or novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or George Orwell's own *Burmese Days*). But it would be a step too far to think that a general rule can be made to the effect that harmonizing the moral and ethical pursuits of a novel always make for a better novel, or that novels that fail (or refuse) to achieve this harmony are always to that extent worse off as works of art.

I can now make good on a claim made at the beginning of this essay. I said that I was impressed by immoralism but wished to show that the issues it addresses are much more complex than immoralists tend to acknowledge. What I meant by that should now be clear. To speak of a work as a moral failure, in the sense immoralists tend to favor, is to speak of it as a failure by the standards of moralism, as I have defined it here. It is to say that a work manifests or is otherwise-expressive of the wrong kinds of moral attitude in respect to its content. I think that the immoral-

ist is right that moral failures of this sort do not always imply aesthetic (or artistic) failures, and I think that Orwell's reflections on Miller and Céline are a compelling example of this.³⁷ What is philosophically unfortunate is that *this* is thought to exhaust the range of possible ethical value a work might bear, as if to say that when a great work fails morally, then it can only be lots and lots of "art" that we are appreciating in it. Whether or not this is the case will depend on the literary work in question. But the account of thick narratives I have given here shows that it is possible for a literary work to fail morally yet still offer readers a very significant kind of ethical insight. This will only sound surprising or inconsistent if one thinks that there is really only one kind of basic moral or ethical value art may bear, and that there is not is part of what I have tried to demonstrate here.

Conclusion

My argument made, it would be wise to liberate "ethics" and "morality" from the restricted sense in which I have been using them and return them to common usage (whatever that might be for philosophically charged terms like these). And one inevitably feels a pang of embarrassment for putting an "ism" at the end of such common English words, as I have done here. But these terms, or any we might choose in their place, are not really of much importance here. It is the idea they gesture towards that counts. And the idea I have explored in this essay is that literature's ethical core – and here I use "ethical" in the sense in which one could just as well use "moral" – is complex, composed, in effect, of two distinct phenomena: one normative and the other narratological. It is the ethical significance of the latter that has not received nearly enough philosophical attention.³⁸ And while much more still needs to be said about it, I hope that the account of thick narratives I have developed shows that it is worth saying, and that the general story we tell of literature's engagement with value will be richer for it.³⁹

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³⁷ I have obviously assumed rather than argued for immoralism in this paper. But in assuming it, I make clear that I am aware (and accept that) the immoralist can rehearse his arguments in respect to the notion of ethical value I have developed here.

³⁸ Literary theorists and critics have on occasion taken an interest in exploring the prospects of a specifically narrative-based account of literature's ethical significance. See, for example, Adam Zachary Newton (1995) and many of the essays collected in Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack (2001).

³⁹ I would like to thank Carolo Barbero, Robert Chodat, Espen Hammer, Bernard Harrison, and Luca Pucci for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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