WHAT DOES A HUMANIST WANT?
John Gibson

I Introduction

Here is a difficult philosophical trick, to be performed in the following order. First, deny that literature in any interesting way refers to or represents—is *about*—anything real. Next, turn to language itself and endorse many of the linguistic idealist's claims about the objects of reference and the nature of representation. Then go on to insist, with the stoutest of relativists, on the irreducible social grounding of concepts, indeed that human cultural practices, and not any sort of commerce with extra-cultural "reality", account for how thought and language gain a purchase on the world, such as they can. Lastly, insist in some intelligible way that you are nonetheless a realist, a literary humanist, and assert wholeheartedly that language, *especially in the context of works of literary fiction*, is saturated with the real and worldly, so much so in fact that looking at words in the context of literature is among the best routes available for exploring and coming to understand our world, that is, our *real* world.

At first glance this will strike one as equal parts ill advised and mad. Yet the above is a fair statement of Bernard Harrison's standing philosophical project, and over the course of his career he has managed to make it appear not only sensible but a marked improvement over the competition (see Harrison 1975, Harrison 1991, Harrison 1993, Harrison 2007, Harrison 2006, and Hanna and Harrison 2004). Harrison's work is at heart motivated by a desire to re-enfranchise reality in the realms of art and language, and he has struggled to do so in those areas of contemporary thought that would prefer it remain banished. Harrison has never carried out his project as a reactionary or contrarian, pointing us, as some philosophers do, back to Greece and away from France. He is inspired by much of the philosophy and literary theory that is most conspicuously at odds with his project—Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, for example—and he has devised powerful ways of enlisting the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein to show how even a poststructuralist can speak like a kind of realist and humanist without betraying her basic principles (see, most recently, Harrison 2009). His is a philosophy of rapprochement, forward-looking rather than conservative. And it has the welcome consequence of showing us that much of the space that currently separates philosophy and literary studies, even analytic and continental philosophy, can be overcome without destroying what is distinctive to each.

I will not attempt to do justice to the grandness of Harrison's project here. But I do hope to give a sense of its seriousness. I will concentrate on his philosophy of literature, though to understand Harrison's thought in this area of philosophy is to understand it in virtually every area. In particular, I want to consider his anti-representationalist view of how literary language engages with reality. As one does on such occasions, I will also air a few worries and raise a few questions. But my basic goal here is to highlight what is novel about Harrison's work.

II Harrison's Humanism

Since the mid-1970s Harrison has been struggling to defend a broadly humanistic view of the value of works of literary fiction and of the powers of human culture more generally. The timing has been right, since, of course, these years have been the hardest on the humanist. Humanism has become

anathema, in fact a whipping boy, in much of the work that now goes by the name of "Theory." In those areas of the academy that have embraced Theory—English and Comparative Literature, most notably; that is, fields whose business it is to study literature and the aspects of culture that produce it—humanism of any stripe is associated with a kind of bad faith, a yearning to keep near myths about the human and its place in the world we know to be bunk (for helpful, and by no means complementary, studies of the legacy of humanism, see David 1996, Cooper 2002, Todorov 2002, and Wolfe 2010).

Harrison does not take issue with many of the worries that underwrite contemporary anti-humanism and this is why he has been one of humanism's most able defenders: he is with anti-humanists in respect to much of what they decry yet he shows that their complaints lead us not to abandon humanism but just those unfortunate habits of thought which humanists can easily shake. To get the obvious out of the way, Harrison is not a humanist in any of the following senses: he doesn't gush about the sovereignty of reason or the harmony of human mind and natural world; he doesn't wonder whether the poet or the scientist is more godlike; he is aware of the inherent limitations of our "epistemic situation"; and he can openly and fully acknowledge the horrors of the twentieth century and the extent to which entirely human failings underwrote them. Apart from the latter (see Harrison 2006), he doesn't go on about these things, but he does offer an alternative to those characteristic sages of late modernity who take "humanism" to mean something midway between "imbecilic" and "evil". Harrison has helped philosophers to see how to divorce a defence of humanism from a retreat to Enlightenment and Romantic exaggerations about the human and its place in the world, and in his hands humanism cannot be reduced to any of the facile, strawman positions it is currently rumoured to champion.

So what is humanism for Harrison? I will put it baldly here, adding detail in the following sections. Humanism, in respect to both literature and life, is at root what we have if we find that we can tell a certain kind of story. The story can be told in a number of ways, but the sort Harrison is interested in will typically conclude with a vindication of the role of art in human life and begin with an account of those aspects of language and culture that make the production of this art possible. The story will insist that coming to understand how art makes meaning possible is a condensed and purified version of the story of how human culture more generally does. In other words, it will be a story of how certain of our cultural practices are capable of conjuring out of our various sayings and doings a sense of a shared world: a site of not uniform but at least shared, public paths of thinking, feeling, valuing, and living.

Now a humanist needn't give pride of place to art when telling this story. But humanists, Harrison included, tend to find the work of art to be the best image we have of how our human practices can conspire to make a particular achievement possible. Explaining what this achievement consists in is where the philosophical work begins. But the achievement, whatever else it does, reveals that human language and culture can on occasion give us access to something *worldly enough*: a realm that is both human in origin yet sufficiently deserving of the name "real" to dispel the sense that it is a mere projection of human thought and speech. Somewhat like Wallace Stevens' supreme fiction (see Stevens 1942), the achievement will consist in the yoking together, in the case of art, of the world and the imagination, or, in the case of our "everyday" practices, of the practical and the real (more on this below). And this achievement will at times strike us as successful enough that it will justify our sense that there is something of substance, something more than just made-up, fictive, or chimerical, in this shared world made available to us through the gift of acculturation.

This is humanism and not, or not just, realism because it emphasizes from beginning to end, and with a reasonable amount of optimism, the ability of human practices to create what the traditional realist thinks we in someway only find or discover. This isn't to say that humanists of this sort take reality to be completely "constructed", whatever this would exactly mean. It is rather to say that certain of our creations open up, as a Heideggerian would put it, avenues through which reality can disclose itself. Consider the practice of measurement—one of Harrison's favorite tropes—by virtue of which thoroughly human inventions like pounds, kilos and stones allow the world to reveal to us something about how it is. The world is not, of course, itself made of pounds or kilos or stones (at least of the sort relevant here), and it would be silliness to argue about which of these units of measurement is "right" or gets closer to reality as it (really) is. But the ability to talk about ways in which things in the real world *are* can only get afoot on account of the creation of tools such as these. Likewise, many of our cultural practices employ human creations that set the stage for a kind of revelation, not in any splendid metaphysical sense but to the extent that these practices render intelligible questions about how the world is and is not. And this is what sets the stage for whole cultural enterprise of articulating a sense of our world. Without the ability to ask the worldly questions these human creations make possible, thought and talk about reality are impoverished to the point of incommunicability (these issues are treated exhaustively in Hanna and Harrison 2004).

Like the idealist or anti-realist, the humanist acknowledges that the world we are bound to have is a thoroughly human world. But the humanist refuses to see this as a kind of barrier or congenital deficiency in our worldly condition, as something *merely* human or *merely* cultural or *merely* conventional. It is human in origin but—or so the idea goes—this does not preclude but grounds the possibility of inheriting something "real," a world of the sort orthodox realists think only an act of cognitive or linguistic transcendence will bring to us. This is a thought that Hilary Putnam captures well:

> What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call "language" or "mind" penetrate so deeply into what we call "reality" that the very project of representing ourselves as being mappers of something "language independent" is fatally compromised from the very start. (Putnam, 1990, 28).

Stanley Cavell is also worth mentioning here, in a passage I suspect Harrison admires:

> For Wittgenstein philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expressions. He wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge. The limitations of knowledge are no longer barriers to a more perfect apprehension, but the conditions of knowledge, *überhaupt*, of anything we should call knowledge. (Cavell, 1969, 61-2).

Like Putnam, Harrison urges that the connection between the human and the real is more direct, more immediate, than can be captured by talk of language or thought as reaching out to a fully independent world. The connection to the world that most matters must in some sense be

internal to our practices, woven into the fabric of thought and language, at least on occasion and to some not insignificant degree. To regard reality as utterly "language independent" is to relegate the very thing we wish to possess to a place wholly beyond us and so beyond the realm in which we speak, think, and create works that, frequently and fundamentally, struggle to be expressive of the world in which we find ourselves. As a few millennia of Western philosophy have shown us, inseparable from this picture is the sceptical idea that "as far as we know" we never succeed in accessing this realm in our attempts at representing and knowing it, a thought that will lead most reasonable minds to conclude that we therefore have little business invoking the notion of "reality", except, perhaps, as a kind of regulatory ideal or fiction of convenience. For Harrison, as for Cavell, the trick here is to find a way of thinking about human practices and conventions that does not make them appear bound to fall always on the unflattering side of the line that divides the real from everything else. Combining the two ideas, Harrison's humanism wishes to see what we call reality not as existing in an elsewhere we can at best represent from afar—giving it then a connection nearly as tenuous as one gets from a solitary act of reference—but as something we can find *within* those very practices that give us a purchase on the world; and it urges that if we can see it as such, we will find that our experience of human culture and its most exemplary products will be an experience of something sufficiently real to satisfy the wish for worldliness that animates humanism.

It will not be a surprise that what contrasts with humanism in Harrison's work is what he calls the "prison-house" view of language and, one might add, of mind and culture more generally. Much of Harrison's work shows how a great amount of the philosophy of language we have inherited from last century (though with roots in Plato and Locke; see Harrison 1993) leads to such a view, unawares or not. It is a view that fashions a sense that what keeps us trapped *here* is, despairingly, much of what makes up the human world: all the practices and conventions we stand upon whenever we direct our mouths or minds toward the world. And, of course, if we have a view of this sort, it will in all sorts of obvious ways wreak havoc on our sense of the value of practices that are content to retreat into human language and thought, exploring the words, feelings, and perspectives that constitute our human way in the world. In short, it is very bad business for our understanding of both language and art. Humanism, for Harrison, is what we have not when we find a way out of this prison-house but when we discover that there never was one at all. If talk of "projecting", "constructing" and "fictionalizing" are intelligible here, it is not in respect to what we call reality but to the sense of human minds, languages and cultures as prison-houses that keep it from us.

I have said little here about *how* our practices and pursuits might be seen as grounding this more internal, immediate commerce with the real. I will discuss it in the next section, when I turn explicitly to literature. But to give a sense of the possibilities this kind of humanism opens up, I conclude this section with the following challenging but intriguing passage. Here Harrison is commenting on the philosophical significance of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*:

> Mr. Ramsey is a creature of pure textuality. He is an insubstantial pageant. His tissues are the tissues of words which have conjured him up. Must we then treat him as having nothing at all to do with reality? Well, not necessarily. For the tissue of words which constitute him are not just tissues of words. Behind the words are the system of practices which give life and meaning to the words. Those practices interact with reality in multifarious ways. They link us each to the complex, commonplace world to which we all share common access [...] The textuality which constitutes Mr. Ram-

sey's personality is, then, not a textuality of words alone, but a textuality of practices. And since we share those practices, and are also in part constituted as individuals by them, the practices out of which Mr. Ramsey is constructed link him not merely to the reality of the world present to all of us as the condition of our speaking a common language, but to the reality which we constitute: to us, as readers. (Harrison, 1993, 42)

This is how a humanist of the sort just described wishes to speak. Now on to seeing what it means to speak like this, and precisely how one can get away with it.

III PRACTICE, LITERATURE, LIFE

As should be clear, a defense of literary humanism turns out to be a defense of humanism *tout court*, since on this particular battleground all of what conspires to put literature in need of such a defense is precisely what puts so much of human culture in need of it. In this respect, the literary work of art turns out to function as what Wittgenstein calls a "perspicuous representation" of culture itself and the challenges we face when we attempt to offer a philosophical justification of it. All that makes the literary work of art seem powerless to touch the real is in effect what has all along made the basic manner in which the human confronts the world appear essentially the same. The arguments that lead one to doubt that literature could ever successfully represent, yield knowledge of, or state truths about reality are of a piece with the very arguments that lead one to wonder whether *any* human practice can. What philosophy needs is a perspective that allows one to escape the circle of argumentation that makes both literature and human practice more generally look so degraded from the standpoint of reality. This is what Harrison gives us.

Before outlining how Harrison tries to pull this off, let me state more clearly just what is at stake in respect to a defense of *literary* humanism. When one is called on to defend literary humanism, one is asked to justify the cultural role literature has served in virtually ever corner of the world, and since stories were first told. The reason all this talk about truth, knowledge, and reality is thought to be so important here is that these are the terms we have traditionally employed when attempting to vindicate the cognitive, moral, and educative power of literary works of art. A theory of literature that implies, as *many* do, that literature can have no direct, intentional, or significant commerce with the real appears to pull from underneath us the very ground on which we have always made sense of the value of literature. Literary humanism, as an aesthetic expression of the humanist's general wish for worldliness, is the struggle to find philosophical grounds for attributing to literature the kind of cultural power it has habitually been thought to enjoy. True, modernity is reputed to be less reliant on the arts of any form as viable instruments of knowledge or tools of communication (all that business about the ascendency of science, technology, and capitalism's "culture industry"). But even if one accepts this, there is room for one to desire, with the literary humanist, to show the old stories still worth telling and new ones worth devising.

But precisely why does one face a serious philosophical challenge when defending literary humanism? As Harrison has shown, there is a powerful tension between our commitment to this deceptively innocent thesis of literary humanism and our understanding of language itself, and so the attempt to defend literary humanism takes the form of a genuine philosophical puzzle in his work. Thus what one finds in Harrison is something that that the philosophy of literature is always in

search of in its struggle to get a bit of respect from philosophy at large: a set of hard problems to be solved, a good paradox, and a clear point of continuity with the work that has guided the great traditions of the twentieth-century. Harrison's contribution has been to show that overcoming these problems requires a radical refashioning not only of our understanding of how literature works but of how language (and those aspects of human practice that sponsor it) itself does. His strategy is in effect the Humean one of offering a sceptical solution to a sceptical paradox. Unlike traditional defenses of literary humanism, Harrison does not struggle to find a way to assert what the skeptic denies, namely, that literature can represent reality or state truths about it. He rather embraces the very skeptical claims that threaten literary humanism, and he reveals that a vindication of it never required affirming these claims in the first place.

It is worth saying a bit more about these sceptical arguments. I outline one of the many one could choose from, since it the one with which Harrison has been most concerned and which is arguably most challenging to literary humanism. Since I will be dispensing with it rather quickly, I will not attempt to make it as compelling as the skeptic would wish. What I ask the reader to consider is not quite the soundness of the argument but the frame of philosophical mind to which it would appeal. It should be a familiar frame of mind, and, while misguided, natural enough, given entrenched philosophical views about what must be the case for language or thought of any sort to be informative of reality.

Call it the problem of *representationalism.* To see the problem, begin by asking what so much as infuses a sentence with *aboutness*, what manages to tether it to something beyond itself? An altogether common, and intuitive, answer is: reference. And when one asks what it means to refer to the world in speech, the standard response is, simply put, that one attempts to *represent* it, as I do when I say, "my friends laugh at me even when I am not telling a joke." In this case, I use my words to bring before you a picture of how things (often) stand in the world, at least in my corner of it. In general, representation explains, in one way or another—and there is an enormous range of competing accounts—how language can describe the world, namely, by holding up a "mirror" to it, for example by conveying a proposition that pictures or otherwise configures a sense of the sorts of relations we take to obtain in the world (my friends as laughing on occasions I'd prefer they wouldn't, etc.). And it is here that questions of truth and falsity become intelligible and hence that the unceasing debates about realism, anti-realism, relativism, and idealism gain traction. For once we say that language claims its worldliness through the act of representing reality, then one of course must ask under which conditions these representations are *successful* and how we can ever know this. It is commonly on this foundation of what we can call *representationalism* that questions of our access to (or occlusion from) truth and reality are fashioned, indeed rendered intelligible. (For a nearly exhaustive canvassing of arguments both for and against the idea that literature imparts extra-literary truths, see Lamarque and Olsen 1994. For the seminal arguments in analytic aesthetics against the idea that literary works bear cognitive value, see Stolnitz 1992 and Diffey 1995. I survey recent work on these issues in Gibson 2008.)

Here's the rub. Literary humanism wishes to see literature as *about* reality. And the problem is not that we have little reason to believe that its representations are ever successful or that we can never quite know whether literature gets reality right. Against the backdrop of representationalism, literary humanism appears to fail the test of wordiness *before* these questions can even be intelligibly raised. For literature, it turns out, does not even attempt to represent reality and so it refuses to engage in the very activity that would permit us to raise the question of its worldliness in the first

place.

As Harrison argues, much philosophy of language leads to the view that it is, "not that the statements which figure in works of fiction are false, but something rather worse, that the statements which figure in works of fiction are, as it were, dummy statements, incapable of being assigned any truth-value, either true or false." (Harrison, 2009, 226-7) Works of imaginative literature—the sort obviously at issue here—are works of *fiction*. And note that even if we think that literary language is in someway representational and truth-bearing, the directionality will still be all wrong for literary humanism: literature represents, if anything, and as Harrison would put it, imagined worlds and not the real one, and so it at best can articulate fictional rather than worldly truths. When Milton writes, "So stretched out huge in length the Arch-Fiend lay/Chained on the burning lake," (Milton, 2005, ll 209-10) something is surely pictured, but one won't find it in the real world. And even if one could find it there, it wouldn't show that *Paradise Lost* was referring to or otherwise representing it. The great poem, presumably, is here representing a link in a narrative chain, a happening in the *fictional* story it tells, and we wouldn't call for corrections to *Paradise Lost* if the real Satan confessed that Hell had actually treated him better than this. The point is, literary humanism appears to run painfully afoul of both how philosophy of language tells us words become worldly and what so much philosophy of literature tells us fictional stories are *about* in a basic "metaphysical" sense.

So how might one respond to this? Harrison's solution seems altogether obvious, once put, though I am unaware of any philosopher of literature before him who hit upon anything resembling it. It is at this point in the defense of literary humanism that one plugs in all the talk about cultural practices I discussed above. There is no use denying that that there are such things as representational and referential uses of language. But the crucial question is often overlooked: what sorts of *prior* connections between language and the world must already be in place for linguistic reference or representation to be possible? And it is here that one explores the role of cultural practices, described above, in creating the conditions that make it possible to speak about the world, practices which bestow us with the very tools, standards, and criteria that render questions about the reality intelligible. What this opens up is an awareness that there are two ways in which language encounters reality, one on the level of reference and the other on the level of cultural practice.

What we'll find when exploring the latter, cultural mode of encounter would appear to be much more interesting for the humanist, for it is here that one sees at the most fundamental level all that goes into what we call the *human* world. It shows us how these practices are disclosive of human reality by revealing "the ways in which our practices have devised for us a specific kind of world, the human world, whose nature determines the scope and boundaries of what for us counts as a human life" (Harrison, 2009, 221) Among much else, we find how our culture and its conventions are expressive of human interests and thus of those aspects our world we wish to get a grip on, and it can cast light on the array of shared concepts, values, and meanings that act as the raw material with which we articulate a sense of our world and, of course, ourselves. This, we can now see, is what is at stake in the passage on *To the Lighthouse* with which I closed the previous section and so explains how Harrison can get away with the bold claims he makes on behalf of humanism, even as he embraces some of the convictions about language and literature that would appear at odds with it.

In *Inconvenient Fictions*, his earliest statement of this view, Harrison describes this insight into the basic intermingling of culture and language in terms of an insight into *constitutive* language:

> It is time to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. Literary language, the language of narrative fiction and poetry, is, root and branch, constitutive language. As such it

is non-referential and it makes no statements…It is a language occupied solely with itself, *in a sense*. The mistake promoted by the Positivistic vision of language is to suppose that this sense can be absolute. Language is everywhere hopelessly infected by the extra-linguistic: the relationship between its signs runs ineluctably by way of the world. So there is, just as the critical humanist has always maintained, a strong connection between language and Reality; only it does not run by way of reference and truth. Rather, it permeates the thickness of the language we speak. (Harrison, 1991, 51)

This strikes me as decisive a rejection of representationism—and the traditional formulations of humanism that are premised on it—as one could hope for. When we find ourselves in the presence of exemplary literary achievements, we come into contact with "constitutive" language in the sense that *in* these works we see language showing us its structure, casting in relief the particular coming together of words, deeds, and values that constitute our practices and so our basic alignment with our world. Works of imaginative literature may not *represent* anything real or actual. But the forms of cultural activity in which both we and creatures of literary fiction engage are as a rule *common,* and this is what supports the humanist's conviction that in one way or another literature nearly always concerns itself with life. Even in a work of dazzling satire or modernist experimentation that has humans doing very unhuman things, the light it casts can have a powerful ability to highlight, even if associatively and negatively, what *we* do and how *we* are. Harrison's various readings of *Kind Lear*, *Measure for Measure, To the Lighthouse*, and the holocaust fiction of Aharon Appelfeld show compellingly that this idea can be fleshed out both philosophically and critically.

What we find is that the dramatic core of literature, when successful, is nothing but the dramatic core of life: of those forms of activity and interaction we call culture (I explore this in Gibson 2006 and Gibson 2007). In this respect, the dramatic and not the mimetic would seem the more appropriate category for literary humanism. This is one way of putting the insight embodied in still fashionable narrative accounts of the self. If we are, in some way, made of stories, then stories, and the *dramatic* encounter with life they explore, function as a common currency of communication when we attempt to call attention to the sorts of doing, suffering, and happenings that constitute the human world (one should keep in mind that even Chekhov's explorations of all that is mundane and tedious in domestic life are the stuff of drama, so this argument casts the net sufficiently wide). A fictional story may not represent any actual truth, but, if Freud was correct, rarely do the stories we offer of ourselves. At any rate, what matters is *not* the representational but the dramatic quality of the story and its ability to confess something of significance about the shared cultural stage upon which human lives, fictional and real, are carried out. Harrison captures this idea nicely when he tell us that the value of literature resides,

[I]n the power of its medium, language, to summon up and display…through its deployment in the medium of a fiction, the nature of the human practices and choices which found the conceptual distinctions it enshrines, and which simultaneously found, along with them, a world; a world which is not only the world in which we live, but that world—and its founding words—made flesh in us: the world which exists only in us, the world of whose values and assumptions we are the living bear-

ers;—and which is not, moreover, a static world, but a world constantly in a slow, glacier-like flux of change, one of the motivating forces of which, of course, is great literature. That is why great literature is, or should be, important to us. (Harrison, 2009, 224)

From this vantage-point, traditional, representationalist brands of literary humanism seem hopelessly conservative, even paradoxical, implying as they do that the reality we want is *external* to us and hence to the world *we* constitute, which can seem more a plea to escape the human realm than to find a way to exult in our acceptance of it. In this respect, traditional humanism leaves us feeling, as Cavell would put it, "chafed by our skin," failing to see that the reality that matters to a humanist is not *extra*-literary or even *extra*-linguistic at all and so that reaching it does not require any act of transcendence. The world the humanist should want is given expression in the very culture with which literary works are so intimately bound.

The only form of skepticism that could pose a threat to this brand of humanism would be the kind that denies that literature is ever about anything at all. This would be the stripe of linguistic and literary scepticism that urges that all meaning is impossible, that the very idea of *content* is a myth, and that texts themselves do not really exist. While this form of skepticism still has few practitioners, even those in Theory will acknowledge that it smacks of the 1980s and so of a moment past. Harrison's humanism offers powerful resources for attacking this form of skepticism, but I shall stop the story here. I hope that what I have said gives a fair sense of how viable Harrison's humanism is for the contemporary scene, a scene in which concerns with ethical criticism, selfhood, aesthetics, and the seriousness (and not, or not just, playfulness) of literature are happily on the horizon again, in both philosophy and literary studies.

IV REPRESENTATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATIONALISM?

I find all of this convincing and a massive step forward in how we conceive the project of humanism. And I think this in large part because I agree with Harrison that representationalism has acted as kind of undetected virus in traditional humanism, which, once identified, explains why humanism seems an ever more risible position the more philosophers and literary theorists pay serious attention to the nature of literary language. So I agree with Harrison wholeheartedly that we would do best simply to lose it and rebuild on new ground. And I also agree that Harrison's practice-based humanism is the foundation on which to build. In fact, I think the power of the insight into the workings of cultural practice that Harrison uncovers accounts for the lion's share of literature's most meaningful ways of engaging with reality. What I find myself less comfortable with is relinquishing all talk of representation. It strikes me that we have two ways to respond to Harrison's powerful critique of representationalism. One, Harrison's, is to show that we can move forward without any significant notion of literary representation. The other is to devise a properly *literary* notion of representation that decisively cuts all ties with representationalism. I make no claim that the latter can actually be done—it is possible that we shall find that we cannot have representation without representationalism—but it is worth briefly exploring the prospects for a reformed notion of representation.

It is important to recall that the term "representation" has always had an independent *aesthetic* usage, though, in fairness to Harrison, one of those central usages, Plato's theory of *mimêsis*,

in all sorts of obvious ways plays directly into representationalism. Unfortunately, in the contemporary philosophy of literature we not only are trained to think of representation in mimetic terms but something even more suspicious: we conceive of representation as an essentially *linguistic* affair, that is, as a mimetic employment of *words*. Of course this would have been alien to Plato, whose theory of mimesis takes images and not descriptions as its point of departure. So whence this tethering of the mimetic sense of representation to the linguistic?

The story is complex, but it is easy enough to indicate what it will be a story of. For anyone working on this side of twentieth-century anglophone philosophy, our concept of representation is filtered through the work of "high" analytic philosophy of language. And consider, just for an example, the overwhelming preoccupation with the nature of the proposition, itself perhaps the best image we have of a mimetically charged employment of words (hence the positivistic flirtation with the "picture theory" of the proposition). As philosophy of literature worked its way back into mainstream philosophy after a good half-century in the woods, it did so largely on the coattails of analytic philosophy of language, devising very sophisticated theories of fictional truth and reference by borrowing the resources of philosophy of language. This was in many respects for the good, but it also helps us to see why the philosophy of literature now finds itself with such a explicitly linguistic, mimetic notion of representation (I develop this line of thought in Gibson 2007). Even in Theory the story is not so different, enlisting as Theory has the kind of post-war continental philosophy that, along with analytic philosophy, represents the great "linguistic turn" of twentieth-century philosophy. One cannot help but wonder what our notion of representation in contemporary philosophy of literature would look like had it been devised in continuity with, say, the philosophy of fine art and not the philosophy of language. At any rate, one does have the feeling that it is a contingent fact of recent history that we philosophers of literature cannot help but talk like representationalists, in the sense given above, whenever we talk about representation. This clearly is not the place to launch a new theory of representation, and in fact I do not have one to offer. But let me say a few things that, with hope, will motivate an interest in reviving at least some talk of representation.

Here is one reason I think we might wish to be able to speak of literature as having an essential representational power: if we give up all talk of representation, we will have a very difficult time telling a compelling account of what it means for a novel to succeed or, perhaps more importantly, *fail* in its attempt to offer a cognitively significant encounter with the world. The representationalist has always had an easy time with this: if a novel strives to be a mirror of the world, it can either succeed or fail to offer an accurate representation of the world --failure and success are just modes of *representational* failures or successes. But if we turn in the other direction and banish all talk of representation, I fear we will find ourselves with a poverty of resources for speaking meaningfully about success and failure here.

To motivate this criticism, consider Dostoyevsky's Preface to *Notes from Underground*, where he makes the sort of authorial promise to illuminate reality that the humanist believes we should takes so seriously:

> It goes without saying that both these Notes and their author are fictitious. Neverthe-less, people like the author of these notes may, indeed must, exist in our society, if we think of the circumstances under which that society has been formed. It has been my wish to show the public a character of the recent past more clearly than is usually

shown. (Dostoyevsky, 2001, 95)

Assume Dostoyevsky delivered what he promised: he succeeded in showing us something about this "public character of the recent past." Something inside of us is bound to speak up and ask what, exactly, can this mean, if not that he *represented*, in some way, this past accurately? Exactly what does he get right, and just how does he get it right, if not by representing it?

Harrison's humanism offers us enough to see how he might build his response to this. He is clever enough to try to accommodate the sensible intuitions representationalism harnesses without accepting its ugly bits. Harrison can say, for example, that this success will consist in the way literary characters, "invoke features of a human world we share with them, which link our situation to theirs, allowing the emotions associated with the pressures of that common situation to flood from us into them, in such a way, that, viewed in them *as in a glass* (for the specular metaphor has always possessed a certain intuitive force, which it retains in this connection and to this extent), our own situation as inhabitants of, and as the bearers of natures formed by the pressures of, a certain human world becomes in certain respects clearer to us, because surveyable as a whole." (Harrison, 2009, 222) This is intriguing, but I would like to press Harrison on this notion of literature's invocation of a common world which we find in fictions. How, precisely, do we *see* a work as invoking our world if not for our ability to see, in some way, the work as representing our world? What so much as inclines us to establish this link between our world and the fictional world of a text, if not that we *already* see in its fictions, somehow, a representation of our world? The trick here is to refuse to allow representationalism, or any image of *mirroring*, creep in when hearing these questions. I agree that no mirroring is going in here, certainly not in a linguistic sense. But it seems incautious, even a little perverse, therefore to conclude that no representing is going on, either.

Perhaps the possibility of failure is more interesting than that of success here. Assume that Dostoyevsky failed—however hard it may be to imagine this—to show us the "character of the recent past"; assume that he did not deliver on his promise. In this case, what did he fail at, exactly? Harrison's solution turns on his idea of language, and hence of literary language, as infused with reality: reality, at least of the human variety, is "internal" to it. But this cannot mean that *any* literary work, because built of natural language, is by that very fact revelatory of this human reality? Harrison is surely aware of this, and he implies no such thing. But I find it difficult to understand what his theory would say here. We need to leave room for this possibility of failure, and it seems altogether natural to say that this requires that we be able to say of certain novels that "that is *not* how we are" or that "human reality is *not* like that," and to say this in terms of its *representation* of life and not, or not just, of how language in the context of literature reveals something about the relationship between our practices, our language, and our sense of our world. The latter feels too general, too abstract, to be able to capture the uniqueness and specificity of a particular novel's manner of getting us and our wold right or wrong.

Again, if these failures do not consist in representational failures, then in what, exactly? One response at Harrison's disposal would be to say that they consist in failures of *language*: novelists who fail to engage with reality have *misused* language. Novels that are humanistic failures are, say, extended strings of nonsense (of the Wittgensteinian, if not everyday, variety of "nonsense"). But I very much doubt that Harrison would encourage such an interpretation of his theory of humanism. For if Dostoyevsky failed, certainly we would not want to say of an author with his mastery over words that he was misusing *language*, that he was, in his way, speaking nonsense? Again we can see

the allure of a recourse to some conception of representation. It seems much easier simply to claim that he failed to represent reality aright: the language of his work is, as it were, in order; the representation he offered is not.

One way of developing this plea for a literary-humanistic conception of representation might be the following. We might bite the bullet and concede that the language of literature represents nothing but fictions and fictions alone. But this is only to speak of a literary work viewed in utter isolation from the culture that has received it *and done something with it.* That is, we can see the claim that a literary works represents reality as a kind of *right* a work has won and not as specifying something its *language* does. It would be the right, or privilege, to stand for us in a certain way, as a narrative that we put forth as embodying, even as announcing, what we take our way in the world to be, or at least one such way. If we view Dostoyevsky's story as a mere peice of language and look nowhere beyond it, the very question of whether it *represents* modern alienation might well be unanswerable, even unintelligible. But it is not if viewed in terms of his masterpiece's place in a modern culture certain members of which have embraced it and come to link it in all sorts of manifest and implicit ways to its self-conception. Indeed, it seems to me that the practice of criticism itself is one example of how these links are established, and that all the various aspects of our culture, from classrooms to cafe conversations, help fill out this story of how a culture breathes into a certain literary work these points of connection to "reality" such that it becomes intelligible to speak of it as a representation of our world (see Gibson 2006). This is not to say that culture, rather than literary works, does all of the worldly work in creating a representation of life. It is rather to say that we should see the two working as in tandem if we wish to understand how a literary work can come to acquire all the forms of worldly significance we attribute to it. And this seems to me to indicate one possible route for embracing representation without representationalism, since it promises to allow us to abandon all of the mimetic-linguistic baggage of the latter when explaining how fictions can represent the real.

I'll stop here, before my point becomes a rant. But I hope my point, if necessarily inchoate, suffices to make one think that we might do well to reclaim for philosophy of literature a workable conception of representation. All of this is been more an expression of wonderment than a criticism of Harrison's work. But I do wonder whether he would accept this call for a reformed theory of representation? It does not strike me that it would be inconsistent with his theory. But the question is just how Harrison would accommodate, if it all, this plea for a properly literary-humanistic theory of representation.

V Conclusion

Harrison's brand of humanism in effect shows us that we have all we need to be humanists if we have access only to the kinds of cultural practice that relativists and anti-realists earn their bread arguing are all we have access to. His work helps us see that what humanists should want are modest but effective terms for justifying at least some of the culture we create and for praising at least some its products, literary works of art chief among them. It is a humanism one does not need to be ashamed of in public, not even in the presence of one's colleagues in English. It is sufficiently modest in its claims on behalf of the real that it should be acceptable even to those recalcitrant sorts who cannot tolerate talk about the real and worldly: apart from their native dislike of a kind of vocabulary, there really isn't much for them to take issue with. And for those of us who suffer from a serious case of

late-romantic longing for worldiness, it shows us how we can satisfy our desire without forgetting that we are modern or demanding that we ignore the better part of reason. To be sure, there are still many skeptics out there, and I've said nothing here about the recent, meteoric rise of post-humanism in literary studies, which, despite its bad press in philosophy, is not as silly as we would like to believe. But this is just to say that there is still work to be done, and I hope to have shown here that Harrison offers us very powerful tools for getting started on this work.

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