Cognition and literary ethical criticism

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ABSTRACT: "Ethical criticism" is an approach to literary studies that holds that reading certain carefully selected novels can make us ethically better people, e.g., by stimulating our sympathetic imagination (Nussbaum). I will try to show that this nonargumentative approach cheapens the persuasive force of novels and that its inherent bias and censorship undercuts what is perhaps the principal value and defense of the novel—that reading novels can be critical to one's learning how to think.

KEYWORDS: argument, cognition, ethical criticism, novels, Nussbaum

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking of the late 1960s and the 1970s—the time of her graduate education and the beginning of her teaching career—Martha Nussbaum says "one rarely found anything but contempt for ethical criticism of literature" (1990: 13). So she set about "to begin to recover" (22) this way of taking literature seriously, inspired mainly by Aristotle, publishing her first articles along these lines in 1983. This was not exactly my experience. In 1972 as a junior I took a course titled "Philosophy in Literature" and as a senior took a seminar titled "Philosophy in the Novels of D.H. Lawrence." Later, in 1982 as an advanced graduate student, I taught my own introduction to ethics course, where we studied William Frankena's *Ethics* (one of the books in the old Prentice-Hall series on the subfields of analytic philosophy), along with Thomas Nagel's *Mortal Questions*, Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, and Lawrence's *The Rainbow*.

Aside from a mild chiding of Nussbaum, the point of this bit of biography is to indicate the issues at stake here. I saw in Nietzsche's work a specification of an ideal way of life, and in Lawrence's work the specification of a contrasting ideal. Notably, expression of the will (to power), the central concept in Nietzsche's philosophy, is emphasized in his ideal, whereas in the Lawrencian ideal, the will and its 'civic' manifestations are deemphasized. Nussbaum subscribes to the "Aristotelian idea that ethics is the search for a specification of the good life for a human being" (1990: 139). She too sees at least certain novels as posing answers to the question "How should one live?" (36), which is the main reason the novels are of interest (11ff.). My topic is, by what means does a novel propose and propound such an answer or ideal? How does a novel offer an ethical viewpoint as valid? This paper will consider and evaluate some of Nussbaum's famous writings related to these issues. The main thing that I will try to show—which has not been attempted before so far as I can tell—is that her view could be significantly improved by

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more explicitly adopting and developing the idea that novels can be arguments. These are arguments of a special sort that will be explained.

2. SOCIAL/POLITICAL JUSTICE

According to Posner (2009: esp. 458), ethical criticism or the "edifying tradition" holds that the quality of a literary work is largely a function of the moral correctness of the views it may be taken to express, and that immersion in literature can make us ethically better people. Insofar as Plato found little or no value in what he regarded as immoral literature, he originated a version of ethical criticism. A prominent recent proponent, other than Nussbaum, is Booth (1988 and 1998). The opposing approach to ethical criticism is "aestheticism," which has it roots at least as far back as Kant, with his view that (proper) judgments of beauty are disinterested, and are made apart from any consideration of the usefulness of the object. Posner is an example of a recent aesthetic.

Nussbaum's view, particularly as concerns social and political justice, revolves around the point that immersion in literature helps to develop the sympathetic imagination, which works toward a good end or has good social effects, at least in the case of some novels. She says, for example:

> . . .literary works typically invite readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences. . .The reader's emotions and imagination are highly active as a result. . .reading a novel like this one [Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*] makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own, makes us acknowledge workers as deliberating subjects with complex loves and aspirations and a rich inner world. (Nussbaum 1995: 5, 34)

For Nussbaum, novels stimulate the sympathetic imagination; that is what they contribute that is special in *making* us recognize such things as the equal humanity of others and *making* us have respect for them as persons. It is not supposed to be argument or a convincing line of reasoning. Nussbaum says, for instance, "an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others" (1995: xvi). Nussbaum consistently writes as if stimulation of the sympathetic imagination, and generally any contribution of the novel, is needed simply as a complement, albeit an indispensable one, to more formal ethical approaches (cf. 1990: 23-24, 27).

I think that if this is all there is to the morally persuasive force of novels, then that force is cheapened compared to what it otherwise might be. For one thing, the imagination may be fickle and not fire in the right way. It seems to be a psychological fact that "the effort to picture the inner lives of others most exerts itself when the others are strange, not when they are pitiable" (Pappas 1997: 286). Indeed, it almost seems a conceptual truth that misfortune that is bleak or *depressing* will not capture the imagination of *healthy* individuals. A related point is that developing empathy in a person is not sufficient to motivate good or compassionate action, as in the case of the empathetic torturer. To this possible objection, Nussbaum replies that "empathy is likely to be hooked up to compassion only in someone who has had a good early education in childhood, one that teaches concern for others" (1998: 352). But in that case, the worry is that reading novels may be gratuitous and Nussbaum's view circular: she shows us how compassion is engendered only in those who already have it (cf. Stow 2000: 194-195). Would the example

set by parents be enough? What about direct institutional measures such as desegregation or affirmative action? More generally, it seems that Nussbaum has not shown that reading novels or immersion in literature is somehow the best—or even a particularly good—way to engender compassion or make us ethically better people. Maxwell cites psychological studies that "identify at least seven interrelated processes" of evoking compassion: "conditioning, mimicry, direct association, language-mediated association, cognitive networking, labelling and finally perspective taking" (2006: 343). Nussbaum focuses on the fourth and last of these.

Underlying most of these worries, I think, is a problem that, following Maxwell (340), I will call "the problem of transference": Will compassion for fictional characters transfer to real people who are similar to the fictional characters in relevant respects? Will the sympathy in the sympathetic imagination hold when there no need for imagination? It seems that there may actually be psychological factors that interfere with such transference. If part of the pleasure of reading novels consists in or arises from the firing of the sympathetic imagination, then you might think that such compassion would not obtain if that pleasure cannot obtain, i.e., at times when you are not reading novels. Even Nussbaum says that without characters to identify with, "we lose interest, and our novel-reading pleasure ceases" (1995: 31). My point, in other words, is that one wonders to what extent the firing of the sympathetic imagination is mere entertainment or, say, a kind voyeurism. I suppose *this* would not be a problem if life is art, or rather, one (perversely) treats life as art.

So why not avoid the problem of transference altogether and focus on direct means (such as enacting good law) of producing the desired salutary effect? Or as Nussbaum says, quoting a character in a Henry James novel, why not look to "poor dear old life" (1990: 45) for the proper material for moral conversions? Nussbaum's primary answer is that life is generally neither wide nor deep enough. Nearly all of us cannot help but to live life mostly in a series of narrowly defined experiences; "literature extends" this, she says, "making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling" (47). Fair enough. However, in making the point that life is not deep enough, Nussbaum claims:

> . . .in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived. (Nussbaum 1990: 47)

This makes one feel uneasy. Is life in this way really *inferior* to art? I think I may have plowed through proportionately at least as much literature with dulled senses as life with dulled senses. One wants both to say that Nussbaum's view is here somehow upside down or immature, yet agree with her main point that literature can morally improve life.

3. HOW SHOULD ONE LIVE?

We are transitioning from considering Nussbaum's later writing (mainly 1995) on how reading novels can improve social and political justice to her earlier writing (mainly 1990) on how novels can contribute to ethics understood as the "specification of the good life for a human being" (cf. her 1998: 346, where she notes this difference). The focus in

the earlier writing is more personal, is more on the individual. While I think the earlier work is more successful, as far as I can tell she does not actually explicate any novel by fully presenting what she takes to be its specification of the good life for a human being or how one should live. Indeed, one commentator claims that Nussbaum holds that "the philosophical significance of novels is found, not in whatever theories or principles they might overtly discuss or dramatize, but in their literary form and their prose style" (Maitzen 2006: 190). This claim is too extreme; the truth lies in a kind of synthesis of this content/form dichotomy. Nussbaum proposes a set of general features that in her view any worthwhile novelistic specification of the good life for a human being will exhibit, and these features for her are at least in part a function or consequence of the novel's formal features. I see three principal ones, which in brief are as follows.

First, Nussbaum says, in contrast notably to utilitarianism, that "the organizing vision of the novels [selected by her] shows that one thing is not just a different quantity of the other … the novels show us the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking," or in other words, the 'noncommensurability of valuable things' (1990: 36). The novels are supposed to exhibit this in the human conflicts, decisions, and dilemmas that they inevitably describe, many with tragic dimensions (37). After all, we cannot imagine a novel that is not primarily about the foibles and vicissitudes of (human) psychology, action, and society, can we? And clearly, the necessity of having a plot structure dictates much of this emphasis.

Second, Nussbaum thinks the novels show us 'the priority of the particular'. This includes the shortcomings of "general principles, fixed in advance of the particular case" as well as the 'thisness' (haecceity) of individuals and their relationships (cf., e.g., Adams 1979). For one's son, daughter, or lover, "no qualitatively similar replacement would be acceptable," unlike in Plato's ideal city. She says "human life, as the novels present it … is lived only once …the very same things will never come around again." So a Kantian kind of "universalizability does not, it would seem, determine every dimension of choice" (1990: 38–40). Surely, much of the focus on the particular (if not its priority) arises from the fact that, as far as subject matter is concerned, the primary elements and connective of a novel inherently are events and forms of causality, not propositions and logical consequence.

Finally, Nussbaum says "the novel as form is profoundly committed to the emotions; its interactions with its readers takes place centrally through them." Emotions have 'ethical value' primarily in that they "embody some of our most deeply rooted views about what has importance, views that could easily be lost from sight during sophisticated intellectual reasoning." This "cognitive dimension" of emotions may make them critical to satisfactory ethical deliberation and decision (1990: 40–42). At least according to one recent interpretation, the case of Huck and the escaped slave Jim in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* appears to have exactly this structure. Huck's emotion of sympathy toward Jim has the upper hand in telling him what is important; his emotion "implicitly involves the judgment that Jim ought to be helped" (Goldman 2010: 9). This judgment overrides Huck's explicit moral reasoning, which embodies the common norms of his society, to the point where he decides to ignore these norms and risk eternity in Hell. And in our sympathetic imagination, we might join Huck.

4. THE ROLE OF ARGUMENT

Yet it should be clear by now that the full morally persuasive force of a novel cannot consist only of the operations of the sympathetic imagination. Indeed, it seems that the moral effect that novel-reading can have on us is greater than could be allowed by any affective means alone. I think the other kind of vehicle of persuasion that a novel can exhibit is argument, though of course it is argument of a special sort. There are some indications that Nussbaum would agree, at least in her earlier work, though she does not develop the idea. The most explicit passage along these lines that I can find by Nussbaum is where she says, speaking of Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*:

> The claim that our loves and commitments are so related that infidelity and failure of response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples of loving is a claim for which a philosophical text would have a hard time mounting direct argument. It is only when, as here, we study the loves and attentions of a finely responsive mind such as Maggie's, through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life, that. . .we have something like a persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general. (Nussbaum 1990: 139-140)

It seems to me that some novels are arguments, not merely in the sense that they are stories that offer arguments, but in the sense that, as wholes, they exhibit a distinctive argument form or structure. That structure is a kind of *transcendental* argument, as I think the passage from Nussbaum vaguely suggests. The distinctive power and sweep of the novel is its unrivaled potentiality for intricate plot and associated character development. For any given plot/character development complex, we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true about the real world (of human psychology, action, and society) for the fictional complex to be believable? So it seems that this is the basic structure of the argument of a novel:

(1) This story (complex) is believable.
(2) [This story is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world.]
(3) *Therefore,* such and such principles operate in the real world.

I think that since the "real world" here is the real world of human psychology, action, and society, the argument of a novel will be an ethical argument, at least in the broad Aristotelian sense of having to do with specifying the good life for a human being or how one should live. In other words, the principles evoked will be normative or have normative implications.

The believability premise, (1), is a proposition about the novel; it is not a self-referential claim made by the novel (although in degenerate cases such as parts of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* the novel seems to be explicitly claiming about itself that it is believable). If (1) were an implicit or explicit claim made by the novel, the question of whether this claim itself is believable would arise, and so into an unpleasant regress. The idea is that in virtue of *being* believable, a novel makes an argument telling us something about the real world. (2) expresses the basic notion that allows a novel to be an argument, according to the present theory. This idea is that the believability of a novel requires that certain principles or generalizations be true about the actual world. (2) is in brackets because it is not so much a premise (let alone one that any novelist need intend or even be aware of) as it is the specific inference license or rule that the present theory is proposing.

(3) is the conclusion. It indicates which principles operate in the real world, which is primarily of human nature given the subject matter of novels. In the preceding Nussbaum example, (3) is the generalized (and rosy) "claim that our loves and commitments are so related that infidelity and failure of response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples of loving." (3) is normally largely enthymematic, though the preachier the novel, the less enthymematic this will be. As Rodden says, "in more didactic novels such as George Orwell's *1984*, we are often aware of a presence arranging and evaluating ideas and characters in building a convincing argument" (2008: 155).

Notice that because the "real world" refers primarily to human nature, the transcendental argument of a novel is not seriously susceptible to Stroud's famous objection (1968) to many philosophical transcendental arguments. These arguments reason that since certain aspects of our experience or inner world are undeniable, the external world must have certain features, on the grounds that the latter's being the case is a necessary condition of the former's being the case. Stroud argues that the only condition that is in fact necessary is that we *think* or *conceive* of the external world as having certain features. My point is that the leap from the inner to outer worlds is quite limited in the case of the argument of a novel. This is not only due to the fact that the worlds are largely the same, but is also due to whatever 'privileged access' or psychological attunement we have to (our own) human nature. Moreover, where there is any leap, it does not appear that damage is done by understanding (3) to be about how we must conceive of the real or actual world. Certainly, there is still an argument whether we take "real world" to refer to the real world *simpliciter* or to how we must conceive of the real world. So for this way that we might be moved or persuaded, there is no significant problem of transference from the fictional to the real, unlike with the sympathetic imagination.

Believability is the central element of the transcendental argument. Is the novel successful 'make-believe'? When we ask about this, we are asking about how well the novel succeeds in getting us to suspend disbelief or believe that the event complex could have been true. The novel aims at verisimilitude, while nonfictional narration (history, biography, etc.) aims at veracity. Speaking at a high level of generality, a novel's believability seems to be determined mostly by what can be called the 'internal' and 'external' coherence of the event complex. I take Schultz (1979: 233) to be nicely explicating internal coherence where he says: "the events must be *motivated* in terms of one another … either one event is a causal (or otherwise probable) consequence of another; or some events [sic] happening provides a character with a reason or motive for making another event happen." A novel is not believable if in it things keep happening for no apparent reason or in a way that is inadequately connected with the other events in the novel. But even if the events of a novel are fully connected, the novel may still not be believable because those connections do not cohere well with our widely shared basic assumptions about how human psychology and society not only actually, but necessarily work. This is the main component of external coherence. The believability of a novel requires that its plot and characters be developed in ways that conform to our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature. At a finer-grained level, a novel's believability may be determined by the novel's respecting and embodying factors such as those that we saw Nussbaum propose for any worthwhile specification of the good life for a human being: the noncommensurability of valuable things, the priority of the particular, and the ethical value of emotions.

A novel does not have to be realistic in order to be believable. The events of a novel, as mere possibilities, can be as far-fetched or remote as you like, as in an allegorical, fantasy, or science fiction novel. Extremism of this sort seems to have little effect on believability so long as the events related are reasonably well-connected, and our fundamental shared assumptions about human nature, and about physical nature of course, are respected. A science fiction novelist may push the envelope regarding physical nature, to the point where neither we, nor the characters, nor the author really understand what is going on. Here also, believability breaks down.

Nonlinguistic art forms, such as pure music and painting, cannot be arguments. They are neither believable nor unbelievable—the category does not apply—because they are nonpropositional, though (e.g.) a painting might be realistic. Believability and realism are distinct notions.

Incoherent novels are not believable. No argument can get off the ground because no conclusion, (3), can be reached on the basis of the inadequate plot and character development that is provided. So I think some novels are not arguments. Contrast novels that are typically bad arguments—pulp fiction, 'bodice-rippers', and the like. These typically have formulaic plot and character development. Here the problem essentially is that they tell us little that we do not already know; their derivable conclusions about which principles or generalizations operate in the real world of human psychology, action, and society are trivial or contain little insight. Still, they might be entertaining.

Though we, as researchers, can analyze and give an account of believability as in the preceding, there is no necessity at all in the reader's having such thoughts. It would appear that generally, believability is experienced by the reader as a simple datum or measure of the novel, continuously updated as the reader progresses through the novel. And, like Aristotle said about judging the happiness of a person, you do not know for sure about believability until you reach the novel's end. Believability might prompt the reader to reflect on what truths about human nature are implicated. But again, there is no necessity in this. The novel's argument is there, whether or not anybody notices.

More explicitly adopting this view of how some novels are arguments could allow Nussbaum to deflect the charge of inconsistency that one critic levels against her. Eaglestone says that for Nussbaum, "philosophy is rational, abstract, universal … literature is emotional, specific, contingent," but in her interpretative commentary on novels, "paradoxically, literature has become exactly what Nussbaum claims she thinks it cannot be, examples for philosophy, exploring reason" (1997: 58). There is nothing inconsistent or paradoxical in holding that the "rational, abstract, universal" argument of a novel is *indirectly* or *implicitly* conveyed by the novel's intricate plot and associated character development, by "the loves and attentions of a finely responsive mind such as Maggie's, through all the contingent complexities of a tangled human life," and by exhibiting such things as the noncommensurability of valuable things, the priority of the particular, and the ethical value of emotions. Indeed, one wants to say that a novel cannot be an overt argument and still be fully literary any more than there could be logical relations between events.

One could make a case—especially if, as above, novels can be arguments—that a principal value and defense of the novel is that reading novels may be critical to one's learning how to think or the development of one's cognition, as well as to the ongoing maintenance of this faculty. For example, Depaul (1988: 563) argues for "the importance of novels" as "offering us the opportunity to practice thinking about difficult and interest-

ing situations and complex personalities and providing us with examples of how to discriminate salient features of such situations and characters." Surely, Nussbaum would agree, as we saw earlier for instance in her discussion of life versus literature (art).

But it seems to me that this defense of the novel is undercut by any serious bias or censorship in the determination of which novels are suitable to read. This is just the familiar notion that the best ideas and arguments will tend to prevail in a competitive intellectual marketplace, and that a requirement of advanced or critical thinking is unfettered access to widely diverse views. Yet Nussbaum holds (1998: 346) that only "carefully specified" novels will contribute to improving social and political justice, and only "carefully selected" novels will make worthy contributions to the specification of the good life for a human being. The reason, she says is that

> We are seeking, overall, the best fit between our considered moral and political judgments and the insights offered by our reading. Reading can lead us to alter some of our standing judgments, but it is also the case that these judgments can cause us to reject some experiences of reading as deforming or pernicious. (Nussbaum 1995: 10)

This may be how, for Nussbaum, developing the sympathetic imagination or compassion got to be the *sine qua non* of becoming ethically a better person in social/political matters. Of course this view about compassion is antithetical, for example, to the view Nietzsche expresses in various works, including the "novel," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche, compassion is ultimately a dangerously life-denying sentiment because it protects the weak. Like Plato, Nussbaum is concerned about the potential *corrupting* influence of some literature. Yet one can never be sure that one's own view is not the corrupting one. Too much of human history consists of learning the hard way (over and over again, in a kind of eternal reoccurrence) that it is illiberality that propagates corruption.

5. CONCLUSION

How can reading novels morally improve life? The main thing that I have tried to show is that Nussbaum's answer to this question could be significantly enhanced by more explicitly adopting and developing the idea that novels can be arguments. In addition, such a position would more naturally appreciate the cognitive value of reading novels, and perhaps be less inclined to a presumptuous determination of which reading would be good for you.

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Commentary on "COGNITION AND LITERARY ETHICAL CRITICISM" by Gilbert Plumer

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper "Cognition and Literary Ethical Criticism," Gilbert Plumer argues against an approach to ethics that views the use of literary works as a replacement, more or less, for moral argument. In strong opposition to Martha Nussbaum's view of literature as a platform and a justification for an "anti-theory" position in ethics, Plumer argues that "novels can be arguments" and that viewing them in this light can lead to a better appreciation of the cognitive value of literature. Although I agree with much of Plumer's criticism of Nussbaum, I am wary of a logical reductionism that would automatically transform works of literature into tacit arguments. In the following brief commentary I will address three basic issues: (1) Is the novel an argument? (2) Are literature and morality similar aspirations? (3) What can literature teach us about ethics? I would like to thank Gilbert Plumer for providing an apt opportunity for reflecting on these important and sometimes overlooked issues.

2. IS A NOVEL AN ARGUMENT?

Plumer's disagreement with Nussbaum seems to derive from a distaste for a lingering Non-Cognitivism in ethics, which risks eliminating the cognitive element in moral theory and replacing it with a vague appeal to sentiment or unsystematic thinking. It would be helpful for the reader if he were to briefly situate his particular concerns within in this larger debate.

Plumer wants to recover the logical credibility of literature as a source for ethical commentary by setting out novels in argument form. He argues that some novels "are arguments" in that they exhibit "a distinctive argument form or structure," which he identifies thus:

- Premise 1: This plot/character development is believable.
- Premise 2: This plot/character development is believable only if such and such principles operate in the real world.
- Conclusion: Therefore such and such principles operate in the real world.

We could express this line of reasoning more informally by describing the experience of reading a novel in the following sequence:

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- The story tells us: here is how it happened.
- We make an "operational inference": It is indeed believable that it could have happened thus.
- And so we conclude: It must be the case that the underlying moral principles are sound.

I am happy enough to concede that novels do make the kind of believability assumption that is at the heart of Plumer's argument. This is entirely in keeping with an Aristotelian theory of art as *mimesis* which, I think, is largely correct. There are odd cases: fables, fairy tales, science fiction—but these can, I think, with a little logical legerdemain, be shown to hinge on some sort of believable plot or character development. I also agree with Plumer that Stroud's objection to transcendental arguments is really beside the point when it comes to literature. (Indeed, I would go further and argue that it is *in most cases* beside the point.) But it does not follow that a novel must be an argument.

Suppose we have an argument about cycling. I want to convince you that long-distance cycling, what is known as "touring," is fun. I force you to come cycling with me; you enjoy the experience, and thus, I prove to you that "touring is fun." Does your long-distance bike ride with me count as an argument? I don't think so. It provides evidence for a conclusion; indeed, it is the very thing that convinces you that I was right, touring is fun. Still, I hesitate to call it an argument. And yet, one could think of the ethical role of literature in precisely similar terms. A novel may corroborate an ethical position; it may provide evidence that these or those moral opinions are sound. Does it follow that a novel is actually an argument?

Compare two views of literature: Plumer's 'argument account' and what I will call an 'open window' account. On the logical interpretation, a completed novel is an argument with a tacit premise-conclusion structure. On the open-window account, a novel is something that opens up a vista on some aspect of reality or the human condition. In order to function properly as a window, the novel has to be believable. We could push the analogy and say that the window has to be transparent not smudged; we really do have to believe that it is a window, not a trick movie screen, or a virtual reality hologram. We have to believe that the 'window' provides an accurate picture of what is on the other side of this wall. But it does not follow from all this that a novel is an argument.

3. DO LITERATURE AND MORALITY ENCLOSE PRECISELY-SIMILAR ASPIRATIONS?

To determine whether a novel really is a (tacit) argument, we need to ask some deep questions about the nature of literary aspirations. There are clearly didactic kinds of literature: fables with a moral; medieval morality plays; novels with an ideological agenda. Still, it seems to me that what a novelist is doing is more akin to empirical observation than logic. Even the most fantastic novels are about seeing what happens, given the constraints imposed by setting and context. We may be able to draw a moral lesson from the resulting description, but "seeing what happens" is not the same thing as arguing about morality. Observing something and turning that observation into a moral argument requires a crucial leap from "is" to "ought." Not that this is a problematic leap (as too many modern authors seem to imply). My only point is that these are distinctly different mental

operations. The first activity may naturally lead to the second; nonetheless, the novelist is primarily concerned with the first activity, not the second.

It is a commonplace to hear novelists explain how, in the process of writing, the characters take over. The story writes itself. Even in the case of moral fables (of which the present author has some experience), it is often the case that the characters direct where the story goes, that the author does not know the moral point of the story until the very end. Moral recipe writing does not, generally, produce high-quality novels. Didactic literature—an allegory like *Pilgrim's Progress*—may operate according to the kind of underlying logical structure Plumer identifies, and such pieces can be significant aesthetic achievements. But modern novel-writing seems a different endeavour.

Perhaps Plumer could respond that many modern novels are, so-to-speak, hidden allegories. I would be sympathetic to such a suggestion. It seems to me that many novels are, in fact, replete with attempts at moral persuasion. Viewing these novels as some kind of deliberate moral pronouncement is perhaps fair game. In such cases, however, Plumer's model argument is too general to be of much help. Ayn Rand comes to mind as a popular author who writes novels that are barely-disguised moral screeds. Plumer's analysis fits here, but it suffers from an unhelpful lack of focus. I think one needs to go further in such cases and probe, in much more specific detail, the kind of moral argument the author is proposing. On the other hand, a Plumer-like approach might be a very useful tool in these kinds of cases.

To summarize this section: I am happy to accept that moral arguments naturally arise out of literature—indeed, the best novels often force us into some sort of moral examination. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily follow that they count, in the first instance, as deliberate moral arguments. Still, it seems to me that the best novel writing is more about honest, probing, scientific observation than it is about moral tale-telling.

4. WHAT SHOULD WE READ?

I agree with Plumer that Nussbaum's often platitudinous arguments seem to seriously understate the ethical role of literature. He should, however, make it clear to the reader what Nussbaum is trying to do: she is using literature to defend the contemporary anti-theory position in ethics. Her discussion of the "incommensurability of valuable things," of the "priority of the particular," and of the role emotion is not original; these are all standard tropes in an anti-theory platform. (I discuss this succinctly in *Moral Reasoning*, cited in the bibliography.) I am probably more sympathetic to aspects of anti-theory than Plumer. The usual systematic approaches to morality one finds in theories like utilitarianism or Kantian deontology are wholly inadequate. At the same time, I would agree with Plumer that accepting the moral significance of novels does not force one to embrace anti-theoretical ethics.

I do find many of Nussbaum's comments about the ethical value of literature partisan and predictable. Plumer is right to wince under the narrowness of her moral vision. She represents one end of the spectrum. At the same time, Plumer's worries about censorship seem largely a distraction. This is to enter into political issues without any adequate treatment of political theory.

Mostly, it strikes me that the discussion about whether reading novels makes you a better person is carried out at too general a level to be of much help to anyone. Why should one suppose that novels cannot be morally pernicious? That would seem to rely an

utterly naïve view of human nature. Imagine someone saying "food is good for you." Well, yes, one wants to say, but what kind of food are you talking about? The potato chip diet? Burgers four times a day? A strict vegan regime? People argue about what foods we should eat, and when, and why. Surely, we could and should enter into similar discussions about novels. It is not that all novels, read in any order, for any reason whatsoever, are good for you. I would find it incredible to think that a steady diet of the Marquis de Sade is morally good for anyone. (Although there may be times and reasons and contexts within which reading de Sade is a *morally* useful exercise.) From what I can gather, Nussbaum's tastes seem fastidious. I, like Plumer, would not like to have my reading restricted to only those novels approved by the good professor! Insomuch as novels may force us into an honest confrontation with evil, they may require disturbing and provocative treatment of unwholesome subjects.

5. CONCLUSION

One might want to argue, along with Aristotle, that human beings are inescapably moral. (Aristotle classifies the irreparably immoral or the amoral as "brutish"; i.e., as less than human.) This sounds to me about right. It will follow, on this virtue ethics approach, that morality creeps into everything we do, including literature. I agree with Plumer that there are moral arguments in literature, both general and specific. I also agree that there is a cognitive—i.e., reasoning—content to ethics. At the same time, we need to be careful about embracing a reductionism that reduces everything to an argument. In doing so, we risk obliternating some fine distinctions that help us to make sense of art and literature.

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Reply to Louis Groarke

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Professor Groarke raises many thought-provoking issues. Here is my response to some.

When I say in my paper (section 4) that "the novel's argument is there, whether or not anybody notices," I mean it. Like any argument, I take a novel's argument to be a timeless, abstract sequence of propositions. The novelist creates the means by which we *access* an argument, not the argument itself (this view is more fully developed in my 2010 ISSA conference paper, "Novels as Arguments"). From this point of view, Groarke's worry (section 3) that novels should not "count, in the first instance, as deliberate moral arguments" is pretty irrelevant. Consider the height of the novelistic art form: the big, good, minimally didactic novel. Certainly in this case, at a conscious or intentional level "what a novelist is doing is more akin to empirical observation than logic," as Groarke says. Yet it seems to me that in virtue of *being believable* (which is a function of how good the "empirical observation" is), such a novel's words evoke an argument. For we can ask—what principles or generalizations would have to be true about the real world (of human psychology, action, and society) in order for the novel's words to be believable?

This yields the template or general structure of a novel's argument discussed in my paper. So it appears to be otiose to say that "Plumer's model argument is too general to be of much help ... it suffers from an unhelpful lack of focus" (Groarke: section 3). As *applied* to a particular novel, of course the values of the template's variables would have to be fleshed out in considerable—if not endless—detail, including specifying which principles or generalizations about human nature are implicated by which aspects of the novel's believability.

Moreover, as above, it is a novel's *words* that evoke an argument. So, I think that Groarke is wrong to say that "one could think of the ethical role of literature in precisely similar terms" as actually engaging in a "long distance bike-ride" and using this to provide "evidence" that bicycle touring is fun (section 2). His worry is that a novel should not count as an argument anymore than such a physical activity. But unlike a novel, a bike-ride is nonlinguistic, hence nonpropositional, and so could not be an argument. This is why such a physical activity, like pure music or painting for example, is neither believable nor unbelievable—the category does not apply—though (e.g.) a painting might be realistic.

Regarding censorship, no doubt it is valuable to discuss and draw conclusions about which novels would be pernicious to read. But it is quite another thing to impose such conclusions on others from a position of power (censorship). I would hope that this is clear irrespective of any political theory.

Finally, I am less concerned than Groarke about "a logical reductionism that would automatically transform works of literature into tacit arguments" and thereby blur the distinction between narration and argument (section 1, cf. 5). I am less concerned partly because to the extent that a novel's argument is not "tacit" or is overt, the piece's literary status (in the sense applied to fiction), and hence its status as a novel, would be called into question.

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