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## A NATION OF MADAME BOVARYS: ON THE POSSIBILITY AND DESIRABILITY OF MORAL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH FICTION

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### 1 Prudence or Oneiromancy?

*... men shal nat maken ernest of game.*  
– Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale*

Imagine you are a professor teaching Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to a group of undergraduate students, and that today's class is on the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. You summarize the plot for them, to remind those who have bothered to do the reading what the gist of it was, and to give the rest a graceful opportunity to escape with their dignity intact. There is a rooster, you say, named Chauntecleer, who dreams he is carried off by a fox. When he wakes up, he tells his wife, Dame Pertelote, that he is in grave danger, since dreams are – as is well known – portents of things to come. She, however, will have none of it: far from predicting the future, she retorts, dreams merely testify to the digestive system of their maker, so that what Chauntecleer needs to take is not preventative action against predators but only (she does not mince words) “som laxatyf” (l. 177).<sup>1</sup>

Pertelote fails to persuade her husband, but a vigorous bout of love-making drives his dream clear from his mind, and he wanders out into the yard, where, sure enough, he finds a suitably hungry fox lying in

wait for him. Being as cunning as any self-respecting fox should be, Daun Russell asks Chauntecleer to sing for him with that beautiful voice of his, and to close his eyes in order to concentrate better; being as susceptible to flattery as one might expect from a puffed-up rooster, Chauntecleer readily acquiesces, allowing the fox to snatch him up in his mouth and start bringing him home for dinner. Chauntecleer is only saved, you remind the students, by his own native wit: turning the fox's trick against him, he convinces Daun Russell to crow (no pun intended) triumphantly – at which point, the fox's mouth being open, Chauntecleer makes good his escape.

Now imagine that you go on, feeling generous with your wisdom, to point the moral of the story – so generous, indeed, that you offer two separate morals, in two different speeches. “Chaucer’s story is highly instructive,” Speech A begins. “It warns us against being like that silly rooster, who closes his eyes and begins to sing, seduced by the fox’s flattery, indifferent to the danger of his situation. We learn from the story to be more prudent in our own lives. Chaucer is writing not just for fun but to help his audience become better and happier people.” Speech B starts and ends similarly, but runs somewhat differently in between: “Chaucer’s story is highly instructive. It warns us against being like that silly rooster, who ignores the prophetic significance of his dream, and thus rushes headlong into the yard where the fox is waiting for him. We learn from the story to accept oneiromancy in our own lives. Chaucer is writing not just for fun but to help his audience become better and happier people.”

My suspicion is that you could quite easily convince your students of proposition A (the prudence moral), but that you would have a much harder time convincing them of proposition B (the prophecy moral). They furiously scribble notes at first, then quietly put their pens down. Why? What is the difference between the two claims? Is it that the story adequately proves we should be more circumspect, but somehow does not adduce enough evidence to show that we should be more credulous? Surely not. If anything, it is the other way around: the one and only piece of “support” for the prudence moral is a ludicrously fictional scenario in which a talking fox captures a talking rooster by convincing him to sing with his eyes closed (can this story really “prove” anything other than the claim that if you happen to be a talking rooster, you should beware of talking foxes, talking foxes tending to be particularly seductive?), whereas the argument for dream interpretation, which draws its strength from ancient precedent, is so extensive that it occupies more than a quarter of the tale. In the course of a scene occupying 173 lines out of the

story's 626, in fact, Chauntecleer cites no fewer than eight authoritative stories, at least some of which – those that come from the Bible – Chaucer's listeners, and indeed many of your students, could reasonably be expected to believe. Here are five of those exempla, concerning Scipio, Daniel, Joseph, Croesus, and Andromache respectively:

Macrobeus, that writ the avisioun [vision]  
In Affrike of the worthy Cipioun [Scipio],  
Affermeth dremes, and seith that they been  
Warning of thinges that men after [later] seen.

And forthermore, I pray yow loketh wel  
In the Olde Testament, of Daniel,  
If he held dremes any vanitee.

Reed eek of Ioseph, and ther shul ye see  
Wher dremes ben somtyme (I sey nat alle)  
Warning of thinges that shul after falle.  
Loke of Egipthe the king, daun Pharao,  
His bakere and his boteler also,  
Wher [whether] they ne felte noon effect [significance] in dremes.  
Whose [whoso] wol seken actes [histories] of sondry remes [realms]  
May rede of dremes many a wonder thing.

Lo Cresus, which that was of Lyde king,  
Mette [dreamt] he nat that he sat upon a tree,  
Which signified he sholde anhangid be?

Lo heer Andromacha, Ectores wyf,  
That day that Ector sholde lese his lyf,  
She dremed on the same night biforn,  
How that the lyf of Ector sholde be lorn [lost]  
If thilke day he wente into bataille;  
She warned him, but it might nat availle;  
He wente for to fighte nathelees,  
But he was slayn anon [immediately] of Achilles.  
(ll. 357–82; line breaks added)

It might, of course, be argued that it is quality, rather than quantity, that counts. Chauntecleer could produce 18 or 80 or 800 classical sources without advancing the cause of the prophecy moral an iota; one simple fable of a fox, by contrast, suffices to show how important it is to be cautious. The dream narratives prove nothing, however copious their number, because they are all invented. Whereas the farmyard narrative . . . But is the farmyard narrative not every bit as invented as the

Homeric account of Hector's last night on earth? Why do we ascribe to it any greater corroborative power?

Perhaps we should talk in terms of the *vraisemblable* rather than the *vrai*. Perhaps, that is, we are swayed by the fable because it, or at least its translation into the human realm, seems plausible to us – people behave this way in real life (even if roosters do not) – whereas the dream narratives, having no basis in real-world events, leave us utterly cold. Yet there is a serious problem with the antithesis thus phrased, and that is that *we have already assumed the very thing we set out to prove*. We say that the story fails to convince us that dreams are prophetic because it offers, as its only evidence, a series of tales which do not seem likely; but the reason such stories do not seem likely is that dreams are not prophetic. In circular fashion, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* convinces us only of what we already believed before we began to read it. Which means, strictly speaking, that it convinces us of nothing at all.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 A Parody of Didacticism

*The [Nun's Priest's] Tale could only have been written for a medieval audience which looked at life seriously . . . If we turn to the poetry, we can see that it is of a kind which could only proceed from a fine moral concern.*

– Holbrook, “The Nonne Presstes Tale”

The bell rings (or rather, since such bells only ring in movies, the end of class is announced by a tumultuous relocation of papers from desk to backpack), and you move on to your graduate seminar, where you explain what has just happened. You have, you note, failed to convert any of your students to oneiromancy. They have learnt three things at most: (1) that *you* believe dreams to be prophetic; (2) that *you* believe you can use a tale by Chaucer as evidence (just as, within the tale, Chauntecleer thinks he can draw on stories from Homer); and (3) that Chaucer may possibly have thought so too. They have *not* learnt (4) that they have any reason to accept the view themselves. You have, in other words, only succeeded in convincing your students of your own insanity. They have responded to your second harangue in the same way that a non-believer would respond to the claim that Genesis, with its injunction from God to be fruitful and multiply, constitutes a cast-iron argument against birth control: few people wish to rule their lives on the basis of a work they take to be pure fantasy.

You do, of course, have a number of rather vulpine graduate students in the seminar, and one of the very shrewdest (let us call him Daun Bertrand

Russell) raises an ingenious objection. “The prudence moral,” he argues, “is borne out by the story, whereas the prognostication moral is not. It just so *happened*, on this occasion, that a dream matched up to reality; rash behavior, on the other hand, *necessarily* proved costly, such being the way of the world. Chaucer probably meant moral A, but was surely too sensible to stand behind moral B.” Has Bertrand bested you? Not necessarily. You do not even have to play devil’s advocate and claim, on behalf of the oneiromancers’ union, that dreams match up to reality more often than not. You merely have to remind Bertrand that rashness is not always a bad thing. Sometimes, to be sure, it is good to look before one leaps; but he who hesitates is also, at other times, lost.<sup>3</sup> As Picasso put it, surprisingly aptly for your purposes, “to draw, you must close your eyes and sing.”

Bertrand now falling silent, Dame Erica Auerbach, a graduate student who knows her literary history, directs us to the story’s postscript:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
Taketh the moralitee, goode men.  
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,  
To our doctryne it is y-write, y-wis.  
(ll. 672–6)

“As a good medieval Christian,” opines Erica, “Chaucer could not possibly have told stories unless he thought they could be in some way edifying.”<sup>4</sup> You feel tempted to ask her for the moral of *The Miller’s Tale*, but content yourself with making two points. First, St Paul is, as Chaucer and his readers know perfectly well, referring to holy scripture, not writing in general.<sup>5</sup> And this is only reasonable, since if “*al that writen is*,” from litanies to laundry lists, yielded equally valuable lessons, the value in question would be pitifully small. Secondly, when the nun’s priest exhorts us to take the “moralitee,” we are placed in something of a quandary: *which one* does he mean? Is he referring to the prognostication moral? the prudence moral? the fatalist moral that “destine . . . ma[y] nat been eschewed” (l. 572)? the downbeat moral that “ever the latter ende of joye is wo” (l. 439)? the upbeat moral that, thanks to God’s justice, “mordre wol out” (l. 286)? or, finally, the charming moral that the advice of women should not be heeded (ll. 490–94), since “*mulier est hominis confusio*” (l. 398)?<sup>6</sup>

All of these morals can surely not be true at once. The confident claim of divine justice stands in tension with the more pagan, pessimistic

wheel-of-fortune discourse;<sup>7</sup> more importantly, neither of the first two can square with the instigation to forethought. We cannot possibly take the nun's priest seriously, and indeed he himself is perhaps not speaking seriously, when he blames not only Chauntecleer (for his lack of prudence) but also Pertelote (for her failure to believe in dreams) and even destiny (for its relentlessness) –

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!  
 Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh [flew] fro the bemes!  
 Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of [paid no heed to] dremes!  
 (ll. 572–4)

– as though any room for belief and prudence could be left over once destiny has extracted its due.

Dame Erica is right about one thing: medieval audiences expected the stories they heard to have easily detachable, easily assimilable morals. And the nun's priest obliges his (and by extension Chaucer's) audience. He just obliges a little too much. Like the hawker of panaceas, he oversells his product, claiming for it every virtue imaginable – with the result that we trust it less than if he had only promised to cure a single ill. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is, in fact, a *parody* of didacticism, a story that reminds us of how extraordinarily easy it is to draw edifying lessons from any narrative. As long as our listeners already subscribe to a particular piety, they will happily consider a story to illustrate it, indeed consider it to emerge automatically from the story, as the only possible inference; they will, under certain circumstances, go so far as to consider the story all the evidence it needs.

### 3 Preaching to the Converted

*This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.  
 But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer [layman],  
 Thou woldest ben a trede-foul [rooster] aright.  
 For if thou has corage as thou hast myght,  
 Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene [think],  
 Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.*

– Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

Fictions, you are forced to conclude, preach to the converted alone. Since they offer no substantiation for their implicit claims,<sup>8</sup> they are powerless to shake our deeply held convictions. It is always open to us to

dismiss them as fantastical.<sup>9</sup> The fact that an author is capable of portraying roosters, say, as able to talk does not even mean that *one* rooster is able to talk, let alone that the *typical* rooster is able to talk; while a real-life example is at least proof of possibility (if not prevalence), a fictional example is proof of absolutely nothing. If we happen to have already seen talking roosters, we will accept the accuracy of the depiction. If we have not, we will reject it, and (if we choose) everything that follows from it. In neither case will our minds have been changed.<sup>10</sup>

The nun's priest must know this, for otherwise he would not pretend that his story is a true one, and worthy *on those very grounds* (as the punctuation indicates) of careful moral attention:

Now every wys man, lat him herkne me:  
 This storie is also [as] trewe, I undertake,  
 As is the book of Lancelot de Lake,  
 That wommen holde in ful gret reverence.  
 (ll. 444–7)

Someone is, of course, joking here – since we know what the nun's priest's feelings are with regard to women,<sup>11</sup> we can infer what kind of reverence *he* has, or at least should have, toward “the book of Lancelot de Lake;” either he is trying to trick his employer, the nun, into taking the fable as fact and, equally foolishly, into “tak[ing] the moralitee,” or Chaucer is mocking his inconsequence – but what is clear is that everyone takes true stories to be more convincing than fictions. The nun's priest knows it, and Chaucer must know it too, however medieval he may be. Far from depicting cases of conversion-by-exemplum, Chaucer has a way of presenting us with characters who do *not* learn from stories – characters like Chauntecleer himself. After reciting his endless catalogue of ancient anecdotes, designed to impress upon Pertelote the seriousness of his plight, what does Chauntecleer do? He saunters out into the yard, and starts singing with his eyes closed.<sup>12</sup>

No one learns anything from *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Those who agree that we should be prudent already thought so before they read it; those who disagree are likely to be as little affected as the Wife of Bath by her husband's harangues.<sup>13</sup> It is not even the case that we learn *this* from the *Nun's Priest's Tale*<sup>14</sup> – not even the case, that is, that we learn how ineffectual fictions are as a tool for conversion. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a parody of didacticism, but true to its own implicit principles, it fails to teach even the impotence of literary instruction. Had it done so, then there would surely not exist today the voluminous and intensely earnest

bibliography of devout interpretations, reading the *Tale* as an allegory of the Fall,<sup>15</sup> an allegory of the Church,<sup>16</sup> a positive exemplum (via the frugal widow who opens and closes the tale),<sup>17</sup> or a negative exemplum (via the rooster).<sup>18</sup> *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is a story which fails to prove even its own futility – and which, in so doing, vindicates itself.

#### 4 The Asymmetry of “Imaginative Resistance”

CHARLES: *You can't expect much sympathy from me, you know. I am perfectly aware that your highest hope was to murder me.*

ELVIRA: *Don't put it like that, it sounds so beastly.*

– Noel Coward, *Blithe Spirit*

Human nature is a strange thing. We know how blissfully immune we are to influence from artworks whose underlying worldview departs from our own (am I really likely to become a con-man after watching *The Sting*? an advocate of whaling after reading *Moby Dick*?), and yet we carry on assigning films and novels and plays and poems to friends we consider in dire need of inner change. “Read this,” we say, “it will make you see things differently” (by which of course we mean “it will make you see things my way”). Perhaps we give a copy of *Candide* to one who is laboring under the delusion that God works in the world. Perhaps she returns the favor by forcing us to read some C. S. Lewis. The two of us end up, like the positivist and the priest in *Madame Bovary*, as firmly entrenched in our positions as we ever were before. We should all just come out and admit it: “*morally improving*” is merely a compliment we pay to works whose values agree with ours.

Such a view is not likely to be widely shared in the age of the “ethical turn.” Quite the contrary, substantial quantities of time and journal space have recently been dedicated to assessing the precise ways in which literature contributes to a better society. Some (like Richard Rorty) have argued that literary texts foster empathy with an ever-widening circle of human types, gradually bringing more and more of “them” under the designation “us.”<sup>19</sup> Others (like Gregory Currie) have suggested that literary texts serve as spaces for “simulation,” in which we imaginatively apprehend the likely consequences of certain decisions, indeed of certain overall value systems, and as a result learn what it is that we want to do – which, by a magic that betrays a certain residual Socratism, turns out to be what is objectively *good* to do.<sup>20</sup> Or, finally, the simulation is said to fine-tune our moral decision-making faculty, so that we are better



equipped to notice and respond to subtle claims on our moral attention (this is Martha Nussbaum's view).<sup>21</sup>

In almost all cases, the salutary effect on readers is presented as automatic, inevitable, "inescapable" (to use a term as beloved of Wayne Booth as, in related contexts, of Charles Taylor) – as though novels were so many bricks with which to hit recalcitrant unbelievers over the head, in hopes of shaking their skepticism loose. Thus for Booth, "all of our aesthetic judgments are inescapably tied to ethics;"<sup>22</sup> when we read, we are "inescapably caught up in ethical activity."<sup>23</sup> For Noël Carroll, similarly, "the narrative artwork *unavoidably* engages, exercises, and sometimes clarifies and deepens moral understanding."<sup>24</sup> And for Nussbaum, "the [novelistic] genre itself, on account of some general features of its structure, constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship."<sup>25</sup> In particular, works like Dickens's *Hard Times* positively oblige us, whether we like it or not, to become better people. "It is impossible to care about the characters and their fate in the way the text invites," according to Nussbaum, "without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself."<sup>26</sup>

Good literature, in short, simply leaves us no choice but to be improved by it. Bad literature, on the other hand – and this is a striking asymmetry in the moralist position – *has no effect on us whatsoever*.<sup>27</sup> We are all blessed with what has been dubbed "imaginative resistance:" when presented with a fictional world in which, say, murder is good, we find ourselves unable (Hume) or at least unwilling (Gendler) to imagine it; by consequence, the work will fail to move us as it wishes, and thus come up short not only ideologically but also aesthetically (Walton).<sup>28</sup> As Tamar Gendler puts it, "I have a much easier time following an author's invitation to imagine that the earth is flat than I do following her invitation to imagine that murder is right."<sup>29</sup> Is this correct? First of all, we might object that to use such a beastly word (as Noel Coward might put it) is already to stack the deck, since "murder," unlike "killing," is a moral term. What if we called it, say, "taking care of"? What, in other words, if we consider the case of mafia fiction, in which the very worst thing one can do is to report crimes to the police, and the very best thing one can do is, at times, to "take care of" an unarmed human being, someone whose only blemish is, perhaps, to have reported crimes to the police?<sup>30</sup>

It is a fascinating fact about certain mafia movies, and virtually all outlaw movies,<sup>31</sup> that they perform an imaginative "re-evaluation of values" *without us resisting in the slightest*.<sup>32</sup> (Mummy movies, incidentally, have a related effect: when the ultra-rationalist – the one who insists loudly that there is no such thing as mummies – is the first to be strangled to



**Plate 3.1:** The skeptic, before.

*The Mummy* (produced by Michael Carreras, 1959)

Source: Clip & Still Licensing, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

death, we feel no sorrow, since obviously he should have known better. For the duration of the movie, we are people who would rather spend time with believers in the paranormal than with seekers of fact; we are people whose firm conviction it is that to base one's judgments on logic and empirical evidence is to merit extermination.<sup>33</sup>) And perhaps this attitude, which we could term "imaginative inertia," is the standard case. Far from resisting the different, sometimes opposite, values of the fictional world, we positively delight in trying them on for an hour or two, like a carnival costume. Even works like *Hamlet*, which do not depart quite so radically from our everyday worldview, nonetheless require us to imagine not only that ghosts exist but also that it is proper to avenge murder with murder, indeed that it is a positive moral failing to leave a murderer alive.

Those who follow Kendall Walton's lead in understanding mimetic fictions as games of make-believe are surely in the right; what they often overlook, however, is the fact that players of such games take on *roles* in order to play them. (The four-year-old who pretends that her doll is



**Plate 3.2:** The skeptic, after.

*The Mummy* (produced by Michael Carreras, 1959)

Source: Clip & Still Licensing, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

a baby, for example, also pretends that she herself is a parent.) We do not enter the fictional world as tourists, anthropologists, passive spectators of the strange goings-on; instead we are granted temporary citizenship.<sup>34</sup> We share its values, operate within its rules, define heroism and villainy by the standards that apply here – not, or at least not exclusively, by those that hold on our home-world.<sup>35</sup>

At all events, any honest account of the aesthetic experience must be symmetrical. If I am virtuous, then I will certainly resist the promptings of Sade to rape and torture; but if I am vicious, then I will just as strongly resist the urgings of Dickens to do unto others what I would have done to myself, or to be kind to escaped convicts, or to embrace (heaven forbid) the Christmas spirit. Perhaps I will resist Dickens *even if I am good*, which is to say even if I share the values his texts appear to be endorsing. After all, there is something about sanctimonious fictions which makes one either burst out laughing – “one must have a heart of stone,” Oscar Wilde famously remarked of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, “to read the death of Little Nell without laughing” – or respond with indignation.<sup>36</sup> In my

more Dostoevskian moments, I do not consider it impossible for previously well-meaning readers to become just a little bit immoral, out of spite.

Conversely, while absorption in Martin Scorsese's film *Goodfellas* does not make me into a mafioso, since the persona I send into the fictional world is disconnected from my everyday self, it must be added that absorption in the novel *Clarissa*, by Samuel Richardson, does not make me into a paragon of patience, and for analogous reasons.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, one of the most seductive pleasures such wholesome fictions offer us is the satisfaction of being, for an hour or two, supremely equitable, unbendingly thoughtful, unadulteratedly righteous. "How good I was! How just I was! How satisfied I was with myself!" writes Diderot about the experience of reading *Clarissa*, and one wonders if there might be a modicum of wry Diderotian irony in the third exclamation.<sup>38</sup> The version of ourselves that we send into Richardson's world is indeed unerringly noble, uncompromisingly idealistic. The pleasure we derive is that of being on the side of the angels, making (for once) categorical judgments, unqualified by the nuances and objections required in the everyday world; like the pleasure of hissing the villain at the pantomime, it is a fantasy of moral clarity, a form of escapism for the morally obsessed. It may even be a profoundly narcissistic sentiment – the sentiment of utter moral perfection – brilliantly disguised as altruism. We convince ourselves that we are doing the world a favor by reading *Clarissa*, while the only person to whom any favors are done is oneself. For when we put *Clarissa* back on the shelf, we return to being the very same earthbound, pragmatic, exception-making individual we were before.<sup>39</sup> (Perhaps we are even *less* likely to make a positive contribution to society, having purged ourselves of all benevolent emotions in our favorite armchair.<sup>40</sup>) If we cannot be harmed by fictions, then we cannot be improved. Fictions, to repeat, preach only to the converted.

## 5 Virtue Ethics and Gossip

SOCRATES: *And a just man does just things, I take it?*

GORGIAS: *Yes.*

– Plato, *Gorgias*

It is, perhaps, for this reason that theorists of moral improvement tend inadvertently to argue against their own position. Thus when Richard Posner reports having enjoyed Dickens's *Hard Times* for entirely non-moral reasons – a feat utterly inconceivable, as we saw above, in the eyes of

Martha Nussbaum – the latter responds, curiously enough, by summoning Dickens from beyond the grave to castigate the obdurate judge. “Well, Judge Posner,” the resurrected Dickens scolds, “you are not a very valuable member of society.”<sup>41</sup> Deep down, Posner’s resistance to ethical criticism is really “an assault on political egalitarianism;” deep down, “insisting on taking his stand with works that keep him at a distance from the demand of the poor and the weak” is just a way to evade “the claim of a painful reality.”<sup>42</sup> Now leaving aside the question of whether someone who has devoured all those improving novels by Dickens and James could be expected to rise above such *ad hominem* attacks,<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum’s rejoinder stands at least as an acknowledgment that Posner *has not been affected by his reading*. And if Dickens does not succeed in converting those who, like Posner, ostensibly *require* moral improvement, what good does he actually do? Those who, like Nussbaum, are already benevolent egalitarians will remain so; those who, like Posner, enter as self-indulgent aesthetes will depart unchanged.<sup>44</sup> Tacitly, Nussbaum is admitting Posner’s point.

The moralists have, after all, only shaky empirical evidence at hand to suggest that well-intentioned art actually makes any difference in people’s behavior. Even proponents of ethical criticism, like Noël Carroll, concede that “we still understand virtually *nothing* about the behavioral consequences of consuming art.”<sup>45</sup> Such theorists, who wish nonetheless to find moral value in the experience of reading, are reduced to positing some kind of effect on the inner structure of the mind, one which (conveniently and mysteriously enough) fails to translate into measurable everyday praxis. Thus Nussbaum, under pressure, says that she is only talking about “the interaction between novel and mind during the time of reading.”<sup>46</sup> Since, on her view, the mere fact of recognizing subtleties in the moral world constitutes “moral conduct” all on its own, we can score virtue points *merely by (correctly) reading a Henry James novel*,<sup>47</sup> even if we return the next day to our job at the plantation.

There is something pleasantly Greek-flavored about the approach, implying as it does that goodness refers to a state or shape of the soul, rather than the decisions to which it gives rise. Still, even the Greeks insisted on proof through action: in Plato’s *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates and Gorgias clearly agree that a man behaving badly is a man who lacks virtue, even if they disagree about whose fault it is. With such doubts nagging at her, perhaps, Nussbaum quickly seeks to take back what she conceded to Posner, writing – a mere two pages after having localized our increase in virtue to the period we spend with a book in our hand – that “the activities of imagination and emotion that the involved reader performs

during the time of reading . . . strengthen the propensity so to conduct oneself in other instances.”<sup>48</sup>

Yet the fact is that there is nothing whatsoever to prevent us from taking an intensive, vigorous, sustained, detailed, painstaking interest in the moral entanglements of other lives while remaining entirely remote from the moral fray. This intensive, vigorous, sustained, detailed, painstaking yet detached interest even has a name: it is called gossip. And as irony would have it, the very work Nussbaum considers the archetype of morally improving fiction – Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* – features a gossip of world-class caliber. If, as Nussbaum claims, “the activities of imagination and emotion that the involved reader performs during the time of reading are not just instrumental to moral conduct, they are also examples of moral conduct,”<sup>49</sup> then Fanny Assingham, who spends all day every day picking apart in thought and conversation the predicament of her friends, has surely clocked up enough instances of moral conduct to earn herself a niche on the portal of Notre-Dame.

A clear *reductio ad absurdum* of Nussbaum’s position, the Fanny Assingham case shows, if it shows anything, that a fascination with (or even a fine awareness of) interpersonal niceties need not fuel any concern for our fellow human being. Fine awareness is, to phrase it in Jamesian terms, no guarantee of rich responsibility. We do not have to be a vicious anti-egalitarian in order to read *Hard Times* for non-moral reasons. On the contrary, that is probably the way *most* of us read it. Like Fanny Assingham, we are infinitely curious (even pruriently so) about the lives of others, whether fictional or actual; if, as Nussbaum correctly states, Fanny stands as a model for the reader,<sup>50</sup> this is because her interest is just as amoral as ours, not because ours is just as moral as hers.<sup>51</sup>

## 6 Qualifications

*Oh! children, see! the tailor’s come  
And caught our little Suck-a-Thumb.  
– Heinrich Hoffmann, Struwwelpeter*

What, however, about the very chapter you are now reading? Did it not begin precisely with a fiction, a made-up scenario (two classrooms) with made-up characters (Daun Bertrand Russell, Dame Erica Auerbach)? And did I not intend to affect your views on the basis of it? It has sometimes been argued<sup>52</sup> that the examples used in philosophical arguments are miniature fictions and so, conversely, fictions are nothing but

extended philosophical examples, perfectly serviceable as tools for securing conviction. The comparison is misleading, however: one only needs to imagine trying to have my little classroom fantasy published in the *New Yorker* in order to register the vast distance between literary fictions and philosophical examples. The latter tend, first of all, to be as general as possible, dispensing with details (if I told you about Erica's interests, it was just for fun; and you know nothing about what she looks like, where she comes from, or what her ambitions are). Secondly, they hew with obsessive tenacity to the way in which events (are taken to) unfold in the real world.<sup>53</sup> Philosophical examples must begin in self-evidence – in situations, that is, on whose plausibility almost all readers will readily agree – in order to elicit intuitions supporting controversial hypotheses. Literary fictions, by contrast, add in such elements as drama and surprise.<sup>54</sup> Their endings tend to have an appropriateness (consider the dénouement of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, a traditional case of the trickster tricked) rarely to be met with in real life.

Let us say, then, that philosophical examples (like mine) are types of fiction – but non-literary fiction – which can be used to summon intuitions. Let us also add that it is entirely possible for a philosophical author to compose a serious treatise, full of claims and arguments, and then encompass it in a fictional frame (by attributing it, say, to a character, perhaps with an exotic name like Zarathustra). Parmenides' poetic treatise on truth and opinion is a similar case, beginning as it does with an account of a mythical journey before launching into its intricate metaphysical disquisitions.<sup>55</sup> There are even (and this would be a third concession) borderline cases, hybrid works which combine the imaginative world-building of literature with the argumentation of philosophy. (Proust's *Recherche* is one example, and Sartre's *La Nausée* might be another, but James's *Golden Bowl* would most definitely not constitute a third.<sup>56</sup>) In such cases, I would suggest that we do indeed learn from novels, *but only insofar as they are philosophical*, which is to say only insofar as they deploy convincing chains of reasoning (as for instance does Roquentin, in *La Nausée*, when he proves that “adventure” is a structure we impose on the sequence of events).

Finally, we should acknowledge that even canonically literary fictions can be used as tools of education, *as long as they are backed up by the sanction of an external authority*. I said above that your putative students may have derived from your lecture the idea that you and Chaucer share a belief in the prophetic power of dreams. Now if, in addition to believing this, your students are also sufficiently misguided to take you (and/or Chaucer) for an *expert* on such matters, they may change their

minds on that very basis. The story may then serve them as a vivid reminder, a mental image helping them to remember how important dreams are. It seems to me that edifying children's literature works in just this way. What children learn is that it is good *according to their parents* to share their toys, keep their thumbs out of their mouth, or resist eating the gingerbread walls of rustic houses in the woods, and that *according to their parents* unpleasant consequences will necessarily follow.<sup>57</sup> The children respond by adjusting their behavior in the direction of the parents' implicit agenda (or indeed, if they are old enough and self-willed enough, in exactly the opposite direction).

Without such sanction, mind you, the outcome is completely unpredictable. You might think that La Fontaine's fable *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, the tale of a crafty fox who tricks a vain crow out of his cheese by persuading him to sing, inevitably encourages its young readers to be a little less vain; you would, however, be mistaken. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was shocked to discover that eighteenth-century pupils (who were so well acquainted with the poem that they could recite it from memory) spontaneously identified with the *fox*, taking the poem as a handy reminder that if you wish to steal, it helps to use fake praise.<sup>58</sup> And I daresay the same would have been true if the story had featured a vain rooster, named Chauntecleer perhaps, instead of a vain crow. Even your students might – who knows? – have read it as advocating flattery and deception, were it not for the fact that, fortunately enough, they have you there to reveal the deep oneiromantic truth to them.

Now your students may, given a list of recommended readings, start concluding on their own – that is, without specific confirmation from you each time – that it is good to help the poor (*Hard Times*), or to avenge murder with murder (*Hamlet*), or to throw strangers out of railway carriages (*Les Caves du Vatican*). Indeed, numerous literature courses at universities assemble sequences of novels, penned by representatives of unquestionably deserving groups, with a view to conditioning the students into taking each successive novel as an object-lesson in empathy for the group concerned.

Notice that those who run such courses are not merely training their students to be better moral agents but also training them *in how to be trained*, teaching them how to learn. (We could call this higher-order instruction “meta-training.”) Just as I tell my child not only that Beijing is the capital of China but also that such facts can be found in the encyclopedia, so I tell her not only that she should share her toys but also that answers to other ethical dilemmas are to be found in fables. Now telling our children, our students, and our citizens to go to the movies



for moral instruction is a serious mistake. For anyone who can be converted to a view by a fiction can be converted *out* of it by a fiction. If *Gandhi* is enough to turn me into a pacifist on Thursday night, then *Malcolm X*, which I watch the following evening, is enough to make me believe in the necessity of violence. If *The Nun's Priest's Tale* makes your students prudent during week one of your survey course, then *The Open Road* will make them reckless by week ten. (Just so, rhetoric was sufficient to convince the Athenians to slaughter all the men on Mytilene, and rhetoric was sufficient – mere hours later – to make them change their minds.<sup>59</sup>) Our culture is full of competing values, and of stories to “prove” any one of them;<sup>60</sup> conversions through fiction are simply not reliable. We are breeding a generation of what Harry Frankfurt would call “wantons,” easily swayed from one well-meaning but unnuanced value judgment to the next.<sup>61</sup> We are on our way to producing a nation of Madame Bovarys.<sup>62</sup>

## 7 Positive Views

*Why, some people may lose their faith by looking at that picture!*  
– Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

It will be tempting for some on both sides to conclude, in horror or delight, that literature, if it has no edifying function, has no function at all. Indeed, part of what is so troubling about the moralist line is that it so frequently sets up a stark “with us or against us” opposition. If novels are not morally improving, then they are morally depraving, or at best frivolous – which, as it turns out, still means pernicious. “Some works,” writes Nussbaum, “promote a cheap cynicism about human beings, and lead us to see our fellow citizens with disdain. Some lead us to cultivate cheap sensationalistic forms of pleasure and excitement that debase human dignity. Others, by contrast, show what might be called respect before humanity.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, there are only three choices: improve, corrupt, or distract (and by distracting, “debase human dignity”). Pleasure, on this view, is not something humans can justifiably seek in between helping little old ladies across the road. It is, instead, a *diversion* from a little-old-lady-helping that should, by rights, constitute our full-time occupation. Aesthetic pleasure – which, like all pleasure, is inherently sinful, not just amoral but immoral – can just about become acceptable if it subserves the end of edification;<sup>64</sup> otherwise, whether sought by readers or offered by authors,<sup>65</sup> it is a positive shirking of our responsibilities to humankind.

We would probably do well to preserve a space for reading without ulterior motives. (Perhaps it could even be argued, for benefit of the irretrievably utilitarian, that society *requires* such amoral pleasures, as a “pressure valve” for pent-up self-directed or indeed antisocial energies.<sup>66</sup>) But there is also a third way, in between hedonism and moralism, a way in which fiction can aid our emotional growth without turning us all into social workers. For while novels only tell us what we already knew, and only convince us of what we already believed, *that very process may be indispensable*. As Posner puts it, “If you don’t already sense that love is the most important thing in the world, you’re not likely to be persuaded that it is by reading Donne’s love poems, or Stendhal, or Galsworthy. But reading them may make you realize that this *is* what you think, and so may serve to clarify yourself to yourself.”<sup>67</sup> Literature, in short, helps us to find our *own* values, which *may* turn out to be moral values such as rich responsibility, but which may just as well turn out to be, say, an individualist (and other-sacrificing) perfectionism. Literature cannot edify, but it can clarify.<sup>68</sup> Wayne Booth is right that literary works can stand to us in the same relation as friends. But few of us today ask our friends to treat us in accordance with Aristotle’s concept of “*philia*,” or as Job’s so-called “friends” (is this a rare case of irony in the Old Testament?) treat him: far from expecting them to repeat indefinitely how irremediably mired in sin we are, and enjoining us to meet an abstract, universal standard, we rather prefer them to invite us to be who we are.

A work of narrative art can be a true friend of ours when, first, its background scheme of facts and values is close enough to our own, so that it makes sense to speak of a simulation shedding light on the intuitions of our real-world self.<sup>69</sup> A second, and absolutely vital, precondition is that it be axiologically *complex*. If it is to spur us to serious reflection on our attitudes, then it must challenge us by placing at least two of our values into conflict, allowing each to assert its claim on us, rather than simply reinforcing one of them (in imagination) and making us feel, like Diderot, how astonishingly good and just we are. The most useful texts are the *Antigones*, not the *Clarissas*.<sup>70</sup> However tempted we are to use purportedly “improving” novels as electrodes with which to jolt the misfiring neurons of the benighted, we should remember that those works which try hardest to change us are those which succeed the least.<sup>71</sup> It is, perhaps, no coincidence that certain segments of the population place a premium on artworks that spur lengthy discussion, rather than those which proceed from incontestably noble moral principles.<sup>72</sup>

We might even – my last, and most important, compromise proposal – be able to use certain axiologically complex works in order to improve

ourselves morally. Nussbaum is surely right that fully moral behavior requires not only an adherence to general precepts but also an attention to nuances which tend to escape the latter's grasp. (This is why her contribution to moral philosophy has been so important.) And she is surely also right that a certain kind of engagement with a certain kind of text can fine-tune our capacity for such attention, acting as a moral obstacle-course, training us to navigate the treacherous road conditions and sudden swerves of real life. Her suggestion, finally, that the most important type of knowledge I gain from my reading is know-how, not propositional (or even experiential) knowledge, is equally welcome. *I must, however, be good already in order to use texts in the way she prescribes.* I must be predisposed to moral improvement, and indeed must come to the text *for* that, at least among other goals.

Literary texts, in other words, *can* make us more finely aware and more richly responsible. But they will only do so if we want them to.<sup>73</sup> If we are not already virtuous, they may leave us unaffected, or even enable us to render ourselves still more grossly obtuse and still more richly irresponsible than we were to begin with. (Any theory with pretensions to adequacy must, to repeat, be symmetrical.) If we come in with murderous desires, then literary texts may offer us new and exciting ways of killing people; while fictions do not, I think, turn good people into criminals, there is nothing to stop them inspiring *specific* crimes in nefarious appreciators. Simulation, by helping us to plan, may assist us in implementing any altruistic schemes we happen to have, but simulation may also assist us in implementing a successful bank heist, a successful kidnapping, or a successful cull of spotted owls.

Back in your classroom a week later, you address the crowd of sleepy undergraduates, retracting what you said last time about dreams. Literary texts do not teach us anything, you say, unless it is who we are as individuals. Literary texts can, however, *train* us – or rather, they can offer us the *opportunity* to train ourselves in certain skills. We can hone, in reading, the talents necessary to intricately fine-grained concern. Maybe, if we try really hard, we can even take some “moralitee” from *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. As the nun's priest's hilarious antics remind us, one can, if one wants to, find a moral in just about anything.

## Notes

I am deeply grateful to Alexander Nehamas, Thomas Pavel, and Lanier Anderson for their detailed comments on this paper. I would also like to mention the very

helpful exchanges I have had with Stanley Corngold, Caryl Emerson, Stacie Friend, Sean Greenberg, Françoise Meltzer, Robert Morrissey, Gary Saul Morson, Elena Russo, Angela Sebastiani, Susan Stewart, Blakey Vermeule, Michael Wood, and the wonderful students of Phil. 81.

- 1 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (New York: Norton, 1989).
- 2 Cf. Paisley Livingston, *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 82. Lewis's *The Monk*, he points out, offers no confirmation of demonology; why then do we take it, and other novels, as evidence for psychological theories of various types?  
Compare also Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 126–60, at p. 130: "where artworks . . . express general moral precepts, or are underwritten by them, those principles or precepts are typically so obvious and thin that it strains credulity to think that we learn them from artworks. Instead, very often, it seems more likely that a thoughtful preteenager will have mastered them already. Yes, there is an argument against murder in *Crime and Punishment*, but surely it is implausible to think that it requires a novel as elaborate as Dostoyevsky's to teach it, and even if Dostoyevsky designed the novel as a teaching aid, did anyone really learn that murder is wrong from it? . . . In fact, it is probably a precondition of actually comprehending *Crime and Punishment* that the readers already grasp the moral precepts that motivate the narrative."
- 3 Cf. Jerome Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32/3 (1992): 191–200, at p. 196.
- 4 Erica speaks in accordance with the view of any number of Chaucer scholars. Thus, for example, the epigraph to this section – David Holbrook, "The Nonne Presstes Tale," in Boris Ford, ed., *The Age of Chaucer* (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 118–28, at p. 119: "The *Tale* could only have been written for a medieval audience which looked at life seriously . . . The poetry . . . is of a kind which could only proceed from a fine moral concern."
- 5 See Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59 (1960): 403–16, at p. 414. Here is what Paul actually says: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance *and the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope." (*Romans* 15:4, my emphasis).
- 6 Walter Scheps counts 10 morals in all, in his "Chaucer's Anti-Fable: *Reductio ad absurdum* in the Nun's Priest's Tale," *Leeds Studies in English* 4 (1970): 1–10, at p. 5. There could be more: intriguingly, the nun's priest refuses to reuse the *original* moral tag for the fable – "the wicked are caught in their own nets" (*Proverbs* 11:6) – from John Bromyard's *Summa*

- Praedicantum*. See D. E. Myers, "Focus and 'Moralite' in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 7 (1973): 210–20, at p. 212.
- 7 Cf. "Lo, how Fortune turneth sodeinly / The hope and pryde eek [also] of hir [her] enemy!" (Chaucer, ll. 637–8).
  - 8 Cf. Stolnitz, "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art," p. 196; Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two," *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 394–412, at p. 405; Daniel Jacobson, "Sir Philip Sidney's Dilemma," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 327–36, at p. 330. David Lewis cannot quite seem to make up his mind on this point: fictions, he writes, can prove "modal truths," such as whether there could be such a thing as a dignified beggar; but fictions can also persuade us to believe in impossibilities ("Truth in Fiction," *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 261–79, at p. 278). If the second statement is true, then surely the "proof" of the first statement is no proof at all.
  - 9 Cf. Richard A. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 21 (1997): 1–27, at p. 14. Carroll recognizes this as a limit on the effectiveness of simulation – "I am also not convinced that simulations à la Currie play much of a role in our moral deliberations, since we are aware that the pertinent scenarios are made up" (Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," p. 160 n. 28) – but not, for some reason, as a limit on the effectiveness of novels.
  - 10 Carroll ("Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," p. 146) points out that we do not need *fictional* examples to persuade us that, for example, power corrupts, or no one should be called happy until he is dead: the real world offers us quite enough case studies.
  - 11 "Wommenes counseils been ful ofte colde [fatal]; / Wommenes conseil broghte us first to wo, / And made Adam fro Paradys to go" (ll. 490–92). Admittedly, the nun's priest goes on to disclaim the allegation, hiding behind his character: "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat mine; / I can noon [no] harm of no womman divyne" (ll. 499–500). But this is presumably only for the benefit of his patron, the prioress. Nothing in the context suggests that it was Chauntecleer speaking.
  - 12 Cf. Edward Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 112–13.
  - 13 But al for noght; I sette noght an hawe [I don't give a fig]  
Of his proverbes n'of his olde sawe,  
Ne I wolde nat of him corrected be.  
I hate him that my vices telleth me,  
And so do mo, God woot, of us than I.  
(*Wife of Bath*, ll. 659–63)
  - 14 As Susan Gallick claims ("Styles of Usage in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 232–47, at p. 244).

- 15 For two variants, see Holbrook, "The Nonne Presstes Tale," pp. 122–3, and A. Paul Shallers, "The 'Nun's Priest's Tale': An Ironic Exemplum," *ELH* 42 (1975): 319–37, at p. 327.
- 16 Myers describes (but does not endorse) this reading. See Myers, "Focus and 'Moralite'," pp. 210–11.
- 17 Peter W. Travis lays out and also critiques this interpretation in his "Reading Chaucer *Ab Ovo*: Mock-Exemplum in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," in Lawrence M. Clopper et al., eds., *The Performance of Middle English Culture: Essays on Chaucer and the Drama in Honor of Martin Stevens* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 170–73.
- 18 For the rooster as negative exemplum, see (among others) Holbrook, "The Nonne Presstes Tale;" and Lenaghan, "The Nun's Priest's Fable," *PMLA* 78 (1963): 300–307. Some critics (Lenaghan again, and Myers, "Focus and 'Moralite'," pp. 219–20) view the nun's priest himself as the key negative example – but they are still arguing for the moral effectiveness of fictions (in this case, Chaucer's, as opposed to the fiction-within-a-fiction of the nun's priest). Chaucer appears to head off even this higher-level exemplarity when he has the host, Harry Bailly, respond in the basest physical terms to the nun's priest's story (see the epigraph to this section). Those most in need of improvement, Chaucer seems to feel, are also those most indifferent to moral tales.
- 19 Richard Rorty describes his brand of Pragmatism as "urging that we try to extend our sense of 'we' to people whom we have previously thought of as 'they'" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 192). "That is why," he continues, "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, [are] the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress." (See also pp. 94–5.)
- 20 See Gregory Currie, "Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction," in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 163, 166, 173; "The Moral Psychology of Fiction," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73/2 (1995): 250–59, pp. 251, 257. Kendall Walton has also been tempted by this view: see "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of Mind Supplementary* 68 (1994): 26–50, p. 34 (and for the general simulation view see Walton, "Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime: On Being Moved by Fiction," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver, eds., *Emotion and the Arts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 37–49). For Socraticism in Nussbaum, cf. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," p. 10.
- 21 Nussbaum sometimes takes a more Rortyan line, writing that "works of art can cut through our tendencies to deny humanity to our fellow human beings" ("Invisibility and Recognition: Sophocles' Philoctetes and Ellison's Invisible Man," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 257–83, p. 265.) Cf. Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,"

- Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 343–65, pp. 350, 356; and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 39. Her reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a Rortyan one. It is an open question to what extent the two outlooks are compatible, given that, as Eileen John points out, there is no need for subtlety – subtlety can, indeed, be a positive *obstacle* – when it comes to addressing problems like racism (John, “Subtlety and Moral Vision in Fiction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995): 308–19, pp. 314, 318). For another critique of Nussbaum, see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 386–97.
- 22 Wayne C. Booth, “Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 366–93, pp. 378–9.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 374. It is true that Booth's definition of “ethics” is so broad as to encompass, apparently, all of human activity (“*Vision? Powerful? Again ethical language,*” p. 392); under such a description, ethics does indeed appear “inescapable.” On the other hand, the examples Booth gives of ethical improvement through fiction – such as recognizing the humanity of other racial groups (p. 337) – tend to be standardly (and narrowly) moral.
- 24 Carroll, “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” pp. 154–5. My emphasis.
- 25 Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 10. Cf. “the novel . . . is a morally controversial form, expressing in its very shape and style, in its modes of interaction with its readers, a normative sense of life” (p. 2). Mind you, Nussbaum does claim, later in the article, that “[her] argument is confined to a narrow group of pre-selected works” (“Exactly and Responsibly,” p. 346) – by which she presumably means Anglo-American realist novels dealing with “social and political themes” (*Poetic Justice*, p. 10).
- 26 Nussbaum, “Invisibility and Recognition,” p. 278.
- 27 Thus Nussbaum believes that novels will only affect us when their influence is beneficial: “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” (*Poetic Justice*, p. 10). If, however, our standing judgments are sufficiently well formed as to be up to the task of rejecting pernicious reading material, why do they need to be altered? And if they need altering, how do they manage to ward off Sade and Riefenstahl?

Relatedly, Gregory Currie argues that simulation through fiction can have two effects on our moral outlook:

projecting myself into the life of another has, potentially, the double function of telling me about his mental life and about my own possible future course of action; whatever I do, I had better make sure that things don't turn out *that way* for me. These are two potential functions of imaginative projection. Both of them have a moral significance. In empathizing with others I come to share their mental states, which powerfully reinforces my tendency to take their interests into account . . . And the same process makes the actions and

outcomes of others guides to my own planning. (“Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction,” p. 169)

Again, there is an asymmetry. If the empathy and aversion (Aristotle might call them “fear” and “pity,” but Currie does not) are to serve *moral* purposes, then surely our empathy must be directed towards deserving individuals, our aversion towards suspect characters. But how, if we are not already properly disposed, do we make the distinction? What is to stop us empathizing with villains, and thus reinforcing our tendency to take the interests of mafiosi (*Goodfellas*) and child abusers (*Lolita*) into account? Conversely, what if I watch a dramatization of the life of Christ and decide that I had better make sure that things don’t turn out that way for me?

Currie’s optimism here is all the more surprising when one considers what he wrote on the subject of empathy three years earlier: “In order to defeat my enemy I may need to simulate his mental operations, so as to know what he will do. That need not make me like him any better” (“The Moral Psychology of Fiction,” p. 257). There are clearly two Curries, one who believes that simulation evolved because it helped us to become “better social creatures” (“The Paradox of Caring,” in Hjort and Laver, eds., *Emotion and the Arts*, pp. 63–77, at p. 72), and another – red in tooth and claw – who knows that simulation also makes us more effective *fighters*.

- 28 “If the work’s obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count as an aesthetic as well as a moral defect.” (Walton, “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,” p. 30) Notice that only the beauty of “obnoxious” works is inaccessible, not that of (say) sanctimonious works.
- 29 Tamar Gendler, “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (2000): 55–81, at p. 58.
- 30 Gendler’s version of imaginative resistance is, to be fair, the most convincing, precisely because she rules such cases out of court: as long as it does not look like I am being invited to “export” the deviant value system to the real world, she writes, I do not feel it necessary to resist (*ibid.*, p. 73–4). Still, one wonders how many works are left once we apply this restriction. How many Sade-like cases are there, in which an author tries to force real-world depravity upon us by fictional means? And even here, is it really moral squeamishness that makes us resist? As I will argue below, it is just as easy for me to resist excessively *pious* fictions – even those with whose values my real-world self agrees.
- 31 Perhaps we do not always imaginatively endorse murder while watching, say, *Goodfellas*. But I believe we do imaginatively endorse theft, larceny, bank robbery, fraud, and so on while watching *The Sting*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and so on for any number of outlaw films. And the conclusion of *Silence of the Lambs* leaves us, quite curiously, feeling glad for Hannibal Lecter that he has secured himself a meal (of human flesh).



- 32 Conversely, I am not convinced that our imaginative resistance drops so dramatically when it comes to facts. When philosophers discuss this question, they naturally tend to think in terms of impossible propositions (“six times two is not twelve”) which we are, they say, perfectly happy to imagine. But these are not the interesting cases. Instead, we should be thinking in terms of *internal* infringement: events, that is, which break the laws of the fictional world (or genre) itself, rather than (or in addition to) natural laws. Thus when a dozen machine guns are all firing continuously, from different angles, upon a hero whom we admire for his ingenuity, and he escapes death because somehow every single bullet misses its target, we may very well cease (temporarily) to make-believe the world presented.
- 33 Gendler (“The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance,” p. 77) suggests that cowboy films reduce our moral outrage by making the victims appear (objectively) to deserve their fate. The mummy-denying rationalist, however, only deserves his fate by the standards of the topsy-turvy worldview internal to the fiction. Objectively speaking, the rationalist is an innocent, and we should, on the Humean account, be resisting with all our might. I would suggest that much of what goes on in outlaw films (think, for example, of the Mexican police massacred, to our great satisfaction, by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) follows a similar pattern.
- Compare Currie: “The lovers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* are not very appealing examples of humankind, but most of us manage some sort of identification with their murderous project” (“The Paradox of Caring,” p. 74). Nor is such misplaced empathy limited to such extreme cases, according to Currie. “We frequently take the part of people in fiction whom we could not like or take the part of in real life,” he writes, citing the example of a novel about Oxbridge dons competing for the position of master. “The way I care,” he continues, “seems at odds with the kind of person I am” (p. 65). Currie, however, takes this empathetic engagement to have positive moral effects (pp. 72–3). One wonders quite how this is supposed to work in the two cases just mentioned, and countless more like them.
- 34 Cf. Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 85, 90, 92.
- 35 Cf. Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two,” p. 404. And Eileen John: “Works of fiction do not provide ‘normal’ perceptual fields, and readers do not approach them with ‘normal’ perceptual habits” (“Subtlety and Moral Vision in Fiction,” p. 309).
- 36 Daniel Jacobson points out that a tear-jerker may (inadvertently) *preclude* the kind of empathy I might very well feel in a real-life situation (Daniel Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997): 155–99, p. 186). Richard Moran also acknowledges that moralizing fictions are a prime source of imaginative resistance (“The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 75–106, p. 99). Still, Moran sees such fictions as inspiring resistance by precluding

- autonomous judgment on the part of their consumers, not by proposing standards to which the latter do not aspire. When it comes to this second type of resistance (p. 105) – resistance, that is, to specific implied norms, rather than to a general sense of coercion – Moran clearly thinks in terms of norms that are deficiently rather than excessively moral. Thus the prime example he gives is the difficulty we would experience if faced with a variant of *Macbeth* in which Duncan’s murder “was unfortunate only for having interfered with Macbeth’s sleep” (p. 95). He thus rejoins Walton, it seems to me, on this point.
- 37 Of course, there are plenty who believe that *Clarissa* is improving and *Goodfellas* harmful. But this view leaves me skeptical. If my mental capacities are so ill-formed as to leave me at the mercy of *Goodfellas*, so that I am easily led to conclude that it is excellent to kill and dreadful to report crimes, then why should I be trusted to draw the appropriate lessons from *Clarissa*?
- 38 Diderot, “Eloge de Richardson,” *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5 (Paris: Le Club Français du Livre), pp. 127–46, at p. 128. The hypothesis of lurking irony may gain some support from Diderot’s remark, in the *Paradoxe sur le Comédien* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981) about the citizen who leaves his vices at the door only to “take them up again on the way out. There he is just, impartial, a good father, a good friend, a friend of virtue; and I have often seen wicked men next to me taking deep umbrage at actions which they would not have failed to commit if they had found themselves in the same circumstances” (p. 167, my translation). Although the speaker is officially “the first interlocutor,” he is clearly identified as Diderot at p. 147.
- 39 Cf. an odd, possibly inadvertent, admission from Booth: “Thus in our moments of actual reading we are led to become quite different from who we are *when we put down the book*.” (“Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake,” p. 378, my emphasis). And Posner, more deliberately: “one of the pleasures that literature does engender in its readers . . . is the pleasure of imagining utopian resolutions of the conflicts that beset the human condition. I just don’t think this pleasure translates into action” (“Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two,” p. 411 n. 14).
- 40 Thus Rousseau writes, in his *Lettre à d’Alembert* – d’Alembert being famous for asking, after a performance of Racine’s *Bérénice*, “qu’est-ce que cela *prouve*?” – that the best tragedies “reduce all the duties of man to some passing and sterile emotions that have no consequences, to make us applaud . . . our humanity in pitying the ills that we could have cured” (quoted in Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” p. 156). And

Tom Stoppard once said that if you see an injustice taking place outside your window, the least useful thing you can do is to write a play about it. I would go further, suggesting that there is something wrong in writing plays about that sort of injustice in which we have an obligation to intervene, since it puts the audience at just the sort of distance the concept of psychic distance means to describe.” (Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 22)

- 41 Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," p. 360.
- 42 Ibid., pp. 344, 361.
- 43 It is, in general, a curious fact that those who spend their time reading great literature appear to be no more moral than anyone else (Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," p. 5). Nussbaum's response – that "professors of literature are often jaded and detached," and "don't read with the freshness and responsiveness of ordinary readers" ("Exactly and Responsibly," p. 353) – presumably does not apply to Nussbaum herself, whose passion for James remains palpably undiminished.
- 44 Cf. Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," p. 18.
- 45 Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," p. 133. Suzanne Keen's recent work confirms this. After performing an exhaustive survey of empirical studies on reading, empathy, and altruism, she concludes that "the link between narrative empathy and altruism is . . . tenuous" ("A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14 (2006): 207–36, at p. 212).
- 46 "Exactly and Responsibly," p. 353.
- 47 "The artist can assist us by cutting through the blur of habit and the self-deceptions habit abets . . . When we follow him as attentive readers, we ourselves engage in ethical conduct, and our readings themselves are accessible ethical acts" ("Exactly and Responsibly," p. 344); "our own attention to his characters will itself, if we read well, be a high case of moral attention" ("'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in Anthony J. Cascardi, ed., *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 167–91, at p. 186). Indeed "the *highest* task is to be people 'on whom nothing is lost'" (p. 169, my emphasis). Cf. Noël Carroll, who agrees, perhaps for comparable reasons, that "Reading a novel . . . is itself generally a moral activity" ("Art, narrative, and moral understanding," p. 145).
- 48 "Exactly and Responsibly," p. 355.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Bob and Fanny Assingham, writes Nussbaum, "perform the function, more or less, of a Greek tragic chorus. 'Participants by fond attention' just as we are . . . , they perform, together, an activity of attending and judging and interpreting that is parallel to ours, if even more deeply immersed and implicated" ("'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible'," p. 181) One has to wonder: if Fanny Assingham is "even more deeply immersed and implicated" than we are, and yet even she takes an "aestheticizing" attitude (ibid.) towards Maggie and company, then what chance do we readers have?
- To be fair, Nussbaum does acknowledge that Fanny "takes fine-tuned perception to a dangerously rootless extreme" and "delights in the complexity of these particulars for its own sake, without sufficiently feeling the pull of a moral obligation to any" ("'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible'," pp. 181–2). Yet this moral obligation is precisely what Nussbaum claims, over and over again, is "constructed" (*Poetic Justice*, p. 10), "awakened" ("Invisibility and Recognition," p. 278), "shaped" ("Exactly and

Responsibly,” p. 353) by novels like *The Golden Bowl*. I shall return at the end of this essay to how the core of Nussbaum’s view can be saved, with important modifications.

- 51 On this point, see Eileen John, “Henry James: Making Moral Life Interesting,” *Henry James Review* 18 (1997): 234–42, at pp. 236–8.
- 52 See e.g., Eileen John “Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56/4 (1998): 331–48, at p. 343. For a position closer to mine, see Onora O’Neill, “The Power of Example,” *Philosophy* 61 (1986): 5–29 (especially pp. 9, 18).
- 53 Some might argue that Derek Parfit’s examples constitute an exception. Others (myself included) would counter that many of his science fiction cases are so far-fetched as to be unreliable even as a guide to our own intuitions.
- 54 On this point, see Daniel Jacobson, “Sir Philip Sidney’s Dilemma,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 327–36, at p. 331.
- 55 This, I think, is the one lacuna in Jerome Stolnitz’s argument: he overlooks the fact that philosophical ideas can come packaged in literary forms (Parmenides, Berkeley, Nietzsche). Ironically, he cites Plato as having complained that artists do not have first-hand knowledge of their topic (“On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” p. 198) – forgetting that this complaint is uttered, in the *Ion*, by a *fictional character* (“Socrates”).
- 56 Nussbaum considers *The Golden Bowl* a “persuasive argument that these features hold of human life in general” (“Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 25–50, at p. 41). It is an argument *a fortiori*: if even the virtuous Maggie sees that the bowl is broken, then it must be broken for everyone. But its force depends on seeing a literary character’s journey from birth to death as a “human life” (*ibid.*), and fiction as a straightforward extension of reality (“‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,’” p. 180).
- 57 For the unpleasant consequences of sucking one’s thumb, see Heinrich Hoffmann, “The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb,” *Struwwelpeter* (1845).
- 58 In Rousseau’s words, “they are taught less to let [the cheese] fall from their beaks than to make it fall from the beak of another.” (Rousseau, *Emile, or, On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1979, p. 115) Rousseau also cites *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, in which an industrious ant refuses assistance to an indolent cricket. Children, says Rousseau, take it to be recommending not that they be less indolent (like the cricket) but rather that they refuse assistance (like the ant). Nor does this situation always come to an end with childhood: consider the fact that the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* was actually used as propaganda by the military in the 1940s (Bill Broyles, Jr., “Flix For Warniks,” *On the Media*, NPR, November 4, 2005); consider also the strange situation in 1943 Paris, when Anouilh staged *Antigone* as a protest against occupation, and the Germans allowed it because they read it as a paean to Creon (Bernard Knox, “Introduction,” *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking Press, 1982, p. 22).

In this last case, both sides were wrong, guilty of a deep misunderstanding about Sophocles' play (on which more below).

- 59 See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 2003), 3:37–48.
- 60 Cf. Michael Tanner, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of Mind Supplementary* 68 (1994): 51–66, at p. 62.
- 61 Of course, the concomitant danger is that of censorship: if we rely on fictions for the moral education of our youth, then we will be forced to regulate its content.
- 62 It is often (and correctly) noted of Emma Bovary that she makes the mistake of deriving her opinions on love from novels. What is less often seen is that her interests, during her convent years, keep *changing*. She, too, is easily swayed from one value to another, from adventure to history to mysticism:

Couriers were killed at every relay, horses ridden to death on every page; there were gloomy forests, broken hearts, vows, sobs, tears and kisses in the moonlight, nightingales in thickets; the noblemen were all brave as lions, gentle as lambs, incredibly virtuous, always beautifully dressed, and wept copiously on every occasion. *For six months*, when she was fifteen, Emma begrimed her hands with this dust from old lending libraries. *Later*, reading Walter Scott, she became infatuated with everything historical and dreamed about oaken chests and guardrooms and troubadours . . . *When her mother died* . . . she let herself meander along Lamartinian paths, listening to the throbbing of harps on lakes, to all the songs of the dying swans, to the falling of every leaf, to the flight of pure virgins ascending to heaven, and to the voice of the Eternal speaking in the valleys. *Gradually these things began to bore her* . . . (Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller, New York: Random House, 1992, pp. 43, 45; my emphasis)

I am, of course, aware of the irony involved in citing *Madame Bovary* in the context of the present argument, and hope I will not be taken as implying that Flaubert's novel has the power to change the minds of its readers, neatly converting them from Bovarysts to anti-Bovarysts. The fact that today's advocates of a fiction-rich diet are themselves almost certain to have read *Madame Bovary* at some point in their lives speaks, in my opinion, for itself.

- 63 "Invisibility and Recognition," p. 274.
- 64 Thus Nussbaum claims not only that Ralph Ellison helps us to understand "how a history of racial stereotyping can affect self-esteem, achievement, and love" but also that "Ellison's work conveys this understanding through and in the pleasure that it imparts" ("Invisibility and Recognition," p. 267). Any dangerous pleasure we risk deriving from the narrative is thus mercifully redeemed by being put to an honorable end.
- 65 "In a genre such as the novel, a turning away from traditional political concerns to private concerns and formal experimentation is awfully likely to express a wish to avoid some unpleasant social reality," Nussbaum writes ("Invisibility and Recognition," p. 280), echoing her earlier claim that Posner selects

his reading material so as to shelter himself from “the claim of a painful reality” (“Exactly and Responsibly,” p. 361). As always, a healthy moral concern – indeed an obsessive and exclusive moral concern, ruling every aspect of our life – is presumed to be where we *start*; amoral areas of our life are carved out *later*, by willed acts of irresponsibility. The novel is, by default, about “traditional political concerns,” and only subsequently perverted to private matters. Nussbaum may perhaps have a point when it comes to Virginia Woolf (as long as we overlook the feminist overtones of, say, *Mrs Dalloway*, and references to the War in *Jacob’s Room*), but one does wonder what she would say about (say) Samuel Beckett, a formalist who served in the Resistance.

- 66 Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).
- 67 Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism,” p. 20.
- 68 On this point, see also Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000) p. 22. See also Carroll: “the successful narrative becomes the occasion for exercising knowledge, concepts, and emotions that we have already, in one sense, learned;” “in mobilizing what we already know and what we can already feel, the narrative artwork can become an occasion for us to deepen our understanding of what we know and what we feel.” (“Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding,” pp. 141, 142) Carroll, however, believes that clarification can easily lead to “re-gestalt,” and thus profound “moral reform” (pp. 143, 149). In my view this is a little too optimistic. Even if re-gestalt does result directly from engagement with literary texts (which I doubt), there is certainly no guarantee that it will operate in the direction of increased altruism. As in almost all writings on ethical criticism, the assumption is that engagement with high art can only improve us if it changes us at all. Dostoevsky knows better.
- 69 Cf. Currie, “Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction,” pp. 163, 174. Walton writes that we judge characters by our everyday moral standards, no matter what the genre (“Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,” p. 37); this claim seems unwarranted to me, for reasons I have already articulated.
- 70 “Of all the masterpieces of the classical and the modern world,” Hegel famously writes, “the *Antigone* seems to me to be the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of this kind” (G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, vol. 2, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 1218); “the heroes of Greek classical tragedy are confronted by circumstances in which, after firmly identifying themselves with the one ethical ‘pathos’ which alone corresponds to their own already established nature, they necessarily come into conflict with the opposite but equally justified ethical power.” (p. 1226) (On Robert Pippin’s interpretation, perhaps even *The Golden Bowl* fits this Hegelian model. See Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.)

It would be hard to see the *Antigone* as seeking to equip us with “fine awareness:” surely we already understand the duties we have to our family

and to the larger community, and even the fact that they cannot all be satisfied at once. What the play does, instead, is make us think hard about the relative *strength* of their claims on us, and how we wish to adjudicate between them in cases of conflict. In the end, a *hierarchy of values* may well be of more use to us than the most finely tuned intuitions.

- 71 In some general sense, it might be true that prejudice rests on stereotypes and a certain distance from the reality of particular lives, and that gripping literary accounts of such individuals might begin to make one uneasy about one's prejudices, but if the novel is not very good (like, in my view at least, Dickens's saccharine *Hard Times*, and like other novels out to make such a point) it is just as likely that 'the individual' presented will instantiate just another Christian cliché, the good-hearted worker uncorrupted by power and money, or that the villains will be stereotypes, and one's moral reaction . . . itself will be stereotypical, will amount to a self-satisfied feeling that because one has rejected Grandgrind, one has a good heart, that one's sympathies are all in the right place. (Robert B. Pippin, "The Felt Necessities of the Time": Literature, Ethical Knowledge, and Law," *Arts Interpretandi* 7 (2002): 71–90, at p. 83)
- 72 Misguided readers, writes Milan Kundera, "seek at the novel's core not an inquiry but a moral position" (*The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher, New York: Grove Press, 1988, p. 7). For in reality, "the novel's spirit is the spirit of complexity. Every novel says to the reader: 'Things are not as simple as you think.' That is the novel's eternal truth, but it grows steadily harder to hear amid the din of easy, quick answers" (p. 18). Compare Bakhtin, who privileges "heteroglot" novels (M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, TX, and London: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 278); Putnam, in whose view literature serves not to "depict solutions" but rather to "aid us in the imaginative re-creation of moral perplexities" (Hilary Putnam, "Literature, Science, and Reflection," *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 483–91, p. 485); and Harrison, whose narrator writes that "le mouvement affirmatif m'a toujours déçu, et m'a toujours fait revenir en courant à la littérature, comme en quête de perplexité. Avec la littérature, on ne peut chasser les incertitudes, puisqu'elles constituent la trame même du texte" (Robert Pogue Harrison, *Rome, la Pluie: A quoi Bon la Littérature?* Paris: Flammarion, 1994, p. 77).
- 73 Booth admits that "no story will produce changes in readers unless they are already in some respect susceptible to a given kind of influence" ("Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake," p. 368); Currie writes that fictions, like electron microscopes, are best used by "those well able to benefit from them" ("Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction," p. 178); and Nussbaum recognizes the objection that "a person who is obtuse in life will also be an obtuse reader of James's text. How can literature show us or train

us in anything, when . . . the very moral qualities that make for good reading are the ones that are allegedly in need of development?” (“‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’,” p. 187.)

Still, this does not stop Currie from claiming that fiction can take control over our minds (“Imagination and Simulation: Aesthetics Meets Cognitive Science,” in Martin Davies and Tony Stone, eds., *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 151–69, at p. 163). Neither does it stop Nussbaum from insisting – as we saw above – that “it is impossible to care about the characters and their fate in the way the text invites, without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself” (“Invisibility and Recognition,” p. 278).