

Novels as Arguments

Gilbert Plumer

Law School Admission Council

I tell you he [Abraham Lincoln] got more arguments out of stories than he did out of law books, and the queer part was you couldn't answer 'em – they just made you see it and you couldn't get around it. (Tarbell 1907, p. 9)

The common view (at least among nonrhetoricians) is that no novel *is* an argument, though it might be *reconstructed* as one. This is curious, for we almost always feel the need to reconstruct arguments even when they are uncontroversially given as arguments, as in a philosophical text. What are we doing then? We are making the points as explicit, orderly, and (often) brief as possible, which is what we do in reconstructing a novel's argument. Moreover, the reverse is also true. Given a text that is uncontroversially an explicit, orderly, and brief argument, in order to enhance plausibility, our first instinct is to flesh it out with illustrations and relationships to everyday life. In other words, we expand the premises. If this process is fictive (as with "thought experiments") and orderly, it is story-telling. So there is intuitive reason to think that a novel can be an argument, whether the argument is taken as writ large or writ small – full or condensed.

Is this intuition true? This matters because if novels can be arguments, then perhaps the fundamental value and defense of the novel is that reading novels may be critical to *one's learning how to think*. If novels can be arguments, then that fact should shape literary studies, and it should shape logic or argumentation studies. Ayers draws a useful distinction between two senses that the term 'narrative argument' might have: (a) a story that offers an argument, or (b) a distinctive argument form or structure (2010, pp. 2, 11-12, 36-37). After drawing further preliminary distinctions in section 1 below, in section 2 we will consider whether there is a principled way of determining or extracting a novel's argument in sense (a). The views of such authors as Nussbaum and Fisher will be evaluated. The possibility indicated by (b) will be taken up in section 3. This possibility is particularly interesting for argumentation studies insofar as it seems that the *source* of an argument need not imply anything about the argument's structure. It is only rarely claimed that fictional narratives themselves, as wholes, can exhibit a distinctive argument structure (form, scheme). We will consider Hunt's view that many fables and much fabulist literature inherently have the structure of a kind of analogical argument. I will then propose what seems to be a better account, which takes some novels to inherently exhibit the structure of a kind of transcendental argument.

1. Further Preliminary Distinctions

I mean ‘argument’ in the logical sense of a timeless, Platonic object, as opposed to a rhetorical or historical creation that is dependent in an essential way upon the circumstances or intentions of the audience or author (which is perhaps a common conception; cf., e.g., “the coherence or significance of a text is, so to say, a variable property, dependent upon the contextual knowledge, interests and viewpoint of a particular reader” – Jones 1975, p. 8). The logical or philosophical notion of arguments taken to be abstract sequences of propositions seems to be the ordinary notion, at least when we are thinking clearly. The contrasting relativistic notion of an argument seems to be a product of confusing the means by which we *access* arguments with arguments themselves. This distinction is particularly pertinent here because of the ‘messiness’ of novels, which might be thought to mean that the argument would have to be a rhetorical or historical creation. As Doody writes (2009, pp. 154–155, 158):

Philosophy [is]. . .proudly divorced from the mess of living. . .The Novel, however, lives in the kitchen, the bedroom, the street and the marketplace. . .[It] is full of characters chattering, giving themselves away as we say, making an exhibition of themselves. . . It is never transcendent. The novel never flies. Its strength is in what it is accused of – that it is a bundle of lies. Morally transgressive from that simple fact, it cannot commit the bad faith of offering pure solutions or a timeless world.

My point is that however messy the vehicle by which a novel’s argument may be expressed, and however relative to contingencies its identification may be, the argument itself would have to be as timeless or abstract as any.

This is not to say that the *subject matter* or topic of a novel’s argument could be as timeless or abstract as any. Given the messiness of novels – the fact that they are one and all primarily about (human) psychology, action, and society – the argument of a novel could not be on a wholly unrelated topic. For example, the argument of a novel could not be a mathematical proof or even make the physical case for the existence of a postulated entity (although a science fiction novel might push the envelope about what is physically possible). The primary elements and connective of a novel are events and causality, not propositions and logical consequence.

This indicates a fact about technique that should be disentangled: the argument of a novel, if indeed a novel can be an argument, would have to be indirectly or implicitly conveyed. A novel cannot be an overt argument any more than there could be logical relations between events. In contrast, philosophy, for example, generally wears its cognitive content on its sleeve. I will return to this point in section 3.

In rhetorical studies, discourse or communication is traditionally divided into “four parts” or types: exposition, description, narration, and argument (e.g., McKeon 1982, p. 25; Rodden 2008, pp. 161–162). Plainly, I am embarked on collapsing two of these types of discourse to some degree. But my focus will be limited to discerning argument in narration, rather than narration in argument. Discerning argument in narration on the face of it is the more interesting question insofar as there is no question that narration can occur in argument – arguments can be expanded or embellished with story-telling. On occasion this latter kind of view is taken to an extreme and narration is seen in almost all discourse, not just sometimes in argument. Perhaps the best-known such view is Fisher’s “narrative

paradigm”: “The logic that I am proposing, narrative rationality, presupposes a narrative world. . . a world constituted by the nature of human beings as *homo narrans* and the stories they tell in all sorts of discourse” (1994, p. 23; cf. 1987). This view has been sharply and effectively criticized for being too broad, among other things (Rowland 1987). There is no doubt value in the traditional four-part division of discourse, so we must be careful. I think that the concept of argument is clear and strong enough that it will hardly become seriously blurred if we allow that some novels may be taken to be arguments. Nothing I say is meant to deny that by their formal features, effect, etc. those novels are still *primarily* narratives.

Why is my focus on novels rather than other forms of fictional narration? Again, this seems to be the more interesting and challenging question. The novel is generally regarded as the pinnacle of fictional narrative art. Other forms of fictional narration such as short stories, plays, and films might be easier to manage or analyze because they have shorter or simpler structures. I do not see anything *essential* in focusing on novels in the attempt to discern argument in fictional narration; indeed, in section 3 we will see what can be learned from considering the question in connection with fables. However, it does seem essential or necessary that the narration be fictional – that it not be, for example, history. This is not because history, biography, etc. need be any less *vivid* than fictional narration (the chain of thought is not: ‘vivid, therefore persuasive, therefore an argument’). Rather, it is because, by definition, the point of nonfictional narration involves veracity – sticking to the facts, telling what happened – so there is no theoretical room for the creativity that is needed to construct an argument by inventing what happens. (That is to say, more precisely, there is no theoretical room for the creativity that is needed to construct the means of accessing or identifying an argument by inventing what happens.) Perhaps Aristotle meant something like this when he famously said in the *Poetics* that “poetry is a more serious and philosophical business than history; for poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars” (1451b 5 – 9).

2. Extracting a Novel’s Argument

An approach to literary studies that might *appear* to offer help in determining a novel’s argument is called “ethical criticism” or the “edifying tradition.” This approach holds, first, that immersion in literature can make us ethically better people, second, that the quality of a literary work is in part a function of the moral correctness of the views it may be taken to express, and third, that the author’s personal moral qualities may legitimately affect the evaluation of the work. The opposing approach is “aestheticism,” which holds the contradictory of each of the three claims (these definitions are derived from Posner 2009, esp. p. 458). Plato originated a version of ethical criticism, and a prominent recent proponent is Nussbaum (e.g., 1995; cf. Booth 1988 and 1998). Aestheticism has its 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.

The third tenet of ethical criticism (that the author’s personal moral qualities may legitimately affect the evaluation of a literary work) is not relevant to our topic. The other two tenets are. How might immersion in literature make us ethically better people, and how might a novel be taken to express a (moral) view? Our concern is what role or roles argument is supposed to have here. Nussbaum’s answer 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 (1995, pp. 5, 34):

...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.

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. 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, p. xvi). Nussbaum writes as if stimulation of the sympathetic imagination is needed simply as a complement to more formal ethical approaches. Other ethical critics, however, are radically anti-argument. For example, Crocker (2002) discusses the "moral transformation" of Huck in coming to *see*, in a kind of *Gestalt* shift, the escaped slave Jim as human in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Crocker says about this transformation that some might hold that "to be legitimate, it must be possible to reconstruct the transformation according to rational considerations. The ability to 'get behind' the transformation in some justificatory way is what I am denying here (as is Wittgenstein)" (p. 58). The same applies for any reader who experiences a "moral transformation" like Huck's, something that was presumably more common in Twain's day.

So what Nussbaum is postulating here with the stimulated sympathetic imagination, and Crocker with coming to see the world in a certain way (e.g., p. 72), is a nonargumentative vehicle, yet one that is nonetheless a vehicle of persuasion or "moral conversion" (Crocker, p. 70). I think that if this sort of thing is *all* there is to the persuasive force of novels, then that force is cheapened compared to what it would be if it *also* included an argumentative component. Noncognitive avenues of persuasion tend to be fickle (lacking the reliability of 'the caustic of reason') and even dangerous. 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" or when their "poverty is drab, depressing, and common" (Pappas 1997, p. 286). Even defenses of the value of noncognitive vehicles of persuasion such as iconic photographs, against the view that they are "threats to practical reasoning," allow (for example) that they may "create a strong but open-ended emotional response" (Hariman & Lucaites 2007, pp. 14, 21). Certainly, it seems pretty obvious that reading novels produces much or most of its effect on us through affective means such as vivid description and situation or character identification. What I would like to urge, however, is that the effect that reading novels has on us is in fact much greater than it would be if Nussbaum and Crocker were right. Correspondingly for the novelist, if Nussbaum and Crocker were right, there would be far less point in writing a novel.

One might wonder, moreover, how did developing the sympathetic imagination or compassion get to be the *sine qua non* of becoming ethically a better person or experiencing a “moral conversion”? As far as I can tell, this is a result of a kind of bias and censorship. Certainly, this view about compassion is antithetical, for example, to the views Nietzsche develops in various works, including the “novel,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche, compassion is ultimately a dangerously life-denying sentiment. Recall that the second tenet of ethical criticism is that the quality of a literary work is in part a function of the moral correctness of the views it may be taken to express. There are of course two claims here (as applied to novels): that a novel may be taken to express an ethical viewpoint, and that this viewpoint may be judged as correct or incorrect. We see these two claims and the call for a kind of censorship where Nussbaum says (1995, p. 10), for example,

ethical assessment of the novels themselves. . . is therefore necessary. . . We are seeking, overall, the best fit between our considered moral and political judgments and the insights offered by our reading. Reading can cause 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.

Now our question is, exactly how do ethical critics discern the ethical viewpoint of a novel?

We have already seen that it is not supposed to be by discerning the novel’s argument. As far as I can tell, at least Nussbaum and Crocker do not propose and defend any method of discerning the ethical viewpoint of a novel. Rather, what are generally regarded as didactic or polemical novels are chosen, and the ethical viewpoint expressed is simply identified, more or less, with what the polemic is generally regarded as for or against.

In contrast, Fisher and Filloy (1982) do suggest a method. Indeed, they believe that “some dramatic and literary works do, in fact, argue” (p. 343), and they indicate a procedure for determining the argument: First the reader or “auditor is induced to a felt belief, a sense of the message advanced by the work.” This sense of the message is “aesthetic” in that it is an “immediate, emotional, intuitive response to the work,” based on simply experiencing the work and its characters involved in various situations and conflicts whereby “different value orientations” are exhibited. Then “the auditor returns to the work and recounts the elements” that led to the initial sense of the message. This becomes “the reasoned account of the message” through a process of discerning “patterns” in the work of consistent descriptions as well as character actions that “dominate and survive” in the various situations and conflicts. Such patterns support conclusions, and this puts the work “within the realm of argument” (p. 347).

Since they hold that only “some dramatic and literary works. . . argue,” presumably Fisher and Filloy would say that a work argues if (and only if) this process can be applied naturally – without being forced – to the work. In their paper, they apply it in detail to Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*. As summarized above, their account seems reasonable as an outline of how one would extract a literary work’s argument. However, they do make additional points that make the account uncomfortably relativistic. One point is that the argument so-derived is an “aesthetic proof” since it has its “origin in an aesthetic response to the work’s elements” on the part of the auditor or reader (p. 347; cf. p. 346). The argument seems to depend in an

essential way on the response of the audience. This is confirmed where Fisher and Filloy indicate that in arriving at the “reasoned account of the message” one is supposed to test “the validity of characters” against one’s own sense of reality or plausibility *and make adjustments to the account accordingly*, so that “different auditors may arrive at different interpretations” (pp. 347–348).

Fisher and Filloy also make some interesting but vague remarks indicating that they think that “aesthetic proofs” are not narrative arguments simply in the sense of (a) a story that offers an argument, but also constitute (b) a distinctive argument form or structure. They say (p. 247) that “aesthetic proofs”

are outside the traditional realm of argumentative proof in that they are neither general principles that form the basis of deduction nor are they real examples that can be the basis of induction. Such proofs offer a special representation of reality somewhere between analogy and example: what they represent is not exactly our own world but it must bear a relationship to it more essential than that of analogy.

This is, I think, all they say in attempting to spell out a distinctive structure for fictional narrative arguments. So let us turn to this topic directly, beginning with a view that appears to deny part of what Fisher and Filloy claim.

3. Two Proposed Structures of Narrative Arguments

I take Hunt (2009) to propose that many fables and much fabulist literature inherently has the structure of a kind of analogical argument (esp. p. 380). What is often cited as the form of an argument from analogy – X and Y have certain properties in common, X has some further property, so Y has the further property as well – Hunt sees as wanting, for the usual reason that having the first properties in common might not have anything to do with having the further property in common (p. 372). Instead, he proposes that at least literary arguments from analogy have a ‘first case/principle/second case’ structure, where the principle is in Peircean fashion ‘abducted’ from the first case – the principle “is supported to the extent that it is a good explanation of the first case.” The second case, however, is deduced from the principle (p. 373; cf., e.g., Beardsley 1975, pp. 113-114). For illustration, consider this short fable, “The Boy and the Filberts” (www.aesopfables.com):

A BOY put his hand into a pitcher full of filberts. He grasped as many as he could possibly hold, but when he tried to pull out his hand, he was prevented from doing so by the neck of the pitcher. Unwilling to lose his filberts, and yet unable to withdraw his hand, he burst into tears and bitterly lamented his disappointment. A bystander said to him, "Be satisfied with half the quantity, and you will readily draw out your hand." Do not attempt too much at once.

The first case is the boy’s experience with the filberts that is described. The principle is stated prescriptively or as a moral here, but stated as an explanation, the problem is that the boy attempted too much. (Of course there are other possible explanations or variations of this explanation, notably, that the boy was greedy.) The deduction of the second case is

where readers apply the principle “to guide their own moral conduct or persuade others” (Hunt 2009, p. 379).

Hunt indicates that, typically, the written analogical argument, as in the Filberts case, is incomplete or enthymematic. It must be completed by the reader. Often not only the second case, but the principle as well, must be filled in by the reader for fables and fabulist literature. One thing Hunt says about this is that “readers have only gotten the point of the narrative when they have, in one way or another, completed the analogy” (p. 380). Does all fictional literature have a point? No. Consider, for example, the recent U.S. television series *Lost* and perhaps James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. But it does seem, essentially by definition, that fabulist literature has to have a point. Such literature is in that way argumentative even if Hunt’s particular analysis is wrong. That some novels do not have a point indicates that not all novels are arguments, a qualification to which we shall return. Another idea to consider in this connection, which Hunt seems to suggest (pp. 379–381), is that how *literary* a fable is, is in part determined by the extent to which its (analogical) argumentative structure is incomplete. The more overtly moralistic the piece is, or the more the author supplies details of the second case, the less literary the piece tends to appear. An example Hunt mentions is Arthur Miller’s 1953 play, *The Crucible*, about witch-hunting in old Salem, Massachusetts, with parallels to anti-Communist ‘witch-hunts’ to be supplied by contemporary audiences. But any number of polemical or didactic novels would serve just as well, for example, the novels of Ayn Rand. Perhaps because the novelist’s focus becomes diverted from character and plot development, the preachier the approach, the greater the risk of alienating the reader with a less-than-rich fictional world populated by wooden characters.

This confirms a point I made earlier – that if indeed a novel can be an argument, it would have to be indirectly or implicitly conveyed. For otherwise, the piece’s literary status (in the sense applied to fiction), and hence its status as a novel, would be called into question. Moreover, it seems that, by extension, Hunt’s view about fables furnishes the outline of a way of understanding some novels as exhibiting a distinctive argument structure: they are a kind of enthymematic argument from analogy. Notions similar to this have been advocated by others; for example, Rodden in a vaguer way discusses how the “enthymematic” analogy between our world and the world of George Orwell’s *1984* may “move” or persuade us (2008, e.g., pp. 165–167).

Nevertheless, this derived account of (some) novels as arguments has several shortcomings. First, let’s face it, as it stands the account is not very deep. Second, it seems basic to the concept of analogy that two different kinds of things are compared; “to say that two pigs are both fat is not to analogize” (Beardsley 1975, p. 111). Given this, it is at least questionable for many novels that would certainly appear to be arguments if there are any, whether they are actually arguments. Consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Are the events and the kind of racism described in the novel (first case) different enough from the kind of racism the reader would be aware of (second case) to count as an analogy? Which readers – those of Twain’s time or our own? This brings us to a final criticism, which I think is fatal, viz., the account is inherently relativistic. Insofar as the reader fills in the second case, the account has the absurd consequence, for example, that a dead author might never have had access to his or her own argument.

I think a better model is that some novels are *transcendental* arguments. The distinctive power and majesty 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.

The believability claim, (1), is self-referential and normally implicit (although, e.g., in parts of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* the claim seems explicit). (2) expresses the basic idea 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 a premise that any novelist need intend or even be aware of; rather, it is the specific inference license that the present theory is proposing. (3) is the conclusion. It indicates which principles operate in the real world and 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, p. 155).

Notice that because the "real world" in (3) 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.

Believability is the central element of the transcendental argument and is, incidentally, at least a necessary condition for a novel to be a good novel (which I take to be obvious). Is the novel successful 'make-believe'? Curiously, when we ask about this, we know we are asking about how believable a work of fiction or "bundle of lies" is. So clearly, we are not asking how much we can presume that the events the novel relates actually occurred. Rather, 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. 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, p. 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" (cf. Cebik 1971, p. 16). 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. Again, perhaps James Joyce's *Ulysses* or William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* fall into this category. 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.¹

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. Consider the novels of Franz Kafka. Here, what is believable may not be so much the depicted events themselves as the event complex's implied commentary on the real world. On the other hand, 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 (consider, e.g., H. P. Lovecraft's novella *The Call of Cthulhu*). Here, believability breaks down.

Incoherent novels either do not make the believability claim, (1), or the claim is false. In either case the argument does not 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 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 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.

How does the novel move from the premise, (1), to the conclusion, (3)? The most interesting cases, and the height of the art form, are big, good, minimally didactic novels. I take the *whole* novel to be the argument. By inventing, in seemingly infinite detail, who the characters are and what happens to them, the novelist constructs a rich fictional world. Such a world (and hence, argument) can be an awe-inspiring *tour de force*. The novelist probes, and shows us different ways we might be or live, shows us different ways we might interact, and shows us the consequences that might result from adopting these ways. Given that the novel is good, all this is believable, and so it unfolds largely according to recognizable principles and generalizations. But it is where these implicated principles are tweaked, highlighted, rearranged, and pushed to limits in unexpected fashions that gives the good novel a uniqueness of vision. Consider, for example, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. Here is a passage about the novel's most reflective character (1915, pp. 447–448):

“The stupid lights,” Ursula said to herself, in her dark sensual arrogance. “The stupid, artificial, exaggerated town, fuming its lights. It does not exist really. It rests upon the unlimited darkness, like a gleam of coloured oil on dark water, but what is it? – nothing, just nothing.”

In the tram, in the train, she felt the same. The lights, the civic uniform was a trick played, the people as they moved or sat were only dummies exposed. She could see, beneath their pale, wooden pretense of composure and civic purposefulness, the dark stream that contained them all.

In a line, Lawrence’s view is that you should develop your passionate self to an equal or greater extent than your civic self; otherwise, your happiness will suffer.

Certainly, a novel’s argument can be summarized or abbreviated. But no such abbreviation is *identical* to the novel’s argument. It is a very common view that being able to “accommodate incompatible moral responses” or interpretations is “typical of great literature” (Posner 2009, p. 471; cf., e.g., Cebik 1971, p. 22). I think this is confusion. Space constraints will permit me only to suggest here that the view derives from our own limitations of finding it difficult or impossible to take in, all at once as it were, the textured nuance of the argument of a work of great literature. So we focus on what we can handle (“any number of arguments become compatible with *significant portions* of the narrative” – Cebik, p. 22, my emphasis). A novel’s argument is the one that ‘best fits’, even if no reader has succeeded in adequately spelling it out, which does not mean that the reader will not be affected by the argument. A great novel’s argument operates on the mind like millions of years of evolution may operate on a creature, possibly radically transforming it. In the evolution case, it seems we find it essentially impossible to imagine the sequence of all the relevant events that could have transpired in such a large amount of time. Similarly, reconstructing how a novel’s argument may affect us is no task for a simpleton.

If correct, my account means that the phenomenon of *coming to see the world in a certain way* as a result of reading a novel is misdiagnosed by the ethical critics we considered. The vehicle of persuasion is argument after all; it is just that it may be very difficult to flesh out. The ability to get behind what ethical critics call “moral conversions” in some justificatory way is what I am *affirming* here.²

NOTES

¹My notions of internal and external coherence bear some resemblance to Fisher’s notions of “narrative probability and fidelity” in the “narrative paradigm” that he proposes for almost all discourse, which was briefly discussed above in section 2. Fisher (1987) says “rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings – their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story [“coherence in life and literature requires that characters behave characteristically” – p. 47], and their constant habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether or not the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. . and thereby constitute good reasons for belief and action” (pp. 5, 105). For the believability of a novel, I see external coherence operating on a more fundamental level than Fisher’s notion of narrative fidelity: with respect to human psychology and society, in order to be believable a novel need only

cohere with our widely shared *basic* assumptions. Later I will illustrate the point that it is where these implicated principles are tweaked, highlighted, rearranged, and pushed to limits in unexpected fashions that gives the good novel a uniqueness of vision.

Moreover, Fisher's view is nothing less than a proposal to revamp logic as a whole, whereas mine concerns the believability of novels. While Fisher's view is still discussed and applied (e.g., Roberts 2004), as a viable new logic I think it has been refuted: "a story may ring true and be coherent, but still false. . . a story may not ring true, but in fact be correct. . . If narrative fidelity and probability are to be useful tests of public argument, they must test not merely the story, but the story in relation to the world. And as soon as the tests are extended in this manner, they become essentially equivalent to the tests of evidence and reasoning that are traditionally applied to public argument" (Rowland 1987, pp. 269-270).

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