

human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*. Art gives a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when we meet with them elsewhere, and it is a clue to what happens elsewhere. An understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority. There are very evident degrees of merit, there are heights and distances; even Shakespeare is not perfect. Good art, unlike bad art, unlike 'happenings', is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish. Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether representational or not it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance; it exhibits virtue in its true guise in the context of death and chance.

Plato held that beauty could be a starting-point of the good life, but he came to mistrust art and we can see played out in that great spirit the peculiarly distressing struggle between the artist and the saint. Plato allowed to the beauty of the lovely boy an awakening power which he denied to the beauty of nature or of art. He seems to have come to believe that all art is bad art, a mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality. About nature he seems, in the context of the theory of forms, to have been at least once in doubt. Are there forms of mud, hair and dirt? If there are then nature is redeemed into the area of truthful vision. (My previous argument assumes of course, in Platonic terms, that there are.) Another starting-point, or road, which Plato speaks of more often however is the way of the *téchne* / the sciences, crafts, and intellectual disciplines excluding the arts. I think there is a way of the intellect, a sense in which intellectual disciplines are moral disciplines, and this is not too difficult to discern. There are important bridge ideas between morality and other at first sight different human activities, and these ideas are perhaps most clearly seen in the context of the *téchne*. And as when we use the nature of art as a clue, we may be able to learn more about the central area of morality if we examine what are essentially the same concepts more simply on display elsewhere. I mean such concepts as justice, accuracy, truthfulness, realism, humility, courage as the ability to sustain clear vision, love as attachment or even passion without sentiment or self.

The *téchne* which Plato thought was most important was mathematics, because it was most rigorous and abstract. I shall take an example of a *téchne* more congenial to myself: learning a language. If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. The task is difficult and the goal is distant and perhaps never entirely attainable. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me. Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal. The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend to know what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory. Of course a

téchne can be misused; a scientist might feel he ought to give up a certain branch of study if he knew that his discoveries would be used wickedly. But apart from special contexts, studying is normally an exercise of virtue as well as of talent, and shows us a fundamental way in which virtue is related to the real world.

8 Const.

Ros. Cooper: *Aesthetics* (Madwell 1998)

20 Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature

* Martha C. Nussbaum

How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?) Sometimes this is taken to be a trivial and uninteresting question. I shall claim that it is not. Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.

But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident – but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises, that our task, as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing. If these views are serious candidates for truth, views that the search for truth ought to consider along its way, then it seems that this language and these forms ought to be included within philosophy. [...]

In his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James describes the author's selection of appropriate terms and sentences, using two metaphors. One is a metaphor of plant growth. Focusing on his theme or idea, the author causes it "to flower before me as into the only terms that honorably expressed it." And elsewhere in the prefaces, James frequently compares the author's sense of life to soil, the literary text to a plant that grows out of that soil and expresses, in its form, the soil's character and composition.

James's second metaphor is more mysterious. The fully imagined text is next

compared (in its relation, apparently, to whatever simpler, more inert, less adequate language may have been, before its invention, on the scene to cover the subject) to some creatures of the air, perhaps birds, perhaps angels. The novelist's imagined words are called "the immense array of terms, perceptual and expressional, that, after the fashion I have indicated, in sentence, passage and page, simply looked over the heads of the standing terms – or perhaps rather, like alert winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to a clearer air."²

These two metaphors point to two claims about the writer's art that seem worth investigating. To investigate and defend them is a central purpose of [this essay]. The first is the claim that there is, with respect to any text carefully written and fully imagined, an organic connection between its form and its content. Certain thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life, reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms. Just as the plant emerges from the seeded soil, taking its form from the combined character of seed and soil, so the novel and its terms flower from and express the conceptions of the author, his or her sense of what matters. Conception and form are bound together; finding and shaping the words is a matter of finding the appropriate and, so to speak, the honorable, fit between conception and expression. If the writing is well done, a paraphrase in a very different form and style will not, in general, express the same conception.

The second claim is that certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. With respect to certain elements of human life, the terms of the novelist's art are alert winged creatures, perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy. [...]

In Plato's attack upon the poets we find a profound insight: that all of the ways of writing that were characteristic of tragic (and much of epic) poetry are committed to a certain, albeit very general, view of human life, a view from which one might dissent. Tragedies state this view in the very way they construct their plots, engage the attention of their audience, use rhythm and music and language. The elements of this view include at least the following: that happenings beyond the agent's control are of real importance not only for his or her feelings of happiness or contentment, but also for whether he or she manages to live a fully good life, a life inclusive of various forms of laudable action. That, therefore, what happens to people by chance can be of enormous importance to the ethical quality of their lives; that, therefore, good people are right to care deeply about such chance events. That, for these same reasons, an audience's pity and fear at tragic events are valuable responses, responses for which there is an important place in the ethical life, since they embody a recognition of ethical truths. That other emotions as well are appropriate, and based upon correct beliefs about what matters. That, for example, it is right to love certain things and people that lie beyond one's own control, and to grieve when these people die, when these things are removed. The tragic genre depends on such beliefs for its very structure and literary shape: for its habit is to tell stories

of reversals happening to good but not invulnerable people, and to tell these stories as if they matter for all human beings. And the form sets up in its audience responses, particularly those of pity for the characters and fear for oneself, that presuppose a similar set of beliefs. It feeds the tendency of the spectator to identify with a hero who weeps uncontrollably over the body of a loved one, or goes mad with rage, or is terrified by the force of an insoluble dilemma.

But one may or may not accept these beliefs, this view of life. If one believes, with Socrates, that the good person cannot be harmed, that the only thing of real importance is one's own virtue, then one will not think that stories of reversal have deep ethical significance, and one will not want to write as if they did, or to show as worthy heroes people who believe that they do. Like Plato's *Republic*, we will omit the tears of Achilles at Patroclus' death, if we wish to teach that the good person is self-sufficient. Nor will we want works around that make their connection with the audience through the emotions – since all of them seem to rest on the belief (a false belief, from this point of view) that such external happenings do have significance. In short, one's beliefs about the ethical truth shape one's view of literary forms, seen as ethical statements. [...]

The "ancient quarrel" had an exemplary clarity, since the participants shared a view of what the quarrel was about. However much Plato and the poets disagreed, they agreed that the aim of their work was to provide illumination concerning how one should live. Of course they were at odds concerning what the ethical truth was, and also concerning the nature of understanding. But still, there was some roughly single goal, however much in need of further specification, that they did share, some question to which they could be seen as offering competing answers.

One obstacle to any contemporary version of the ancient project is the difficulty of arriving at any account of what we are looking for that will be shared by the various parties. My aim is to establish that certain literary texts (or texts similar these in certain relevant ways) are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete. But then it is important to have some conception, however general and flexible, of the inquiry inside which I wish to place the novels, the project in which I see them as helping to state a distinctive alternative to Kantian and Utilitarian conceptions. A difficulty here is that some influential accounts of what moral philosophy includes are cast in the terms of one or another of the competing ethical conceptions; thus they will prove unsuitable, if we want to organize a fair comparison among them. For example, if we begin with the Utilitarian's organizing question, "How can one maximize utility?" we accept, already, a certain characterization of what is salient in the subject matter of ethics, of the right or relevant descriptions for practical situations – one that would rule out from the start, as irrelevant, much of what the novels present as highly relevant. Similarly, reliance on a Kantian characterization of the domain of the moral, and of its relation to what happens in the empirical realm, together with reliance on the Kantian's organizing question "What is my moral duty?" would have the effect of artificially cutting off from the inquiry some elements of life that the novels show as important and

link to others – all in advance of a sensitive study of the sense of life that the novels themselves have to offer. So we would, it seems, be ill advised to adopt either of these methods and questions as architectonic guides to the pursuit of a comparison among different conceptions, different senses of life – among these the views of life expressed in the novels. It seems that we should see whether we can find an account of the methods, subject matter, and questions of moral philosophy (ethical inquiry) that is more inclusive.

And here, it must be stressed, what we really want is an account of ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions. For the activity of comparison I describe is a real practical activity, one that we undertake in countless ways when we ask ourselves how to live, what to be; one that we perform together with others, in search of ways of living together in a community, country, or planet. To bring novels into moral philosophy is not – as I understand this proposal – to bring them to some academic discipline which happens to ask ethical questions. It is to bring them into connection with our deepest practical searching, for ourselves and others, the searching in connection with which the influential philosophical conceptions of the ethical were originally developed, the searching we pursue as we compare these conceptions, both with one another and with our active sense of life. Or rather, it is to recognize that the novels are in this search already: to insist on and describe, the connections the novels have already for readers who love them and who read, like David Copperfield, for life. [...]

Nothing could be further from my intentions than to suggest that we *substitute* the study of novels for the study of the recognized great works of the various philosophical traditions in ethics. Although this may disappoint some who find moderate positions boring, I have no interest in dismissive assaults on systematic ethical theory, or on “Western rationality,” or even on Kantianism or Utilitarianism, to which the novels, to be sure, display their own oppositions. I make a proposal that should be acceptable even to Kantians or Utilitarians, if like Rawls and Sidgwick, they accept the Aristotelian question and the Aristotelian dialectical procedure as good overall guides in ethics, and are thereby methodologically committed to the sympathetic study of alternative conceptions. The proposal is that we should *add* the study of certain novels to the study of these works, on the grounds that without them we will not have a fully adequate statement of a powerful ethical conception, one that we ought to investigate. It will be clear that I sympathize with this ethical conception and that I present, in alliance with the novels, the beginning of a defense of it. But that’s just it, it is the beginning, not the completion. And in the full working out of the inquiry the investigation of alternative views, in their own styles and structures, would play a central role. [...]

“But novels both represent and activate the emotions: so our dealings with them are marred by irrationality. They are not likely, therefore, to contribute to rational reflection.” No other objection has been so frequently made against the literary style, and no other has been so damaging to its claims. Emotions, it is said, are unreliable, animal, seductive. They lead away from the cool reflection

that alone is capable of delivering a considered judgment. Certainly the novel as form is profoundly committed to the emotions; its interaction with its readers takes place centrally through them. So this challenge must be confronted.

A central purpose of [this essay] is to call this view of rationality into question and to suggest, with Aristotle, that practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom; that emotions are not only not more unreliable than intellectual calculations, but frequently are more reliable, and less deceptively seductive. But before we can go very far with this issue, it is very important to notice that the traditional objection is actually two very different objections, which have been confused in some contemporary versions of the debate. According to one version of the objection, emotions are unreliable and distracting because they have nothing to do with cognition at all. According to the second objection, they have a great deal to do with cognition, but they embody a view of the world that is in fact false.

According to the first view, then, emotions are blind animal reactions, like or identical with bodily feelings, that are in their nature unmixed with thought, undiscriminating, and impervious to reasoning. This version of the objection relies on a very impoverished conception of emotion that cannot survive scrutiny. It has had a certain influence; but by now it has been decisively rejected by cognitive psychology, by anthropology, by psychoanalysis, and even by philosophy – not to speak of our sense of life itself. However much these disciplines differ about the further analysis of emotions such as fear, grief, love, and pity, they agree that these emotions are very closely linked to beliefs in such a way that a modification of beliefs brings about a modification of emotion. In drawing this conclusion, they are in fact returning to the conception of emotion that Aristotle shared with most of the other Greek philosophers. For they all held that emotions are not simply blind surges of affect, recognized, and discriminated from one another, by their felt quality alone; rather they are discriminating responses closely connected with beliefs about how things are and what is important. Being angry, for example, is not like experiencing a bodily appetite. Hunger and thirst do seem to be relatively impervious to changes in belief, but anger seems to require and to rest upon a belief that one has been wronged or damaged in some significant way by the person toward whom the anger is directed. The discovery that this belief is false (either that the event in question did not take place, or that the damage is after all trivial, or that it was not caused by that person) can be expected to remove the anger toward that person. Feeling grief presupposes, in a similar way, a family of beliefs about one’s circumstances: that a loss has taken place; that the loss is of something that has value. Once again, a change in the relevant beliefs, either about what has happened or about its importance, will be likely to alter or remove the emotion. Love, pity, fear, and their relatives—all are belief-based in a similar way: all involve the acceptance of certain views of how the world is and what has importance.

There are various subtly different positions available (in both the ancient discussion and the contemporary literature) about the precise relationship between emotions and beliefs. But the major views all make the acceptance of a certain belief or beliefs at least a necessary condition for emotion, and, in most cases,

also constituent part of what an emotion is. And the most powerful accounts, furthermore, go on to argue that if one *really* accepts or takes in a certain belief, one will experience the emotion: belief is sufficient for emotion, emotion necessary for full belief. For example, if a person believes that X is the most important person in her life and that X has just died, she will feel grief. If she does not, this is because in some sense she doesn't fully comprehend or has not taken in or is repressing these facts. Again, if Y says that racial justice is very important to her and also that a racially motivated attack has just taken place before her eyes, and yet she is in no way angry – this, again, will lead us to question the sincerity, either of Y's belief-claims, or of her denial of emotion.

Because the emotions have this cognitive dimension in their very structure, it is very natural to view them as intelligent parts of our ethical agency, responsive to the workings of deliberation and essential to its completion. (Dante's *intelligenza d'amore* is not an intellectual grasp of emotion; it is an understanding that is not available to the non-lover, and the loving itself is part of it.) On this view, there will be certain contexts in which the pursuit of intellectual reasoning apart from emotion will actually prevent a full rational judgment – for example by preventing an access to one's grief, or one's love, that is necessary for the full understanding of what has taken place when a loved one dies. Emotions can, of course, be unreliable – in much the same ways that beliefs can. People get angry because of false beliefs about the facts, or their importance; the relevant beliefs might also be true but unjustified, or both false and unjustified. [...]

But the fact that some beliefs are irrational has rarely led philosophers to dismiss all beliefs from practical reasoning. So it is not easy to see why parallel failings in the emotions should have led to their dismissal. And the Aristotelian view holds, in fact, that frequently they are more reliable in deliberation than detached intellectual judgments, since emotions embody some of our most deeply rooted views about what has importance, views that could easily be lost from sight during sophisticated intellectual reasoning. [...]

But why not life itself? Why can't we investigate whatever we want to investigate by living and reflecting on our lives? Why, if it is the Aristotelian ethical conception we wish to scrutinize, can't we do that without literary texts, without texts at all – or, rather, with the texts of our own lives set before us? Here, we must first say that of course we do this as well, both apart from our reading of the novels and (as Proust insists) in the process of reading. In a sense Proust is right to see the literary text as an "optical instrument" through which the reader becomes a reader of his or her own heart. But, why do we need, in that case, such optical instruments?

One obvious answer was suggested already by Aristotle: we have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling.³ The importance of this for both morals and politics cannot be underestimated. [...]

We can clarify and extend this point by emphasizing that novels do not func-

tion, inside this account, as pieces of "raw" life: they are a close and careful interpretative description. All living is interpreting: all action requires seeing the world as something. So in this sense no life is "raw," and (as James and Proust insist) throughout our living we are, in a sense, makers of fictions. The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly – whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived. Neither James nor Proust thinks of ordinary life as normative, and the Aristotelian conception concurs: too much of it is obtruse, routinized, incompletely sentient. So literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life.

To this point we can add three others that have to do with our relation, as readers, to the literary text, and the differences between that relation and other relations in which life involves us. As James frequently stresses, novel reading places us in a position that is both like and unlike the position we occupy in life: like, in that we are emotionally involved with the characters, active with them, and aware of our incompleteness; unlike, in that we are free of certain sources of distortion that frequently impede our real-life deliberations. Since the story is not ours, we do not find ourselves caught up in the "vulgar heat" of our personal jealousies or angers or in the sometimes blinding violence of our loves. Thus the (ethically concerned) aesthetic attitude shows us the way. Proust's Marcel concurs, making a far stronger (and, perhaps, to that extent less compelling) claim: that it is only in relation to the literary text, and never in life, that we can have a relation characterized by genuine altruism, and by genuine acknowledgment of the otherness of the other. [...] There is something about the act of reading that is exemplary for conduct.

Furthermore, another way in which the enterprise of reading is exemplary is that it brings readers together. And, as Lionel Trilling emphasized, it brings them together in a particular way, a way that is constitutive of a particular sort of community: one in which each person's imagining and thinking and feeling are respected as morally valuable. The Aristotelian dialectical enterprise was characterized as a social or communal endeavor in which people who will share a form of life try to agree on the conception by which they can live together. Each person's solitary scrutiny of his or her own experience may, then, be too private and non-shared an activity to facilitate such a shared conversation – especially if we take seriously, as the novels all do, the moral value of privacy regarding one's own personal thoughts and feelings. We need, then, texts we can read together and talk about as friends, texts that are available to all of us. [...]

A community is formed by author and readers. In this community separateness and qualitative difference are not neglected; the privacy and the imagining of each is nourished and encouraged. But at the same time it is stressed that living together is the object of our ethical interest. [...]

MICHAEL NORMAN

Philosophy has often seen itself as a way of transcending the merely human, of giving the human being a new and more godlike set of activities and attachments. The alternative I explore sees it as a way of being human and speaking humanly. That suggestion will appeal only to those who actually want to be human, who see in human life as it is, with its surprises and connections, its pains and sudden joys, a story worth embracing. This in no way means not wishing to make life better than it is. But [...] there are ways of transcending that are human and "internal," and other ways that involve flight and repudiation. It seems plausible that in pursuit of the first way – in pursuit of human self-understanding and of a society in which humanity can realize itself more fully – the imagination and the terms of the literary artist are indispensable guides: as James suggests, angels of and in the fallen world, alert in perception and sympathy, lucidly bewildered, surprised by the intelligence of love.

Notes

- 1 Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, in *The Art of the Novel* (New York, 1907), 339. In the volumes of the New York Edition (Scribners, 1907–9) containing *The Golden Bowl*, this passage occurs on l.xvi. James is actually talking here of the activity of "revision," the author/reader's re-imagining of the language and form of his text.
- 2 James, *Art of the Novel*, 339.
- 3 I am thinking of Aristotle's claims, in both *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, about the connection between our interest in literature and our love of learning.

END

21 Carnage and Glory, Legends and Lies

Michael Norman

For the record, I know the drill. I've saluted my superiors and spit-shined my shoes and marched till my arches were aching. I've aimed a rifle and reeled at the awful result. In short, I'm a typical American paradox: a veteran who still boils at the Beltway blockheads who bloodied his generation and a former marine who will always step forward for his beloved corps.

One fine Tuesday many movie seasons ago I carried this baggage into the Sherry Netherland Hotel in Manhattan to interview a film maker, then relatively unknown, named Oliver Stone. Someone thought it might make interesting reading if a combat-hardened reporter was dispatched to encounter a combat-hardened director, especially when that director was peddling his war record as the bona fides for his new movie, *Platoon*.

"So – what did you think?" he said as I settled into a chair opposite him. The marketing campaign, as I remember, was to position *Platoon* as the real thing,