

The Moral of the Story

Candace Vogler

Between Life and Literature

In seeking a reflective understanding of ethical life . . . [philosophy] quite often takes examples from literature. Why not take examples from life? It is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature.¹

Bernard Williams suggests that ethicists mine literature for examples in order to support or to counter philosophical claims.² But ethicists turning to literature—normally fiction, but sometimes poetry or drama—often seek more than appropriately complex and eloquent illustrations. Sometimes, philosophers find literature the most natural starting place for something on the order of a philosophical case study.³ As Colin McGinn puts it,

This essay grows out of Gayatri Spivak's remark that fiction is often read as "gossip about imaginary people," and is meant as a development of her phrase. I am grateful to Stanley Cavell for conversation about his work and to Neil Hertz, Jeff McMahon, Daniel Morgan, Bradin Cormack, Jaime Hovey, Melissa Bradshaw, Toril Moi, Hank Vogler, Larry McEnerney, and Neville Hoad for conversation about mine. Lauren Berlant gave me tremendous editorial advice and encouragement. Gabriel Lear and Richard Strier gave me detailed comments on an earlier draft. Robert Pippin has been an unimaginably generous, patient, and invigorating conversation partner. Jay Schleusener has been my constant interlocutor on these topics for four years.

1. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 13.

2. For an example of this, see Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford, 2003).

3. *Case study* is not a term philosophers will recognize as applying to the normal stock-in-trade of contemporary, mainstream anglophone philosophers. The ordinary philosophical equivalent to the social scientific case study is the thought experiment. Conducting a thought experiment does not turn on empirical observation. Literary case studies in ethics, however, represent themselves as observational.

discussing novels: “Literature is where moral thinking lives and breathes on the page. Philosophers of morality therefore need to pay attention to it. And, if they do, it is likely that the field of moral philosophy will take on quite a different complexion and shape.”⁴ When moral philosophers turn to fiction as *yielding* reflective purchase on ethical life—*directly*—the answer to the question, Why not take examples from life? approaches: but we *are*.

The usual ambition in this sort of work is to gain insight into moral psychology—those aspects of mental life that admit of ethical assessment, express ethical assessment, inform deliberation and conduct, and frame the larger practical orientations of individual agents. Daniel Brudney takes it that “part of the data for moral philosophy is to be found in literature as literature.”⁵ Ethicists who develop literary case studies are usually addressing perceived absences in moral theory. Sometimes the trouble is the abstractness or coldness of the field. If “moral thinking lives and breathes” in fiction, this is partly because fictive reasoning is contextual and impassioned rather than subjected to philosophical scrutiny in isolation from its natural home (in social intercourse, interpersonal anxiety, introspection—the stuff of a good story).⁶ The turn to fiction often *is* a turn toward moral psychology.

4. Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford, 1997), p. vi.

5. Daniel Brudney, “*Lord Jim* and Moral Judgment: Literature and Moral Philosophy,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (Summer 1998): 277.

6. One could object that reasoning is reasoning, and the fact that it is confined to a novel cannot render it fictive. This cannot be right for practical reasoning where the conclusion is an action or a decision that is the first stage in an action. The only live agent on the scene is the reader. The actions, other than mental acts, involve turning pages and eye movements. My target ethicists sometimes suggest that the relevant change in the world effected by moral reasoning in a novel occurs in the mind of the reader; he becomes, for example, more tolerant by encountering sympathetic accounts of imaginary lives unlike his own or learns by example to turn his attention from principles to the detail of situations. This may happen, of course, and some novels may even function like extended and influential op-ed pieces for a reading public. But whether or not there is reasoning taking place—in the sense of working something out in order to change one’s mind or conduct—is up to the reader and depends entirely upon the *use* to which the reader puts reading. One can read cookbooks without ever taking up cooking. One can read novels in order to catch allusions to them at parties or simply to pass the time. The only “reasoning” *required* for novel reading is the sort that goes with keeping track of fictional names and events, in roughly the way that one keeps track of anything that one reads or hears about. This is a matter of basic cognitive

CANDACE VOGLER is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Reasonably Vicious* (2002) and essays in ethics, social and political philosophy, and other areas. Her research interests are in practical philosophy (particularly the strand of work in moral philosophy indebted to Elizabeth Anscombe), practical reason, Kant’s ethics, Marx, and neo-Aristotelian naturalism.

In 1970, Iris Murdoch challenged ethicists to theorize improvements in moral perspective that had no public expression in conduct.⁷ The only way to do so was by making moral psychology a topic in its own right rather than something added bit by bit as was necessary to make sense of right conduct and sound judgment.⁸ Nowadays, thanks partly to Murdoch, moral psychology is a distinctive region of ethics. Inaugurating it, Murdoch pointed philosophers to literature, and the current ambition is to explore moral psychology by reading novels for depictions of self-expression, character development, interpersonal relations, and personal experience.⁹ Unpacking *this* use of fiction is my topic. I will set aside the question of whether philosophers provide good readings of fiction.¹⁰ The strangeness of seeking life through fiction is what attracts my attention.

There has been a turn to ethics in literary criticism of late that bears uncanny resemblance to the turn to literature in disciplinary anglophone moral philosophy. The concerns that I have about the philosophical enterprise bear some similarity to Lauren Berlant's worry about the turn to ethics in literary criticism—"it's not the field itself that concerns me but the impulse to recement individuality-with-consciousness at the center of critical thought."¹¹ Some of my ethicists are as interested in individuality-with-unconsciousness as they are in the vicissitudes of consciousness. Some produce readings that carry an allegorical aspect more common in literary

functioning for a linguistically competent agent rather than a special exercise of cognitive capacities—that is, an act of reasoning. I am grateful to Richard Strier for discussion of this point.

7. See Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, 1970), pp. 1–44.

8. The move toward moral psychology for philosophers trained in an analytic tradition is delicate. Such differences as character, virtue, vice, sound ethical judgment, moral reasoning, and moral principles (understood as endorsed prescriptive general sentences) make in the world are made by way of informing thought, attachment, relations, emotions, interaction, and individual conduct; the actuality of ethical matters has an unavoidable psychological dimension. This does not entail that ethics is a branch of psychology. It does not even entail that moral psychology is a branch of psychology. Colin McGinn offers a fairly detailed argument against psychologism in ethics—the attempt to treat ethics as a branch of implicitly causal empirical or developmental psychology—as a prelude to his work with fiction. Although one could object to his treatment of goodness as a property, his account of the "naturalistic fallacy," and his general discussion of evaluative concepts, the argument against psychologism in advance of giving fictional case studies in moral psychology is extremely useful; see McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, pp. 7–34.

9. Most ethicists involved work with modern anglophone novels, but many work on Marcel Proust and some work on Gustave Flaubert. A few work on Russian novels in translation. The novels at issue admit of readings as (in effect) novels of character. There is very little work with science fiction, fantasy, or horror (although McGinn reads *Frankenstein*). There is very little work with detective novels or Westerns (although Robert Pippin reads *The Searchers*). There is very little work on contemporary fiction (although Kwame Anthony Appiah reads George Saunders).

10. I am interested in the claims philosophers make about the usefulness of their readings, and good readers and bad readers alike have similar senses of the usefulness of fiction for ethics.

11. Lauren Berlant, "Affirmative Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 447. Berlant's concern embraces various revivals of aesthetics in literary criticism as well.

criticism than philosophy (although few go so far as to produce symptomatic readings). Others slide from fictional figure to literary character to imaginary person to person, and back again, with scarcely a bump or a wobble. (By *fictional figure* I mean an individual personlike figure without determinate core fictional subjective traits; a *literary character* has such core traits; an *imaginary person* has core traits *and* accidental or occasional features—for example, one not normally impulsive represented as having an impulse—whether or not the presumption is developed on the page. As I'll use the terms, *literary character* and *imaginary person* mark increasingly articulate moral-psychological interpretations of fictional figures.) All of my target philosophers are interested in individuality. All of them think that fiction gives us philosophically informative access to individuality *as* an ethical issue rather than simply as a focus for literary interpretation. All of them think that novels can give us a better sense of ethical challenges in life. My first question is: How could anyone think this? (I mean this partly as an ethical question.) I will raise this question through methodological reflections meant to cast doubt on the claims philosophers make about the kinds of moral instruction to be got from reading novels. In the course of doing so, I will trace a movement toward increasingly abstract accounts of the usefulness of the relevant novels for philosophy. My second question is: Why think that reading novels might address the ethical question, the question of how one should live?

The Seat of Understanding

One question that might arise in considering whether fiction illuminates moral psychology is, By *whose* lights?¹² The answer cannot be Elizabeth Bennett's, Emma Bovary's, or Merton Densher's. Fictional figures do not have ethical insight. If they have physical bodies, these are dispersed across multiple copies and editions of specific works of fiction. Whereas real people can't be in London *and* Paris *and* Boston at the same time, Merton Densher faces no such limitations. Moreover, the whole of what a fictional figure faces in its particular imaginary life is to be found in the narrative that produces the figure as textual artifice. Consider the question: What if Mr. Darcy *hadn't* intervened in Jane's romance and had danced with Elizabeth straight off? This asks how things would be if we didn't have *Pride and Prejudice*, but rather some *other* object (it is not clear whether this other object would count as a novel).¹³ By contrast, one can *always* ask such questions about

12. It is a surprising concern for philosophers with analytic credentials. Our way of doing philosophy takes some of its force from the work of Gottlob Frege, whose focus on thought was not a focus on the occurrent thoughts of this or that person.

13. It matters that the questions go to key plot points in the novel. I will consider questions that go to character less indirectly below.

what a man did. People intent on self-improvement, for example, are imagining *themselves* otherwise, often because things have not been going well for them. In short, there is no contingency, no novelty, and no possibility of things going otherwise for a fictional figure in its final form. Scholarly interest in earlier drafts of a novel is interest in the writer, the method of composition, or the work, *not* in the other possibilities that life offered the imaginary people before the author intervened. Imaginary people exist in no one place. They sense nothing, feel nothing, and think nothing. If you prick them, they do not bleed. If you toss a novel that produced and sustained several of them for you into the rubbish, or burn it, or sell it at the secondhand bookstore, they are not damaged by your act. The same could never be true of your dinner guest.

The more likely locus of ethical awareness is (*was*) the author. In the history of philosophy, authors never die. We are comfortable writing, Kant *argues* that *p*. The warrant for this use of the simple present is complicated. The canonical corpus is read as pitched at specifically philosophical problems. (If different philosophical problems are addressed in different works, the overall effect has to be harmonious—if, say, the account of the limits of speculative reason finds points of contrast in the account of the powers of practical reason, then the anglophone philosopher-historian asks how the difference between practical and speculative reason accounts for the contrast; if some writings do not address a specifically philosophical issue, then these do not belong to the canonical corpus—George Berkeley’s remarks on the medicinal value of tar water in *Siris* provide a convenient example.) Consistency, coherence, and cogency set standards for interpretation such that when the historian of philosophy encounters a recalcitrant passage, the philosopher must work to determine whether the current account of the argument or the problem it addressed (or even of the set of assumptions that brought problem and argument to the fore) is *wrong*, whether there is an important division between late and early work, or whether the passage represents some lamentable lapse. The job is to avoid the latter conclusion. The analytical reading claims timelessness; *given* the constraints, *given* the character of the philosophical problems, *given* the intellectual milieu *these* arguments make sense. The sense made is what bears the dead philosopher’s

Jay Schleusener pointed out that there is a deployment of the counterfactual useful in teaching students to read. You can ask how things would have been if an adverb of manner had been added to a scene. This teaches students to regard the specific content and rhetorical conduct of a fictional work as necessary. It finds its frankest expression in Martha Nussbaum’s early work: “I presuppose . . . the quotation of Book Fifth, Chapter III of *The Golden Bowl*. Indeed . . . I presuppose quotation of the entire novel” (Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* [Oxford, 1990], p. 149). It is differently enshrined in Stanley Cavell’s work with philosophical texts as literary and literary texts as philosophical—the wording matters.

authoritative name in the present. The trope at issue is an *antonomasia* keyed to analytic reading in the history of philosophy.¹⁴

I think that the habits of scholarship and analytic interpretation native to the history of philosophy enable an easy transition to treating the proper name of a novelist as marking the seat of moral-psychological discernment. It is not just a coincidence that most of my target ethicists have worked in the history of philosophy.¹⁵ The name of the author marks the place of the philosopher's thematic reading, often directed to an entire literary corpus in roughly the way that work in the history of philosophy is answerable to an entire philosophical corpus. Accordingly, it is common to find philosophers adverting to several works by a single author in a developed literary case study, treating the larger corpus as a unified body of thought.¹⁶

In discussing moral criticism in literary circles, Andrew Gibson issued a complaint that might seem to damn the fictional case study:

The Anglo-American critical tradition of which [F. R.] Leavis and [Wayne] Booth are notable instances flourished on the basis of a set of assumptions that were seldom questioned. Firstly, . . . moral critics maintained what was in retrospect a curiously naive faith in the mimetic principle. However sophisticated the discourse in question, at least two generations of critics tended to talk about characters in novels as though they were people: there was no cardinal distinction. Secondly, moral critics were universalists: both author and critic were deemed to know what was good (or evil) for all.¹⁷

I have already expressed doubt about reading fictional figures as people. But the character-driven style of novel reading common in moral philosophy

14. In *antonomasia*, a name that might be variously bestowed is given to the preeminently suitable candidate. It is a species of metonymy.

15. See, for example, Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, which takes us considerably beyond the mere deployment of a literary example. Nussbaum, Appiah, Lanier Anderson, Pippin, Alexander Nehamas, Cavell, Brudney, and Cora Diamond also work both in the history of philosophy and in the region of philosophy and literature that produces ethical case studies.

16. I am grateful to Gabriel Lear for asking about this. Not all of my target ethicists read across a corpus. Diamond, for example, often works with a single poem, novel, essay, or short story without supposing that the whole of a literary corpus ought to be amenable to uniform treatment. But just as one almost never reads philosophical writings in isolation from each other when doing serious work in the history of philosophy, so too the impulse in ethics and literature often involves reading more work by a single author when developing an account of the moral project in the literary work. Sometimes other regions of the corpus—the author's correspondence, for instance, or essays about literature—license the move from individual work to corpus. But sometimes there is no clear reason for supposing that different works belong together and no articulate conception of why two or more works should be read as addressed to the same point or the same problems.

17. Andrew Gibson, "Ethics," in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore, 2005), litguide.press.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/view.cgi?section_id=0505

may produce *antonomasia* twice over. First, the author's name carries the sense of the thematic reading. This suggests that, second, the treatment of Adam Verver as a figure with a specific place in the ethical work of *The Golden Bowl* has it that *this* name marks the contribution of *this* figure to the novel's ethical task.¹⁸ The "cardinal distinction" between people and fictional figures need not tell against the habits of novel reading common among moral philosophers.

By a similar token, the "universalism" involved need not be a matter of moralism—of knowing what is good from what is evil "for all." It may just be an artifact of transferring habits of historical scholarship from a philosophical to a literary corpus. *Given* the types of situations at issue in the plots, *given* the named figures (read as distinctive loci of imaginary subjectivity, personality, and agency), *given* the implied or explicit mores, strictures, and possibilities for conduct that produce imaginary cultural contexts in miniature involving those named figures, *these* impasses, *these* quandaries, and *these* modes of recognition and misrecognition just *will* arise. They make sense.

In the ethical case studies, character-centered readings are subjected to the constraints that inform work in the history of philosophy. The proper name of the dead author marks both the philosophical account of the ethical and the source of its insight. The insight is produced through interpretation. The interpretation is constrained by some aspects of the corpus and by what Brudney calls psychological "believability."¹⁹

Further Problems

I have suggested that, just as philosophers give contextualized accounts of the cogency of a canonical philosophical corpus as a body of argument when working in the history of philosophy, they produce contextualized descriptions of ethical stances or positions when developing readings of fiction. This makes it seem as though the usefulness of the thematic interpretation of a novel for contemporary ethics will depend upon the degree to which current social and historical circumstances present similar ethical challenges. While the suggestion falls short of charging the philosophers with pernicious moralism, it opens onto a series of additional difficulties.

Martha Nussbaum distinguishes her reading of *The Golden Bowl* from moralism explicitly:

18. I mean *place* and *contribution* to be more individualist and less definite than narratological character roles or "actantial" roles.

19. Brudney, "Lord Jim and Moral Judgment," p. 275.

[In] our very articulation of what is right in Maggie's and Adam's responses we have strongly implied that two people who had a situation with all the same contextual features, in all of their historical specificity, ought to act, in many cases at least, in the same way.

For all that:

The person who, reading [the scene in which it is decided that Adam will return to the States with Charlotte, and Maggie will remain abroad with her husband], concluded from it that "All daughters should treat their fathers as Maggie treats Adam here," would have shown herself a blunt reader indeed. The reading I have presented suggests, instead, that "any daughter with Maggie's history and character who has a father with Adam's history and character (where this would be filled in by a very long and probably open-ended set of descriptions), should, if placed in a situation exactly like this one, respond as Maggie responds here." It also suggests, more pertinently, "All daughters should treat their fathers with the same level of sensitivity to the father's concrete character and situation, and to the particularities of their history, that Maggie displays here." The universalizing, in the latter case, provided not a principle, but a direction of thought and imagination.²⁰

Consider the first improvement. Even supposing that actual fathers' and daughters' lives were amenable to noncontroversial accounts of individual character and history (itself implausible), even supposing that we could provide an account of *types of situation* adequate to support a judgment that two people were in "a situation exactly like" a plot point in a Henry James novel (stranger still), the most likely result of our efforts is the conclusion that *no* people have *ever* been in such circumstances, that *no* such situation has ever obtained, and that the "case" of the Verver family has *no* point of application outside this reading of *The Golden Bowl*, rendering the philosophical work an exercise in thematic literary interpretation rather than an exercise in ethics.²¹ On the second improvement, we have an admonition to daughters that cannot be directed to children. Restricting the injunction to adult daughters of living fathers (where father and daughter alike have their wits about them), the substantive directive is keyed to a highly abstract notion of "levels" of sensitivity—the good thing that Nussbaum finds exemplified in James's depiction of Maggie and Adam at this juncture. How is this supposed to help us with the question about how one should live?

20. Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible," pp. 166–67.

21. Brudney rejects the suggestion that fiction gains its believability by depicting what's typical. See Brudney, "Lord Jim and Moral Judgment," p. 276.

One of Nussbaum's sketched responses places real people in fictional context: "our task, as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story do."²² Now, there are ways of modeling one's conduct on stories. Consider how the faithful found models in the lives of the saints. Since early accounts of the lives of saints were not written to contemporary standards of factual biography, they were, by current standards, significantly fictional (whether or not we credit accounts of miracles). But the appropriate use of these stories is impersonal and related to perfectly general principles. Peter Geach, praising the "snakish cunning of the Saints," relates the story of St. Athanasius rowing on a river. When his persecutors rowed by in the opposite direction and asked, "Where is the traitor Athanasius?" he replied: "Not far away."²³ The point is that the saints, mindful of the wrong of lying, seek to avoid it in a crisis. Nussbaum does not think that novels are instructive because they illustrate general principles. Her focus is, instead, on specific scenes of individualized moral attention. That is why the second improvement to the blunt reading is necessary. The reader of the life of St. Athanasius who concluded that he ought to avoid lying *when pursued by persecutors under such-and-such circumstances* would miss the point. But, if my interest is in specificity, particularity, and individuality, then it is hard to see how to live as a character in a published work of fiction, unless it amounts to living as though my descriptions of life had the kind of stability that belongs to novels—an extreme version of that's my story and I'm sticking to it—coupled with the thought that, although I am, somehow, my story, the content of my story is out of my hands—an equally extreme version of *amor fati*. While there *are* accounts of the individual as written by something other than its self—by the operations of a Lacanian unconscious or by ideological apparatuses, say—this is not what Nussbaum has in mind.

A few pages later, she places people in a position analogous to authors (a shift that is easy in James because of the shared interpersonal preoccupations of narrators and fictional figures):

A view of life is *told*. The telling itself . . . expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections. Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something. . . . The responsibility of the literary artist, then . . . is to discover the forms and terms that fittingly and honorably express, adequately state, the ideas

22. Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," *Love's Knowledge*, p. 3.

23. Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 115, 114. I am grateful to Lear and Véronique Munoz-Dardé for discussion of the lives of the saints in this connection.

that it is his or her design to put forward; and to bring it about that the reader, led by the text into a complex artistic activity “in his own other medium, by his own other art,” is active in a way suited to understanding whatever is there for understanding, with whatever elements of him or herself are suited to the task of understanding.²⁴

I am to imagine myself a reflective narrator learning something of my craft by reading the work of practitioners like James. According to this picture, I should live so as to develop my imagination for myself and other people. I should find people engaging in the ways that I am engaged by fictional figures. I should steer by the view of the world that I learn to have in learning to read novels. This is less puzzling than the suggestion that I should live as a literary character. Nevertheless, it is deeply troubling.

The most obvious moral risk centers on one aspect of the “cardinal distinction” between people and imaginary people: *everything* that there is to know about an imaginary person is available in the literary corpus that produces and sustains the imaginary person. The better I am at exploring the complexities of a fictional figure in its aspect as imaginary person with a stable, characterological core and accidental qualities, the more likely I am to produce a fairly comprehensive view of the textual artifice in question. By contrast, if I have any decency, I will respect others’ privacy (imaginary people do not have any privacy; it is neither wrong nor even unseemly to pore over the most intimate detail of their imaginary lives). I will not strive to conceal myself in a room where I have every reason to expect that my friend, Maggie, is about to have a tender moment with her father, Adam—a moment in which he will likely resolve to leave town in a gesture acknowledging the integrity of her sexual relation with her husband, and she will likely acknowledge what this gesture costs him and how profound a shift it signals in their relations, one to another. In life, I am charged with appreciating my intimates’ separateness and the fact that they are not figments of anyone’s imagination.

If I am given to some varieties of daydreaming, I may invent all kinds of stories about what my friends are up to when they are not with me. They may figure prominently in tales I tell myself about our world. But it isn’t clear that making up stories about strangers rather than friends will do anything but *help* my friendships by displacing a layer of fantasy that might otherwise obscure my friends. In either case, I will be making an *ethical mistake* if I take myself to have the kind of grasp of a person that fiction

24. Nussbaum, “Introduction,” pp. 5–6.

makes available to me in my engagements with imaginary people. I will make an ethical mistake if I think that I should *strive for* such understanding.

With any luck, *no* human being will be knowable in the way that *any* literary character worth repeated readings is knowable, even *given* significant variation in interpretation of a single fictional figure as a distinctive character. Suppose that one wanted to understand a human being—"Jane"—in the way that one understands Maggie Verver. The seeker of the best interpretation of Jane will need not only to stalk, eavesdrop upon, and interview Jane repeatedly, not only to study Jane's personal correspondence, wardrobe choices, diaries, and photo albums—all in order to *approximate* the kind of access to Jane that James gives us to Maggie—but, having finally acquired and archived all available evidence on Jane, our man will have to see to it that her life ends in order to ensure that the thing he has come to know is finished. Otherwise, he risks the ruin of his Jane-interpretation through Jane's vexing change of heart or mind or disposition in response to new circumstances, new events, new knowledge, new love, new experience, new employment, new society—new *anything*, really.²⁵ That is partly why the company of a good novel is so much easier to handle than the company of a human being. It is partly why one sometimes rereads novels on airplanes in order to *avoid* conversation with the occupant of the next seat. Many of us *became* readers in retreat from family, after all.²⁶ Such surprises and disappointments as novels offer are few, and can be limited and controlled by repeated readings of the same novels.

Relocating Philosophical Faith in Fiction

Treating life as a work of fiction that I compose as I live is ethically alarming. The aspiration to do so seems at once a defense against and an expression of the ethical "pathologies" that Robert Pippin finds haunting James:

There are those great, painful doubts shared by so many characters that one "has truly lived," rather than that one has only "pretended" to live. There is that theme itself in general, the difference between pretending to be and being. . . . There is the fear of exposure (as if one would be exposed as, really, nothing), or the general theme of exposing. . . . There is the anxiety of being out of place . . . and so the constant wariness about shame, the experience of shame, and then the cycle of revenge and res-

25. Elijah Millgram argues that those aspects of practical reason centered upon learning from experience are essential because we face novelty. See his *Practical Induction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

26. I am grateful to Jaime Hovey and Melissa Bradshaw for discussion of this point.

sentiment so occasioned. There are the bizarre attachments and dependencies. . . . There is the constant reality or presence of the unspoken, unsaid because unsayable but nonetheless real . . . , the fascination with secrets and obsession about hidden, crucial meanings not yet found.²⁷

Pippin does not urge his readers to pursue self-improvement by imagining being writers of, or characters in, novels. What he takes from James is an articulation of social pressures endemic to middle-class American modernity in the late nineteenth century. At root these pressures revolve around the emergence of the liberal subject as a free and somewhat independent center of psychological complexity and ethical awareness, charged with negotiating social life with fellow liberal subjects. The pressures are still with us.

Central to the trouble, on Pippin's reading, is moral-psychological indeterminacy. The figures are presented as loci of volition and consciousness with some leisure for reflection but without stable, shared social codes that could fix the significance of their own thoughts and feelings or render determinate the nature of their intercourse with others. The challenge is to produce a good life. The problem, at any point along the way, is this:

None of these characters know yet what they intend, not because such motives are hidden from them or because they hide them from themselves, but because James has "placed" their motives in some complex, fluid social space among them all, showing us their incapacity to act except in light of anticipations and expectations massively uncertain. [*HJ*, p. 73]

Ethically praiseworthy motives and intentions can neither form nor be executed in action without cultural mediation (even gestures of casual greeting in one setting may count as deadly insults or unwelcome sexual advances in another, for example). In James, the meanings of actions are necessarily negotiated over time (it is not that there are no mores upon which to rely; it is that there is no coherent system of them shaping intention and motive reliably for all concerned). Accordingly, the figures' circumstances (any stable reading of these figures as proper *characters* will only be available, if at all, retrospectively) produce acute, compounded moral-psychological indeterminacy. On Pippin's reading, there are no facts of the matter prior to the last page about who anyone is, what he is up to, or how things would go for him if fortune tracked virtue.

How is using James to bring this into focus morally instructive? If I understand it, Pippin's answer has several parts. First, James helps us to locate

27. Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 57–58; hereafter *HJ*.

the forms of social dependency that persist in the absence of coherent guidance in custom and conscience. It is not that social norms governing conduct and conscience are *dispensable* for modern liberal individuals. It is that they have to be *negotiated*, and the need for a negotiated context is so acute that there are no facts of the matter about the moral status and significance of one's relations with others (or about one's own character) in advance of the delicate, nonconscious modes of adjustment and maladjustment that give rise to something like consensus for a given set of participants in a given social scene. Second, these aspects of the modern, liberal, godless ethical challenge only come into focus in specific examples (we couldn't catch sight of the problem if we didn't stay the painful course of seeing things squared and destabilized again across multiple points of imaginary consciousness throughout the novel). Third, James's work on this topic involves close attention to unresolved interpersonal detail not normally isolable for observation or reflection. Fourth, although most James readers probably lack all awareness of such matters most of the time and although most may miss these things in James, close study of James directs our attention to the vertiginous openness of our lives in a way potentially useful in moral philosophy and in practice.

It is at this point that Pippin's turn toward James intersects with one dimension of Stanley Cavell's work. (Cavell's ethical case studies are as likely to deploy cinematographic texts, dramas, or writings by philosophers as they are to turn on works of fiction, but, no matter what the source text, he produces something on the order of character-driven readings of his chosen exemplary material.) Cavell lacks Pippin's emphasis on historical specificity. Moreover, much of Cavell's recent work concerns itself with questions about moral perfectionism, understood in the first instance as a way of doing philosophy. I will allow that differences among cinema, theater, and novels needn't concern us; I will suppose that the differences are easy to characterize or that it is easy to slip around them because we already know which points of contrast need to be noted along the way. I will leave much of Cavell's account of moral perfectionism untouched. The ethical challenges in Cavell's perfectionism fall squarely within the range that Pippin traces. "Perfectionism," Cavell explains, "is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life," that dimension that throws us back upon ourselves, demands that we make ourselves intelligible to one another, is acutely aware of the lack of uncontroversial authoritative backing for what we do or say, is beset by uncertainty on all sides, and is "political" in its insistent orientation to others (whether in reaching out to them or withdrawing from them).²⁸ In effect, perfec-

28. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago, 1990), p. 2.

tionism directs our attention to the ways in which we are not one with ourselves. Perfectionism takes hold in the gap in which the self is strange to itself. In this spirit, following Emerson, Cavell suggests that excellent cultural producers are in the business of “returning rejected thoughts” to readers, audience members, or viewers, each of whom is, qua center of reflective consciousness, a thinker potentially reflectively poised to take advantage of its self-estrangement.²⁹ For Cavell:

The implication is that the self is such that it is always beside itself, only mostly in an insane sense. (Thinking does not start from scratch; it, as it were, sides against and with the self there is and so constitutes it. The question is, What must that be in order to be sided, to be capable of asides, to require parentheses?)³⁰

Considering the circumstances of the materially secure person, the incitement to perfectionist self-consciousness might well be a Jamesian moment:

Let’s put this demand as the expectation of your “taking your place” in society. And let’s suppose that you do not see the place, or do not like the places you see. You may of course take on the appearance of accepting the choices, and this may present itself to you as your having adopted a state of fraudulence, a perpetual sense of some false position you have assumed, without anyone’s exactly having placed you there. A mark of this stage is a sense of obscurity, to yourself as well as to others, one expression of which is a sense of compromise, of being asked to settle too soon for the world as it is, a perplexity in relating yourself to what you find unacceptable in your world, without knowing what you can be held responsible for. Do I, for example, consent to the degree of injustice we all live with? Do I know how to define my position with respect to it? Since it probably doesn’t make sense for me either to assume direct responsibility for it or to deny all indirect responsibility for it, where do I stand?³¹

It is not that reading James or Shakespeare or Emerson or watching comedies of remarriage will settle such questions, according to Cavell, just as it is not the case that reading James will settle the issues that surround the liberal individual, according to Pippin. Rather, exemplary texts take on the task of representing the challenges at issue for individuals who understand

29. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 22.

30. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 9.

31. Cavell, *Cities of Words*, p. 23.

themselves as distinctive, separate loci of volition and awareness charged with making their way in the world as moral agents. Whether or not the exemplary texts offer much concrete guidance, they can serve as touchstones for reflection that simultaneously place and unsettle us in a relatively gentle way—our contact with them is intermittent; all that we need to do about them is to read well; and the way in which they produce fictional figures as sites of excess *before* there is anything definite for a single figure to exceed shows us order and disorder, exorbitance and containment as provisional co-constituents of individuality. For Cavell and Pippin, then, the philosophical importance of exemplary literary material is not that such material tells us what to do. Rather, it provides exquisite help in formulating the depth and character of an ethical challenge that we may be presumed to face (the *we* here is we readers of the relevant exemplary texts with access to the kinds of interpretations produced by fellow committed readers) *qua* individuals with time for reading: the challenge of producing a reflective, engaged, meaningful life with very little substantive guidance enshrined in established custom.

According to a medieval catchphrase about textual exegesis:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas, allegoria,
Moralia, quid agas, quo tendas, anagogia.

Nussbaum's reading of the scene between Adam and Maggie near the conclusion of *The Golden Bowl*, notice, followed the path of the principal exegeses carefully; we go from (literal) the deed involving Maggie and Adam, to (allegorical) the belief that it was good, to (moral) an account of what was good in the deed urging us to attend to the exact character of what is morally general about it, to (anagogical) an injunction to live with the kind of sensitivity displayed in the exemplary case. In Pippin and Cavell, it is not just that the letter of the text—the literal exegesis—*displays* or carries the deed. The task we undertake in reading is the task of becoming alert to the pervasive indeterminacy of the work conducted through the text. The literal *is* the deed.

For these philosophers, the allegorical exegesis *does* carry credibility, in the sense that it invites us to take the textual situation personally—to shoulder its burden, to see ourselves brought into relief by the pointillist haze assembled of many discrete, sharp observations on the uneasy relation a literary figure has to itself in its circumstances. Nevertheless, the “belief” that we are to carry away from the allegorical exegesis is odd. Pippin remarks that in James, “there does not appear to be any reassuring way, not just for us but for [the fictional figures], to identify reliably the contents of their own thoughts, to know what they think” (*HJ*, p. 64). We are to find credible

massive and far-reaching doubt about assigning definite content to an individual's motives, thoughts, ends, ideals, and conduct when considering the individual in isolation from the ongoing social negotiation of these matters.

Since the moral exegesis shows what we should do in the face of our understanding of the deed, there are no determinate morals to the stories that Cavell and Pippin read for us.

And what of the anagogy—the upward guidance, the point where the what is to be done? of the moral exegesis opens onto the more general ethical question, How should one live? Anagogy seeks the kind of thing we should tend toward, orient ourselves to, and strive for—even in the slightly indefinite form of a specific ideal governing conduct. The character of the uplift provided in this region of ethics and literature is unclear, the anagogical exegesis indefinite. Cavell clearly thinks that there is something redemptive about the projects of cross-reading toward the perfectionist ethical challenge—beginning in “showing the human as strange to itself, one could say haunted by itself”³²—that form the core of his recent work. Pippin suggests that *failure* to accept the challenge of working out one's freedom in “active entanglements” with others can amount to “so grievously and fatally ignoring” one's circumstances that one forfeits all opportunity to lead what one could rightly claim as “one's own life” (*HJ*, pp. 178, 179).

There are several things to notice about this take on how fiction is useful for ethics. First, the claim *isn't* that exemplary narratives (those to be found in the source texts or those that can be extracted from the case study) portray solutions to practical difficulties. If anything, they make the problems worse than they seemed. Second, nothing about this claim for literature rests upon a focus on character in literary interpretation, although character-directed readings are the vehicles for moral philosophy in both Pippin and Cavell. Third, the things that readers are supposed to share with fictional figures are becoming increasingly abstract.

What Is in a Name?

I have pointed out that the way disciplinary philosophers approach the history of philosophy generates a puzzle about what proper names name. The puzzle emerges when one reflects upon the philosophers' habitual use of simple present sentences attached to the names of the dead. I have suggested that the transfer of this usage from history of philosophy to philosophy and literature should alert the reader to a similar puzzle about the use of the names of dead authors and urged that this puzzle offers a similar

32. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), p. 106.

solution: just as the name of the dead philosopher is most appropriately treated as attaching to the sense that the living philosopher makes of the corpus understood as a body of argument, so too the name of the dead literary author is most appropriately attached to the sense that the living ethicist makes of the moral task that informs the literary material.

If that's the case, then we have a straightforward way of considering how philosophers might be approaching names like Jane Eyre or Isabel Archer or Oliver Twist. These might be treated as marking distinctively individualist contributions to the ethical tasks at issue in the relevant works of fiction. There is something to this. Although my target ethicists are all interested in individuality, there is some movement toward treating fictional figures in their fictional interpersonal contexts as *types* of person followed by further abstraction in the direction of *types* of traits or powers or capacities or sensitivities in even the most insistently concrete readings of literary materials—a movement I traced through Nussbaum's account of what a daughter could learn about how she should be with her father by attending to a scene between Maggie and Adam in *The Golden Bowl*. I urged that Nussbaum's accounts of the morally instructive aspects of her James readings were ethically questionable and located the trouble in a slide that goes like this: fictional figure to literary character to imaginary person to person and then back again (*back* is too crude a description of the movement; on these readings, any two points along the path can be brought together immediately at any moment in the reading). The problem seemed to be that this was too concrete to account for the ethical usefulness of a James novel, that we faced the philosophers' version of what Gibson dismissed (in a remark about Booth and Leavis) as "a curiously naive faith in the mimetic principle."

If that was the problem, then the solution looked to be a movement in the direction of greater abstraction, toward readings that depart from the clean path cut for exegesis in the medieval catchphrase. I sought some help with James on this score from Pippin, and his assistance took me toward Cavell. Cavell's readings have an avowed allegorical dimension. Pippin's work with James must, I think, be read as similarly allegorical. If one finds the focus on imaginary people easier to take in this work than it is in some other work in ethics and literature, it is partly because the philosophers' self-conscious concern with method in moral philosophy extends to a self-conscious concern with strategies for reading *literary* material. Both Pippin and Cavell understand that any claim made about the significance of literary interpretation for ethics will stand or fall on the interpretive methods that inform the *literary readings*, not just the sense that anglophone moral philosophy needs something that it cannot generate on its own and that the

felt lack could be remedied by supplementing traditional anglophone moral philosophy with character-directed readings of (in some sense canonical) fiction. In spite of all this, the readings that Pippin and Cavell give us remain somehow character directed.

In Pippin, this generates a tension at the heart of the readings because he persistently calls Densher, Verver, and others characters, but he gives an account of both their fictional circumstances *and* the ethical work of the novels that *undermines* any attempt to pass from point A to point B on the fictional figure-to-literary character-to-imaginary person slide in advance of the resolution of the story. This is at issue because such opportunities for proper narrative closure as life presents *people* are few, partial, vulnerable, and unlikely to be as satisfying (in any sense) as the denouement of a good novel. If I understand him, Cavell's cross-readings and self-reflective insistences stage his embrace of the kind of indeterminacy that Pippin finds exemplified in James. Cavell enacts the perpetually provisional move toward character and ethical stance over and over again precisely in order to highlight these dimensions of the ethical challenge posed by presumed individuality (as this challenge infects our circumstances as people, as readers or viewers or audience members, and as philosophers).

Now, not all fictional figures are best read as literary characters. Edgar Poe for example chose to write short stories in part because, "in the tale proper . . . there is no space for development of character."³³ As he knew well enough, if there is no space for character development, then there is no space for character *at all*. Accordingly, one will do tremendous violence to Poe if one moves from individual fictional figure to literary character in one of Poe's tales and then tries to read well. Often, central personlike figures (narrators, especially) in Poe are unnamed, perhaps in order to underscore this point, since these are the only fictional figures that might even *seem* to admit of readings as literary characters; they are the sites where something akin to *learning* (almost) happens. The named figures—Ligeia, Berenice, and C. Auguste Dupin, for example—undergo alterations and come to the reader in motion, but they do not appear as imaginary people engaged with problems of self-cultivation; they do not even sustain readings as sites of imaginary moral-psychological *change*. In the face of this point of contrast, given, especially, the tension in Pippin's readings of James's fictional figures as literary characters, it is hard not to suspect that the moral philosopher is somehow stymied by the proper name on the page.

One just *will* steer by the names of personlike fictional figures, of course.

33. Edgar Allan Poe, marginalia in June 1849 issue of *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York, 1984), p. 1465.

Not only do they mark subject-positions grammatically and accept verbs of human action, attitude, and response, their consistent deployment in a novel organizes both make-believe historical and biographical material and focuses corresponding make-believe moral-psychological density, distinctiveness, and difficulty.³⁴ Moreover, a writer of fiction may describe his cast of fictional figures as coming to him, taking on a life of their own, nagging at him, demanding things of him, and generally making nuisances of themselves until their story is written.³⁵ It is entirely possible that fictional figures are first conjured for writers as imaginary people, somehow drawn from the writers' studies and experiences of people. It may be that the only way to contain these figments is by rendering them as literary characters, however provisional or partial the rendering turns out to be.

For all that, the movement to character in Pippin and Cavell looks to be at odds with the substance of their readings.

Subject, Source, Object, and Referent

The backside of Poe's remark suggests that novels lend themselves to character-directed readings because longer fiction has enough space for character development. It's only natural that such work will invite reading for characters, and this is, doubtless, part of the reason why we read as we do. But, as Pippin and Cavell show us, philosophers will read that way even when the character-presumptive readings threaten collapse. Length and theme alone can't account for the seductions of reading for selves-in-the-making.

Nancy Armstrong argues that the apparent perfect fit between the novel form and dramas of individuality is no accident; the history of the canonical modern British novel and the history of the self-made and self-governing individual are one and the same history:

[The British novel] came into being, I believe, as writers sought to formulate a kind of subject that had not yet existed in writing. Once formulated in fiction, however, this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy, biography, history, and other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit. Simply put, this class- and culture-specific subject is what we mean by "the individual." To produce an individual, novels had to think as if there already were one, that such an individual was not only the narrating subject and source of writing but

34. I am grateful to Schleusener for discussion of these points.

35. I am grateful to Neil Hertz and Mark Slouka for discussion of this point.

also the object of narration and referent of writing. To produce an individual, it was also necessary to invalidate competing notions of the subject—often proposed by other novels—as idiosyncratic, less than fully human, fantastic, or dangerous. The result was a cultural category and a bundle of rhetorical figures that were extremely fragile and always on the defensive yet notably flexible and ever ready to adapt to new cultural-historical conditions.

Suppose that Armstrong is right: “The novel . . . was born as authors gave narrative form to [the emergent liberal] wish for a social order sufficiently elastic to accommodate individualism.”³⁶ Suppose that the anxious joint consolidation of capital and colony provided the historical impetus for the emergence and defense of such formations in anglophone fiction. Armstrong traces the history in question by reading fiction and philosophy. On Armstrong’s account, disparate strands of reflection about the individual—that he is a free and spontaneous center of activity; that morality emanates from his core; that he is charged with negotiating the social world in which he finds himself and must think for himself how much of it to accept; that his passions, proclivities, and energies (also located at his core) threaten always to exceed the limits of morality and propriety; that he has no settled place; that he must discipline himself and fall in line with his social world in order to make a life for himself; etcetera—are twisted together and untwisted in the figures and fortunes of fictional protagonists. The work of the now-canonical modern anglophone novel is the work of tying up some of these threads and allowing others to drop away in a way that makes sense. Some of the ethical force of this cultural project may be easier to sense if we think about reading.

How is it that reading novels could provide a reproductive technology for the self as made of such stuff? Begin from a scene of production.³⁷ Imagine silently reading a novel.³⁸ If things are going well, no matter what else is going on, the act of reading produces a space of solitude.³⁹ More precisely, it induces a solitude made of being given over, inwardly, to the fiction. The privacy in question can be spun wherever one can stop to read. And this

36. Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York, 2005), pp. 3, 139.

37. On this score, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of the opening scenes of *Jane Eyre* in her “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 246.

38. One could also begin from a listener hearing a work of fiction read aloud. This starting place will leave the essentials intact, I think.

39. If the reader is a married woman at home, reading can produce solitude in a domestic space that offers a simulacrum of the privacy that is supposed to be the prerogative of her man in his home.

provides a ready-made scene of concealment and self-governance (one must stay with the text, turn the pages, concentrate; what one is doing is happening for oneself and in oneself; there is automatic resistance to other claims on one's time and attention).⁴⁰ One withdraws from social intercourse. One can make this happen any time one takes up one's book. This, all by itself, lays practical groundwork for the cultural labor Armstrong finds accomplished by the canonical British novel.

For all that, silent reading may not *feel* like withdrawing from social intercourse. It may instead feel like voluntary association with (imaginary) people whose company is vastly more sanguine than the company of anyone else in the vicinity. Sites of bona fide voluntary association among middle-class subjects are few. The traditional forms of it rarely feel entirely chosen or entirely to one's liking—consider, for example, contracts or obligatory family gatherings. Even romance and friendship require practice in forms of self-containment far more challenging than those necessary for silent reading. Moreover, one retains extraordinary control over one's intercourse with fictional figures—control unmatched in any interpersonal congress. If there is time for reading fiction, if one can choose what to read, then one can inhabit and be possessed by what one will when one will. The life of the fiction reader is a life that permits exorbitant appetite for works of fiction, exorbitant fascination with fictional figures, and exorbitant flights of fancy in traffic with these. Fictional figures in one's mother tongue are always naked. Everything that there is to know about them is there for the reader. They will not change, and that fact allows one to track one's own changes in the ways that a fictional figure reconfigures itself upon repeated readings. One needn't do so. One can instead decide that the new reading was always there for the making and that some scales have fallen from one's eyes. And the textual anchor *was* there, potentially, even if the new reading was never there before (it is not as though the words on the pages have changed).

I take it that all these things belong to the pleasures of reading fiction. In these senses, the scene of reading fiction presents itself as a ready-made "social order sufficiently elastic to accommodate individualism." It's just that most of the players in that social order are not human beings. One "participant" is—the reader—and this (actual, individual) participant enacts an astonishing range of modes of control, consumption, and vulnerability in the act of avid or reflective reading. There is no question that a serious novel reader imaginatively inhabits the novel she reads. It is equally clear that the

40. In a recent essay Pippin remarks on the scene in which Maisie senses danger and "a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self . . . of concealment" (quoted in Pippin, "On Maisie's Knowing Her Own Mind," home.uchicago.edu/~rbp1/publications.shtml).

good reader is inhabited by, haunted by, possessed by her fictional object. Any serious literary case study in ethics invites the reader of the philosophical work along for that ride, reporting how things are when one gives oneself over to and then steps back from the work in question. If the reader of the philosophical case study knows the novel already, space is opened to join the philosopher (through another episode of reading, carrying its own moments of consternation, hope, openness, and secrecy) as a fellow interpreter of the literary work. If the reader of the philosophical case study does not know the literary text, then the case study opens a track into the fiction that may or may not be taken up by the reader of the case study. And then talk follows, or more writing, or recommending the case study to other readers. Reading—reading the literary text, reading a reading of a literary text—becomes productive and reproductive.

This helps to explain the easy congress between fictional figure and imaginary person, the aura of believability that surrounds fictional dramas of the self, and the conviction that moral thinking lives on the page in some novels. Further, the fact that we often use reading to produce solitude and to inform fantasy in an otherwise lonely or uninteresting or overpopulated life provides a safe context for traffic in excess. Just as the fictional protagonist of the individualist novel on Armstrong's account must learn highly complex modes of containment and vulnerability, so too the reader must produce a place for reading that can contain and compose the passions that reading incites or makes possible. I take it that something like this is what people mean when they talk about identifying with fictional figures. But notice that this, in turn, begins to dissolve the mimesis-allegory distinction that proved so comforting in work on James; traffic in novels is traffic in character-presumptive narrative, moral-philosophical case studies provide traffic in character-directed narrative, absorption in narrative is a technology for self-making, and the self most easily produced for the purposes of reading has the controlled, contained-but-expansive-and-expressive voluntary (imaginary) sociality formed around a characterological core that some of the fictional figures are called upon to develop (in order to emerge as the sorts of liberal subjects that the readers hope to be)—all these combine to make character-directed narrative the common thread running through philosophical literary case studies. Perhaps Cavell will not permit himself to produce singular, straightforward running narrative accounts of how moral perfectionism works out of concern over the elevation of character-directed narrative to the basic stuff of ethics.

On the Importance of Killing Jane

It is time to consider character, story, and plot—the basic elements of character-directed readings of individualist fiction. On one traditional view,

plot and character are *made* for each other.⁴¹ The fictional protagonists' characters emerge over the course of the story. At the same time, character-in-the-making is the engine shaping the imaginary events—the stuff of story—into plot points. When everything is appropriately concluded, readers come to understand fictional figures as characters that were at once expressed and produced throughout the movements of the plot.⁴² The plot, in turn, is the aspect of the narrative that enmeshes fictional figures in the story such that fictional circumstances and events do not merely bear down upon the figures—moving them from place to place, raising or lowering their fortunes, making dents and marks on them—but take their form as narrated happenings of such-and-such a type *because* the characters (however pressed upon, overwhelmed, or infused by everything else) are self-moving, self-sustaining, and self-directed.⁴³

For example, considering the first stirrings of James's Maisie's own mind, Pippin writes:

She *sees*; something is marked in her experience as requiring an interpretation she cannot yet fully give but whose dangers she senses. She knows this about her own experiences but she pretends not even to be aware of this gap or lack. (She sees “that everything had something behind it; life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors,” all without knowing what is behind the doors.) So the first manifestation of “her own mind” is this act of resistance or refusal. It is not a defense of her private views from inspection and manipulation; it is the creation of such a false front even though there as yet is next to no content in such an inner self. She does not have a worked out view of what to think about what her parents are using her for or why, but she intuits that whatever it is, it has little to do with her and it is *by* resisting their incursions that she *comes to have* a concealed or inner self. This is not yet a mind of her own, but it is something *not theirs*. Feigning stupidity, creating misreadings on their part, is what gives her that odd, striking as yet unnamable “pleasure,” the pleasure of subjectivity, one might call it.⁴⁴

41. The view is close to E. M. Forster's remarks on story, character, and plot in his *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1927). Forster means to oppose Aristotle. My summary of the view involves Aristotelianism. I think this is necessary to Forster's account of the distinctions between story and plot. The causality that constitutes plot cannot be Humean or Kantian; the why? that moves plot is an Aristotelian question.

42. There are no characters in Poe's fiction. Accordingly, Poe defines *plot* as “that, in which nothing can be disarranged, or from which nothing can be removed, without ruin to the mass—as that, in which we are never able to determine whether any one point depends upon or sustains any other” (Poe, “Edgar Allan Poe” [1848], *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, p. 869).

43. The distinction between being dented by events and being responsive to them is Aristotelian.

44. Pippin, “On Maisie's Knowing Her Own Mind.”

Reading for character requires attention to the way that narrated events become the kinds of happenings that they become through their enmeshment with the developing, self-animating imaginary character of the fictional figures.

Notice, it is not *until* the fictional figures have something on the order of literary character that it becomes possible to imagine them in other sorts of circumstances.⁴⁵ Once we have some confidence about Maisie's character, we can wonder how things might have gone if she had stayed with Sir Clyde and Mrs. Beale instead of leaving with Mrs. Wix. We can ask *why* Maisie left and have confidence that this event—Maisie's leaving—was the event that it was (whatever kind of event it was, on our reading) because of something about Maisie.

Character pulls in two directions. On the one side, reading for literary character is reading for the imaginary points of strength and vulnerability that inform the imaginary subjective systems of fictional figures—the never entirely apparent and apparently inexhaustible, developing, self-animating center of organization for imaginary biographical, autobiographical, subjectively colored, perspectival, active or passive strands of narrative attaching to a given fictional figure. This provides a take on the figure that invites counterfactual speculation of the kind native to taking stock of people. A mere fictional figure as such cannot be pulled out of its narrative context and imaginatively transplanted elsewhere.⁴⁶ A literary character seems to invite transplanting. Call this the fertility of character.

The fertility of character is, I think, one source of moral-philosophical interest in literary character. Because a literary character appears as an imaginary being that could retain its qualities in different circumstances—manifesting itself as the same imaginary self-sustaining, self-moving, self-governing individual responding to new conditions, quite possibly in de-

45. However much violence is done to the integrity of the work of fiction by such flights of fancy, it is undeniable that many readers focused on character are prepared to ask such questions, wonder about what happens next at the conclusion of a novel, or speculate about how things could be if the work of fiction were differently produced. The tendency is, I take it, rooted in the kind of generality that belongs to character. Mr. Darcy would not be Mr. Darcy if the story presented him arriving at his first country party eager to dance. In this sense, things could not be otherwise in *Pride and Prejudice*. But tracking the plot requires tracking the principals, and the principals are presented as changing. The changes presume stable cores that were first one way, then another in response to and in the working-out of fictional events. In this, the literary characters mimic young people and invite the counterfactual speculation that belongs to thinking about people. My discussion of character is meant in part to diagnose the tendency to try to imagine things being otherwise for characters in novels.

46. Consider Jane Austen's characters. Austen can render fully fledged literary characters with a few deft strokes. Even in an Austen novel, however, questions of the form, But what if So-and-So had done such-and-such? do not nag the reader right off. That they begin when things go awry twenty pages in testifies to Austen's ability.

veloping ways—imagination can transport the literary character into circumstances unlike those of its native plot. This is why reading for character so easily becomes reading for *type*.

In ethics, by analogy, moral-psychological character is understood as the flexible active and receptive core of moral agency. Good character orients attention to what matters and screens off disgraceful alternatives. I take it that the implicit variety of generality ascribed to the literary character as such bears remarkable similarity to the generality of ethical character; both sorts of character are seen as *sources* of many different kinds of actions in a wide variety of circumstances insofar as character presents itself as an embodied orientation to what matters in life, alert to opportunity, alive to risk, and deeply steadying.⁴⁷

The fertility of character—literary, moral—is one attraction in reading for character. The other seems at first to be a pull in the opposite direction: the deadness of character. In imagining attempting to know a person in the way that one can know a literary character, I mentioned that guarding one's completed interpretation of the person will require killing her off once all available evidence is in and given due consideration. This was partly because *everything* that there is to know about a literary character is available to the reader in its final form.⁴⁸ The danger was that contingent circumstances might arise in the living person's life, that she or he might meet novelty by changing, and that her or his changes might run contrary to the interpretation. This can *never* happen to a figure in a novel. People change. Literary characters don't. What looked like a merely epistemological point—people are harder to know than literary characters—belongs to the “cardinal distinction” between literary and living individuals.

Characters in life are difficult because they can go their own ways (as *characters*, they have tendencies and orientations quite apart from the push and pull of circumstance). But even if characters threaten always to get out of hand—to want to brood at precisely the point that one most wants them

47. Consider, for example, generosity (that version of old-fashioned magnificence that is within the means of any virtuous person). The generous person will lend material support to good causes. But she or he will also display openness to others in conversation, take others' views seriously, delight in the good fortune of friends and decent people more generally, etcetera. There is no one kind of action that the generous person does. Rather, her or his way of being in the world is variously *other than* selfish or petty. It is expansive without being sloppy, directed without being narrow or overbearing. His or her generosity helps the generous person to find his or her way into a wide variety of situations and to engage in many different kinds of active relationships with others and colors her ways of thinking about and responding to other people's lot in life. It is fertile.

48. Characters in ongoing serial fiction continue to develop and change over the course of each new installment. If I understand it, this is how high-end contemporary narratology understands character in series.

to pitch in, to have secrets and shadows, to act out—the mere fact that one is understanding others as characters presumes a stable core that limits their wildness. In this sense, if one can't kill Jane, one can at least develop a sense for her character, count this as knowing what matters about her, and so treat her unexpected responses as local color, a bad mood, a low moment, or an unusually high one. (If there are enough anomalous moments, one can decide that Jane's character has taken a turn—for the better, for the worse, or in some way that is not yet better or worse.) That is, one can render the vividness of Jane tractable by “reading” the story one has made about her for character.

But if one would have to kill Jane in order to preserve one's interpretation of her, then there is a strong sense in which one has *already* been attempting to close the books on her by determining what sort of person she is. This is deadening in two respects. First, if one already knows what and how to think about Jane, one needn't pay much attention to her. Second, if one has an account of Jane, one has something that is no longer tied to the living person. Consider: your Jane account, however finely tuned to her uniqueness, will rest in generalization; you will attribute some traits to Jane, some qualities, and in the very attribution of *traits* and *qualities* you produce an account that could apply to *other* people. It may turn out that Jane's combination of qualities is so rare that there is only one such person, as a matter of merely contingent fact. But, if reading novels for character is morally instructive, this can only be because the character studies show what to cultivate or which things to weed out.

That any such account is implicitly imitable is why the attractive move from naïve faith in mimesis to the subtler abstraction of allegory turns out not to be much of a move. First, both implicitly traffic in controlling contingency—from *within* (by fixing on a portable, steadying character or psychological core that orients responses to novel circumstance) and from *without* (by developing an account of the emergence of this core in canonical fictional figures that cannot change). Treating life as fiction or fiction as alive, then, can take on the anxious air of a desperate attempt to ward off contingency—the thing that can never be at issue in a published work of fiction and can never fail to be at issue in life. Second, however interested in the challenges of individuality, however alive to the issues surrounding the need to cultivate individuality in diverse, highly particular circumstances, both mimetic and allegorical readings give us something general—the generality that belongs to investigations of character. And this is so whether we are being advised to model ourselves *after* literary characters (as in mimetic reading) or merely (allegorically) *to take personally the burden* of facing the challenge of the ethical *as* individuals engaged in reciprocal,

incoherently but massively normatively charged dealings with each other. In this sense, the allegorical account of the ethical significance of fiction is *also* mimetic. Both enterprises (painfully concrete or soothingly abstract) suggest that the individual might address the ethical challenge through self-cultivation (even if doing so requires risking vulnerability to every other mature human individual in the vicinity).

And it may well be that the biggest seduction of fixing upon named, personlike fictional figures is just this: if we presume that what there is for us to get from the exemplary text is a take on character, then we will tend to assume that the ethical difficulties given exemplary treatment in the literary text can be grasped, conceptualized, and potentially given adequate philosophical treatment through focus on character.⁴⁹ What the readings yield are character studies, even when the character studies are unstable.

The result falls short of giving us the human as haunted by itself. It gives us the liberal subject as haunted by the promise of the selfhood that is at the core of liberal self-representation: narratively structured, self-governing, self-contained, self-regulating, voluntarily associated, voluntarily subject to (reasonably foreseeable) risk, and willingly reciprocal. In the world described by Armstrong or by Pippin, in the world that arrests Cavell, sentence by sentence, without yielding unequivocal guidance for conduct, this cannot but appear as a thing desirable in its own right.

Reading for Ethics

Now, as far as I know, no one has suggested that we need to turn to fiction to understand all aspects of the ethical. The fluidity of the social space in James is not so extreme as to disrupt crucial pair-wise relations between figures taken as imaginary persons—relations that would make it possible for one of them to be presented as wronging another by, say, murdering or maiming (specifically) him or her. Similarly, however much elasticity surrounds the significance of a promise in an individualist novel, *what* a literary character promises to do is stable enough to permit readers to notice when an imaginary promise maker tries to slide out from under an undertaking. Moreover, almost none of the stories that form the foci of fictional case studies make sense outside the context of institutions of property with their attendant possibilities for inheritance, alienation, or theft. In short, absolutely traditional concerns with justice frame the case studies (where justice is understood not as a feature of institutional and social distribution but

49. The corresponding assumption in the literary-critical turn to ethics looks like this: the ethical challenge can be adequately conceptualized in terms of (possibly historically or culturally contextualized and specific) modes of subjectivity and intersubjective social relations.

rather as the virtue that is necessarily toward an other in circumstances where different people going about their own business find themselves at cross-purposes). What is special about justice is that parties to just interaction do not wrong each other when at cross-purposes, and this is to their credit. It is not that they are *inept* would-be villains; it is that they do not take villainous means to private advantage because the other parties (*as* potential participants in just interaction) directly impinge upon their agency.⁵⁰ For some of us, the liveliest and most difficult philosophical issues in ethics concern precisely these matters. There is no reason to think that ongoing philosophical work on them requires moral-psychological case studies.

Concern about individuality *does* call for extensive moral psychology. I have said that my target ethicists see the task faced by fictional protagonists as the task of leading meaningful, ethically sound, appropriately self-expressive lives with others, each of whom can be assumed to face the same task (Armstrong reads the history of the canonical British modern novel as the literary consolidation of this task). The promise of individuality is the promise that, if I start from reasonable material means and work at it, and if I am spared catastrophe, I will find myself with a life that I have made for myself, that my relations with others, even if not freely chosen, will be ones that I can endorse or affirm, that I will enjoy security in my person, meet and take advantage of opportunities to develop and exercise my talents and capacities, enjoy the company of friends, live reasonably well, love and be loved, enjoy sensual and aesthetic experience, find ways of making a living that do not grind me into the dust, participate in lively social scenes, and have adequate space for leisure and reflection. Individuality, understood in this way, represents a good modern life.

To whatever extent the promise of individuality sets the terms for people's aspirations, people will face the challenge of individuality *individually*. This forces ethical case studies toward a focus on particularity. What is depressing in finding one's work on individuality driven toward meditations on types of person and types of situation is that the challenge of individuality is met and decided by particular persons facing particular circumstances, and the unique nexus of individual and situation is such that mere reliance on what's typical looks like failing to meet the challenge. Nussbaum's moral and anagogical reading of the scene between Maggie and Adam expressed something of this conviction. If I understand Cavell, the sensed particularity of individuality motivates some of his asides. Perhaps the extraordinary

50. On individual justice, see Michael Thompson, "What Is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice," in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, ed. R. Jay Wallace (Oxford, 2004), pp. 334–84.

magnification of a moment partly accounts for the popularity of James and Proust among ethicists—as though, if things could just be slowed down and if the narrative account of them could be developed at sufficient length, it would be clear how one ought to cope with the depth and density of a moment, always with the sense that success or failure in a life could rest in something as apparently trivial as a decision to stay put when something catches one's eye from the window of a train or as a quiet agreement between ex-intimates to shop together for a wedding present without mentioning it to anyone.

Fictional case studies may give us the human as haunted by itself in this vicinity. Liberal individual self-representation rests upon a conviction that what I do and think and experience *matters*. It is in and through the crucible of daily social experience that I will meet (or fail to meet) the challenge of individuality. Now, given that I am charged with ethically reflecting upon and responding to contingent circumstances, given that, in light of moral-psychological points that emerge from ethical case studies, my responsibility for meeting contingent circumstances extends to a demand that I attend to what happens well enough to have a good basis for reflection and response, it can seem as though the ethical quality of my life could suffer if I am preoccupied or inattentive in the ways that one normally *is*. If our model for paying attention is Proustian or Jamesian, then it is *impossible* to give due ethical attention to *anything* that happens *as it is happening*. At best, we might inwardly replay incidents that occurred during the day, or over the week, or a year ago Tuesday. Under these circumstances, hypervigilance, far from signaling neurosis, might seem somewhere between a feeble, ethically necessary precaution and a cardinal virtue.

Worse, any time I spend in silent reading is time spent *isolating* myself. If I have my nose buried in Proust, I will miss every opportunity to feel the pull of anything my train passes along the way and every chance to engage my fellow passengers. This is why it is a stretch to treat reading as a technique for self-cultivation in the sense *habituation to virtue*. I habituate myself to virtue by taking the characteristic virtuous action. So, if I seek to cultivate generosity, I *give*. I give of my time, energy, concern, and resources, working against inclinations to hoard whatever I take to be mine. Since silent reading induces *retreat* from my circumstances, silent reading is the *opposite* of habituating myself to noticing what's going on in my world *by* noticing. It is the opposite of *taking the action* characteristic of those very virtues of attention, concern, acknowledged vulnerability, and openness to others that case studies suggest we best come to appreciate *by* reading well. An abyssal disconnect between the theoretical and practical aspects of reading fiction for character threatens. If reading individualist novels for character aids self-

cultivation, the help is *at best* indirectly preparatory. To think otherwise would be like imagining that I could mount a generosity-directed self-improvement campaign by ruthlessly amassing a private fortune while insisting (to myself and everyone else) that I only was doing so in order to be in a better position to perform future acts of disinterested philanthropy. No such alibi would survive thirty pages' worth of Jamesian or Proustian scrutiny. Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, or E. M. Forster might make a hash of it in a sentence.

Something has gone terribly wrong.

I have already suggested that part of the problem is supposing that the fact that we *face* the challenge of individuality individually means that we can *meet* it individually. (Pippin's work with James dismantles this supposition.) The hope that such a thing might be possible may involve praiseworthy interest in leading an ethically sound life, some recognition of the privilege that attends having the kinds of security and opportunity that conduce to extended reflection on how one should live, and a (perhaps inchoate) thought that ongoing and serious efforts at ethical self-culture might produce a situation in which one could lead a life beyond reproach—that one would never need to feel the sting of unmerited privilege, that one could never be rightly charged with failing to show other people due regard while taking advantage of educational, vocational, and aesthetic opportunities the likes of which most people will never see, etcetera. I suppose that some of it might also trace to the hope that a good education in humanities will make one a good person, coupled with the understanding that a good humanistic education turns on learning ways of reading, interpreting, and responding to cultural materials.

Whether or not it is possible to set all such thoughts, hopes, and half-thoughts to one side, three shifts of philosophical emphasis might help. First, we might allow that excellent work on the moral-psychological, experiential, lived texture of the ethical is unlikely to show us how to live an unquestionably good life. Second, with Philippa Foot, we might question whether "dispositions, motives, and other 'internal' elements are the primary subjects and determinants of moral goodness and badness."⁵¹ Third, we might allow that reading for character (understood as an organization of "'internal' elements") might provide genuine insight on some aspects of moral psychology without showing how one should live.⁵²

51. Philippa Foot, "Rationality and Goodness," in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge, 2004), p. 2 n. 1.

52. My conversations with Pippin suggest that this is how he sees his work with James.

Individuality is not the only ethical topic. Individualist moral psychology is not the whole of moral psychology.⁵³ Even if Armstrong is right and reading gives us our first experience of individuality's promise and pleasures, exploring the place and status of these will take us off the page. In short, whether or not "moral thinking lives and breathes" in novels, practical reason—reason in and toward action—does not.

53. For a splendid example of anti-individualist moral psychology, see Thompson, "Two Forms of Practical Generality," in *Practical Rationality and Preference: Essays for David Gauthier*, ed. Christopher W. Morris and Arthur Ripstein (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 121–52.