

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: KRISTIN BOYCE

Why Wander Into Fiction? Analytic Philosophy and the Case Study of Henry James

It is not unusual, when reading a great work of literature, to feel that something of philosophical importance is being achieved. Sometimes the philosophical significance seems fairly explicit and easy to characterize. In a Dostoyevsky novel, for instance, characters raise philosophical issues by explicitly debating them. In a Sophocles play, characters face conflicting demands of family and state that explicitly require a reconsideration of central moral concepts such as justice or courage.

It has often seemed most natural for philosophers to focus on these kinds of literature works—ones in which philosophical issues, easily recognizable as such, are raised by what happens or what gets said. Not many philosophers, even philosophers of the most rigorously analytic stripe, would deny that it is possible that a great literary work might touch on important philosophical questions. Nor would many deny that such works of art might provide a good way *into* such problems, which can often on first exposure seem alienatingly dry and abstract. (Although once such problems have gotten a grip, of course, the place to look for the real philosophical heavy lifting is *philosophy*—philosophy of mind, philosophy of action, M & E—not narrative, verse or drama, however carefully constructed or aesthetically virtuosic.) For philosophical criticism of this kind, the literary merit of the work—the painstaking care devoted to crafting *how* the story is told—registers at most as adding force or vividness to the philosophical interest of what takes place or what gets said. In other words, the philosophical interest and the literary merits of a work are treated as largely separable from and irrelevant to each other.

But there are some works of literature whose literary virtuosity and philosophical interest are not so easily prized apart. The novels and tales of Henry James are a case in point. As Daniel

Brudney puts it with respect to James's masterpiece, *The Golden Bowl*, "if ever there was a novel in which the protagonists shied away from moral *debate*, it is *The Golden Bowl*".¹ And if very little of obvious philosophical interest gets *said*, even less *happens*. It is difficult to read James's novels as anything but experiments designed to push *what* happens as close as possible to nothing, while amplifying and elaborating the importance of *how* it is depicted to the furthest possible limit.² It wouldn't be quite right to say that nothing happens that could occasion philosophical reflection,³ although the way James writes often seems calculated to interfere with our capacity to determine what has happened at all.⁴ But even when it is possible to settle with confidence upon what has happened, much of its philosophical interest simply evaporates if one separates it from the complexity, precision and nuance of how James presents it. If one insists upon bracketing attention to how James writes, it is difficult not to feel that one has simultaneously obscured from view those dimensions of James's work that recommended him to the philosopher in the first place.

¹ Brudney 1990, 397.

² William James glosses this uncharitably by suggesting that his brother often "chewed more than he bit off". Daniel Brudney makes this point about James's *The Golden Bowl* by saying, "*The Golden Bowl* is a quintessential Jamesian novel. Almost nothing *happens*. In the course of more than five hundred pages there are two marriages, one affair, and a single act of violence, the smashing of the golden bowl. The rest is reflection, nuance, detail" (Brudney 1990, 397).

³ Compared to the dilemmas faced by Antigone, or the atrocities contemplated by The Grand Inquisitor, the intimate possibilities of failure and betrayal that shadow James's characters can seem comparatively thin grist for the philosophical mill. Dorothea Krook puts this point by acknowledging that "Henry James's social material is, or appears to be, severely limited . . . and this to many, especially those who find an unqualified virtue in the greater variety and range of the social material of a Tolstoy, a Dostoevsky, a George Eliot and even a Dickens, has always seemed to set a fatal limitation on Henry James's greatness". James limits his characters to fairy-tale figures like counts and princes, millionaires and heiresses and then perversely confines them "to their town-houses and country houses, . . . for the sole purpose, it would seem, of engaging in the analysis of their intricate personal relations and the processes of their own consciousnesses" (Krook 1962, 3 and 10).

⁴ Ruth Bernard Yeazell formulates the problem this way: "The Jamesian critic . . . [makes] himself familiar with what "really" happens in the late novels: he knows that Madame de Vionnet is actually Chad's mistress, though Strether would like to believe she is not; that Milly Theale is literally dying, however unnamed her disease, and that Kate and Densher genuinely deceive her, however noble their talk . . . Critics of any fiction, but especially of novels as elusive as these necessarily begin with much that is unwritten plot summary and character sketch; the very act of intelligent reading demands that we implicitly summarize . . . But one thus translates James's late novels at the risk of doing violence to what is most idiosyncratic and exciting in them, of making their peculiarly fluid and unsettling reality something far more stable and conventional. The distance at which critics must inevitably talk about novels is particularly dangerous here: the disquiet we feel on first reading these novels should not be so easily assuaged" (Yeazell 1976, 2).

The possibility that James's work presses upon us, then, is the possibility of a necessary rather than an accidental relation between aesthetic and philosophical value or power: the possibility that it is precisely in virtue of their power *as* works of art that certain works of literature achieve something of philosophical significance, even the possibility that for some such works it may not be possible to account adequately for their power *as* works or art *without* accounting at the same time for their philosophical interest. I will call this the "possibility of philosophical literature."⁵ The effort to make sense of this possibility, I think, motivates most of the best philosophical writing about literature, much of which has centered upon James's novels and tales. I seek to contribute to this effort in the dissertation.

It has often proved difficult to do make sense of this possibility from within an analytic philosophical framework. One source of this difficulty is that the analytic tradition has defined itself in part by distinguishing sharply between the "logical" (that which pertains to the expression and justification of truth-evaluable content) and the "psychological" (that which pertains to effects on the psychological faculties of a reader or viewer, especially the feelings and imagination). Indeed, this tradition has understood one of its central tasks to be that of overcoming confusions of the "logical" with the "psychological". This has created an obstacle to the possibility of seeing literary works as vehicles of serious philosophical thought because the sort of force that literary works have for their readers—the power they have *as* works of art—has been associated with a "merely psychological" capacity to powerfully engage the feelings and imagination.

The dissertation argues that many of the philosophers who seek to overcome this obstacle share a common assumption, namely, that a work of literature is philosophically significant only

⁵ Footnote about Michael's paper: philosophical history as a way of doing philosophy: what I intend the phrase "philosophical literature" to capture is the possibility that writing literature can, in certain instances, be a way of doing philosophy—that in certain instances, to achieve something artistically is, at one and the same time, to achieve something philosophically. I will also want to use the phrase "philosophical criticism" to capture the idea that engaging in literary criticism may *also* be a way of doing philosophy. And as we will see, to do philosophy by doing literary criticism is, as I want to practice it, is bound up with the enterprise of doing philosophy by doing the history of philosophy.

in so far as it contains or justifies a philosophical view of some kind. I call this the “natural analytic assumption” because especially in light of the particular obstacles the analytic tradition has posed to the possibility of seeing literary works of art as involved in serious forms of philosophical reflection, it can see a natural assumption to make. If one is arguing *against* the assumption that the sort of force literary works have for their readers is merely “psychological”, the most obvious strategy to adopt is to argue that in fact the aesthetic power of a literary work contributes to the logical work of expressing or justifying a philosophical view. But I argue not only that this assumption is not compulsory but also that making it precludes the possibility of doing full justice to precisely those literary works that have struck many as most philosophically powerful.

I make this argument in the dissertation by showing that the philosophical interest of some such works—the novels and short stories of Henry James--can be brought out most fully by considering instead what they contribute to a different form of philosophical progress—that of overcoming forms of philosophical confusion. I do so in a way that that is bound to strike many readers as almost willfully arbitrary and bizarre—by drawing on the works of Gottlob Frege as a generic model for the philosophical activity of the clarification of confusion. The problem isn’t simply that Frege is perhaps *the* philosopher most explicitly unwilling to countenance the possibility of philosophical literature. (Indeed, as we will see, the obstacles to seeing the possibility can be traced by to their source in his work.) Since James writes fictional stories about human relationships, it has seemed natural, in attempting to identify the source of a felt sense of the philosophical significance of James’s work, to locate that work with respect to philosophical discussions of moral or ethical topics: to find in his novels a conception of the good life that is interestingly related to Aristotle’s or a conception of historical change that bears comparison to Hegel’s. It would be crazy to look to James for a conception of logical entailment or of the relation between logic and arithmetic that is interestingly related to Frege’s.

But even supposing I can contrive to contort these two thinkers in such a way as to extract from them some sort of parallel, so what? With enough effort and ingenuity, it is

probably possible to draw a comparison between X and Y for any given value of X and Y, but that doesn't guarantee that there is always a *point* to the comparison beyond a kind of empty exercise of virtuosity. And if *my* point is to indentify some form of philosophical work that isn't a matter of expressing or justifying a philosophical view, surely there are more fruitful, certainly there are more obvious places to look than Frege? There is no getting around it: the initial impression of the approach I develop is not a favorable one.

Although the connection is not immediately obvious, my approach takes its orientation from resources within the analytic tradition where the possibility of philosophical literature—or to put it more precisely, the philosophical *art* more generally—gets most fully and powerfully articulated: the writings on modernism in philosophy and the arts that Stanley Cavell and Michael Fried develop together. In the remainder of this abstract, I motivate the approach I unfold in the body of the dissertation by locating it with respect to the concept of modernism that Cavell and Fried elaborate.⁶

Modernism, as Cavell and Fried conceive it, is not a label for art from a particular time period; nor is it a label for art exhibits a certain set of “perceptible properties”.⁷ By their lights, art is “modernist” when it bears a certain kind of problematic relation to its own history. For Cavell and Fried the “essence” of modernist art lies in a form of self-criticism which has become necessary to it: critical reflection upon what, *under present conditions*, will have the power to absorb us and matter to us in the way that great painting or sculpture traditionally has, what kind of writing will carry the conviction that great philosophy has always inspired. As Cavell puts it, this kind of criticism becomes necessary to an enterprise, be it artistic or philosophical, at a “moment in which history and its conventions can no longer be taken for granted”—that is, at a when the conventions which could be relied upon in order to produce convincing painting (or sculpture or philosophy) can no *longer* be relied upon and it becomes a problem to discover

⁶ I will be drawing on Cavell's formulations, but Cavell is often himself drawing upon Fried's art criticism. Cf. especially Fried 1998.

⁷ I take this locution from Banes and Carroll 2006.

“what objects we *accept* as paintings [what writing we will accept as philosophy], and why we so accept them”.⁸

But to recognize that the inquiry undertaken is dependent upon discovering what, under present conditions, we can respond to in the way we have responded to great painting (or painting or philosophy) is to open oneself to the possibility that what we so accept may not conform to the criteria we had taken to be essential to such works. For Cavell and Fried, the sculpture of Anthony Caro provides a salient example. Caro, Cavell argues, has succeeded in making works that we respond to *as sculpture*: in encountering these works, in “testing them against ourselves”, we are “stuck with the knowledge that they are sculpture”. And yet, they do not meet the conditions that have been taken to be essential for something being sculpture:

I had—I take it everyone had—thought (assumed? Imagined? . . .) that a piece of sculpture was something *worked* (carved, chipped, polished, etc.); but Caro uses steel rods and beams and sheets which he does not work (e.g., bend or twist) but rather, one could say, *places*. I had thought that a piece of sculpture had the coherence of a natural object, that it was what I wish to call spatially closed or spatially continuous . . . but a Caro may be open and discontinuous, one of its parts not an outgrowth from another.⁹

To be faithful to our experience of Caro’s sculpture, to take responsibility for our response to his work, is to expose ourselves to a blindness, a self-estrangement, at the heart our responsiveness to the most traditional and established works of the past. If this object can “elicit the experience I had thought confined to objects made so differently”, then my assumptions about why those other objects also elicited that experience are also thrown into question: “I no longer know what sculpture is, why I call *any* object, the most central or traditional, a piece of sculpture”.¹⁰ In other words, to allow ourselves to register this experience is to open ourselves to the demand for a deep and disorienting self-examination and transformation.

Modernist sculpture like Caro’s, as Cavell and Fried characterize it, provides a paradigmatic example of “philosophical art”: it is precisely in virtue of its power as a work of art that modernist art it achieves something of philosophical significance: it is through the

⁸ Cavell 2007, xxxvi & 197.

⁹ Ibid., 218. Cavell is following Fried closely here.

¹⁰ Ibid., 218.

procedures of the art form itself that the conditions for the possibility of something being art are investigated. It is by discovering what we will, in the present moment respond to in the way we respond to great art that the work both succeeds (or fails) as art *and* succeeds or fails to achieve something of philosophical significance. As Cavell puts it, such art has “entered the condition of philosophy”.¹¹ Although Cavell and Fried do not, to my knowledge, put things quite like this, it would, I think, be fair to say that modernist philosophy—here Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is perhaps the paradigmatic example—“enters the condition of art”: both by entering a condition in which the success of the philosophy *as* philosophy depends upon its capacity to elicit a certain kind of responsiveness and a condition in which considerations of literary form and style come to the fore. To take seriously the idea that such modernist philosophical writing seeks to inherit and develop further what is most valuable in the tradition of philosophy—in Wittgenstein’s case, the tradition of analytic philosophy—is to suggest that there is something internal to the analytic tradition that pushes philosophy into the condition of art. And this suggests not only that the analytic tradition has the resources to make sense of the possibility of works—like James’s, like Wittgenstein’s—whose aesthetic and philosophical power cannot be prized apart, but that the analytic tradition cannot fully realize its own best possibilities, cannot fully actualize its own potential, *without* coming to terms with that possibility.

¹¹ It is easy to water down (and thereby to miss) the point that is being made here. It is not simply the point that frequently *is* made: the point that modern art is “self-reflexive”, that its subject matter is art itself rather than the *world*, or even that modern art demonstrates a preoccupation with questions that have traditionally been the province of philosophy: questions about the nature of art, about its conditions of possibility. The point that Cavell *is* making here is crucially dependent upon his way of conceiving the relation between philosophy and meta-philosophy. On his view *there is no distinction*: philosophy is such that what philosophy itself *is* constitutes an inescapable part of the subject of philosophy. To say that *art* has entered this condition is to say that a given art form has reaching a point in its historical development such that what art is has become an *inescapable subject* for the art itself. It is to say, in other words, that in *order to remain* art—that is, in order to continue to absorb us in the way *art* absorbs and matters to us—it *must* raise and explore question about its own nature, about the conditions for its own possibility. Its success as art, its power to matter to us and absorb us in the way art does, is dependent upon its undertaking this kind of exploration.

It is this thought that motivates the particular way in which I seek to account for the philosophical significance of James's literary project, especially the surprising turn to aspects of Frege's work as an illuminating object of comparison. For the most part, the best interpreters of Wittgenstein's modernist philosophy do not account for the philosophical power of that work in terms that are governed by the "natural analytic assumption". And in seeking to clarify the relation between Wittgenstein's philosophical writings and the "possibilities" of the analytic tradition those writing endeavor to inherit—the possibilities that push philosophy into the condition of art—these interpreters trace those possibilities to their source in Frege's writings, particularly to Frege's elucidation of forms of philosophical confusion and illusion. It is the wager of the dissertation not only that Frege's elucidatory activity can serve as a generic model that helps bring out an elucidatory dimension that runs throughout and unifies James's literary project but also that identifying and exploring Jamesian forms of elucidation will help to develop more fully those possibilities which, from the vantage of the modernist writings of Wittgenstein, emerge as part of what is most valuable and vital in history of the analytic tradition.

The Dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter One explores what I take to be some of the most promising ways analytic philosophers have sought to overcome the obstacles the analytic tradition has posed to the possibility of accounting adequately for the philosophical power of literary works of art. Chapter Two argues that many philosophers who seek to do justice to our experience of literature, the tremendous variety of their accounts notwithstanding, share a common assumption: the assumption that a work of literature is philosophically significant only insofar as it contributes to the expression of justification of a philosophical view of some sort. Chapter Three identifies in Frege's writings a generic model for a different kind of philosophical work to which a literary text might contribute, namely, that of overcoming forms of philosophical confusion and illusion. Chapter Four begins to make use of this generic model in order to illuminate the philosophical interest of James's writings. Using the Jamesian tale, *The Beast in the Jungle* as its primary case study, this chapter develops a template for interpreting other of James's novels and tales. With some Jamesian forms of elucidation in view, Chapter

Five explores what is gained by bringing out the elucidatory dimension of James's project: both what is gained from the perspective of an interest in doing fuller justice to the philosophical power of James's writing and what is gained from the perspective of an interest developing more fully the potential internal to the tradition of analytic philosophy. Using James's *The Wings of the Dove* as its primary cases study, Chapter Six extends further the exploration of Jamesian forms of elucidation by examining in detail what is perhaps James's most extended effort to elucidate the deepest forms of illusion with which he is concerned.