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Source: *Style*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Literature and Ethical Criticism (Summer 1998), pp. 272-297

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42946427>

Accessed: 01-07-2019 13:17 UTC

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Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience

What sense can it make to attach the adjective “lyrical” to the term “ethics”? It is all too clear why writers and critics might want the attachment to ethics, for it seems as if literary criticism has to be able to idealize ethics now that it has manifestly failed to affect politics. Claims about ethics enable us to continue to feel good about ourselves by staking our work on values less easy to check up on: who can tell if the moral fiber of a literary audience or the audience comprised by our classes undergoes some kind of modification? But why complicate that position by introducing the now largely neglected concern for anything distinctively lyrical within literary experience? In my case the answer is simply that I am angry and frustrated with the criticism and theory now arrogating to itself the aura that invoking “ethics” still seems to promise. Here then I will attempt to provide reasons for these reactions, then use my criticisms in order to develop contrasts which I think offer readers an opportunity to speculate on how stressing qualities of ethos established by the lyrical can modify the relations we project between literary texts and moral philosophy.

Tony Cascardi once remarked to me that the only people to whom we should listen on the topic of ethics are those who are evidently embarrassed by their talk. Let me begin by establishing the appropriate credentials. For literary critics at least, this embarrassment can, or should, stem from taking ourselves as spokespersons for self-congratulatory values in reading that are extremely difficult to state in any public language. And with this embarrassment there probably ought be some self-disgust, since our claims to understand and use ethics seek a self-promoting and perhaps unwarranted dignity for what we do while they also displace the domain of pleasures and thrills and fascinations and quirky sensualities that may in fact be what we produce for our clients.¹ At the least then we need a theoretical stance that can acknowledge our self-interest without succumbing to the temptation to defend ourselves by assuming the mantle of ironic distance.

This is where the lyrical becomes important. Emphasizing its centrality for literary experience allows us to stress the various ways that this experience

is concerned with exploring modes of ethos involving psychological states and inviting affective responses capable of challenging the models of agency that dominate moral discourses. This challenge addresses both the specific values philosophers bring to bear in that discourse and philosophy's tendency to make itself the arbiter of what differences make substantial differences in how criticism discusses values. More important, even to begin taking up the challenge, criticism itself must treat the specific intricacies and pleasures that literary experience provides in terms that lead beyond the aesthetic: criticism must show how what matters for the aesthetic also has consequences for the questions posed by moral philosophy. I am tempted to claim that having to face the challenge will help critics resist what now often seems a grand ethical dog show where we all get one turn around the arena before a table of discerning judges, judges who have probably forgotten what it feels like to be able to prance. But it is probably more accurate to claim only that this shift in critical perspective will at least lead us to do less harm than we do now because we need not promise moral worth but can stress simply those states that attentive pleasure makes available.

I

Let me begin by attempting to clarify what I mean when I refer to ethical criticism in relation to literary studies. Ethical criticism occurs in at least three activities—in individuals evaluating motives and actions in texts, in readers imagining or actually entering moral conversations about their assessments, and in critics using texts to enter the discourses about morality carried out by professional philosophers. All three activities stage reading as a culturally vital practice because they require testing our moral vocabularies, making careful distinctions in our judgments, and even assessing public policies, at least in broad terms that reflect upon the ends that these processes serve and the imaginations about human value that go into shaping those ends. But all three activities also involve substantial risks of subordinating what might be distinctive within literary experience to those frameworks and mental economies that are attuned to modes of judgment shaped by other non-textual and (usually) less directly imaginary worldly demands.

Responding to these risks need not require melodramatic languages about shattering the self or pursuing polymorphously perverse sensibilities. It simply requires pushing back against the practices of ethical criticism to show what they negate and to provide a contrasting story stressing aspects of literary experience that they cannot adequately address. My version of that story will emphasize how texts develop affective states much more in tension with our ideals of judgment than those cultivated by what we might call the new "emotion-friendly" versions of moral reason popular in ethical criticism. By resisting the standard claims of ethical criticism, we may develop a richer model for clarifying how aspects of ethos become a force in these texts. Then

it becomes feasible to treat literary experience as actually capable of influencing what we take ethical judgment to involve.²

This proposal is hardly revolutionary. No decent theorist on the relation between ethics and literary experience ignores the challenges I am trying to sharpen.³ But, still, I want to claim that the challenge is rarely fully engaged. Clearly, ethical criticism often calls our attention to two aspects of literary experience that are central to many of the texts that matter to most of us, especially classic novels—a will to accurate and dense, relatively impartial concrete description and a corresponding quest for a generalizing scope by which the text can establish an exemplary version of certain qualities of compassion and evaluative judgment. If criticism dwells on only these values, however, it offers little opportunity to extend beyond realistic narrative to engage one of literature's major contributions to our appreciation of what is fundamentally at stake in ethical thinking. Literary modes like lyric often ask us to participate in states that are either too elemental or too transcendental or too absolute or too satisfyingly self-absorbed to engage ethical criticism. Yet these states can have enormous impact on how and why we are concerned with values of all kinds, including those that we pursue by ethical reasoning. Minimally, they bring to bear examples of positive intensities that any ethics might have to take into account. And at their richest these works explore the limitations of all judgmental stances by requiring complex blends of sympathy and distance, and hence eliciting our fascination with extreme states of mind while complicating any possible grasp of how one might put such states into the categories affording commensurability on which ethical judgment must ultimately depend.

Some of those energies are focussed by acts of identification; others depend on where works situate us, that is, on the specific qualities of imaginative vitality offered by certain dispositions, including those states of transport once sustained by religious experience. In such cases, participation entails maintaining substantial differences from the attitudes we rely on in our practical judgments. We become attentive to the selves that are possible when we manage to deploy distinctive powers of mind and sensibility. Often, moreover, the focus is much less on how we perceive or interpret the world beyond ourselves than on how we manage to achieve states of will or of satisfaction or of painful separation in relation to events and even to overall assessments about how life might be worth living. Through art (but not only through art) we learn to demand of ourselves something more grand and perhaps more threatening than that we be justified in our actions or that we be able to appreciate how others might be justified or not justified. And through art (but not only through art) we find the will engaged not simply in terms of languages of justification but also in terms of principles of satisfaction. It does not suffice to have made the best decision among available options. Rather, these engagements of will involve levels of consciousness where we glimpse what

it takes to make the world of a happy person different from that of an unhappy person. We understand, that is, how there is a dimension of ethics that cannot be put into words but must be approached through Wittgenstein's dictum that ethics and aesthetics are one (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.421-6.43). And, conversely, the richer our alternative to standard ethical criticism, the better the case we can make that ethical analyses be limited to situations where we are concerned with the justification of specific actions or with the characterization of how we might go about making these assessments. More general questions about value can then be relegated to the general cultural theater where we have to acknowledge constant struggle not only over which specific aspects of ethos will prevail but also over which ways of determining among the values make the most practical sense.

I can summarize my project by claiming that I want to provide practical and non-melodramatic ways of adapting to literary criticism Nietzsche's contrast between orientations shaped by a will to truth and orientations shaped by a will to power.⁴ Therefore I will have to show how ethical criticism becomes subject to Nietzschean critique, and I will have to demonstrate how we can recuperate a good deal of what Nietzsche attributed to the will to power simply by concentrating on the conative aspects of those energies within our responses to art that cannot be located in the roles of spectator or judge. This then also requires altering the conceptual models we have for the emotions fundamental to the reading enterprise. Rather than dwelling within the parameters of approval and disapproval generated by empathy and sympathy, stressing conative states enables theory to explore how we participate in passions that range from fear and desperation and confusion about identification to the fullest models our culture has for what Yeats called the "self-delighting, self-appeasing, self-affrighting" soul realizing "its own sweet will is heaven's will" ("Prayer for my Daughter"). As Yeats knew, it is precisely the relation between such states of soul and possible dispositions of will that makes the lyrical fundamental to the ethos within ethics: without it we may find ourselves comfortable judging others but we will have impoverished terms for putting into our moral calculi what satisfactions are most important to pursue for and as ourselves.

II

Now it is time to be specific about the limitations within various versions of ethical literary criticism so that we at least appreciate the pressure to come up with alternative versions of how literary experience affects existential values. I suggest we begin by distinguishing four characteristic ways of performing ethical criticism. The first two are mirror images of one another. Each stresses the ethical importance of attending to dense concrete presentations of particular actions because such attention provides a powerful supplement to more abstract and categorical modes of ethical inquiry. At one

pole we have an emphasis on how involvement in concrete situations enriches our capacities for making discriminations and keeps our judgments in close relation to the emotions of sympathy and empathy; at the other we have a deconstructive concern for an ethics of letting be that is acutely aware of the imperializing work usually done by professions of empathy and of sympathy since it is the responder who gets to specify what those emotions involve.

The first emphasis is especially important for those who want literary experience to complement traditional ethical inquiry. It promises to contour judgment to the dense texture of particular lives and hence can partially free us from the tendency within Anglo-American philosophy to rely on simple representative anecdotes as its means of testing principles. Moreover, that shift provides an alternative to the excruciating philosophical task of developing categories enabling us to treat different situations as subsumable under one commensurate framework within which relative worth can be assessed. Ethical literary criticism makes it clear that we simply cannot rely on such abstract principles for any aspects of experience without also bringing to bear the more flexible, narrative-based modes of judgment that Aristotle characterized as *phronesis* (see Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 25-27 and 168-94). And where philosophy seeks impersonal and disinterested modes of judgment centered on the giving and testing of reasons, literary experience explores the degree to which our emotions can be heuristic features of the judgmental process: we can be impartial without being unmoved (so long as our emotions are spectator emotions).⁵

Deconstructive and Levinasian ethical criticism is based on a very different notion of concreteness. More affected by Kantian aesthetic ideals than they are by ethical claims based on practical judgment, these theorists concentrate not on dramatic situations but on the ethical force that one can attribute to the purposiveness of the particular text as an authorial action. Here the central value lies in adapting oneself to strong particulars by letting them be, that is, by coming to appreciate their power as the articulation of working desire, a mode of desire manifest primarily as a direct function of their ability to ward off the categories that moral judgment tries to impose. The ethical here is sharply opposed to the moral, the domain of principle. Ethical values emerge in reading because there we feel the violence of our will to make texts mean something we can state abstractly while we also have to recognize the capacity of the desires working within textuality to resist that will. Analogously, we can learn to adapt the same attitudes towards society, since our attention is oriented towards forms of violence that easily mask as welfarist principles yet in fact are not responsive to the needs of those for whom we see ourselves speaking.

Clearly, both stances have roles to play in literary criticism. But they also leave us with substantial problems making it impossible not to have to reach out for additional theoretical terms. There arises immediately the question of how we reconcile the two quite different views of concreteness

and the two quite different views of the values that ethical judgment seeks. Does dwelling on the denseness of particular actions afford a richer model of ethical judgment or does it encourage casuistries that evade the clear and necessary application of principles? Once these two alternatives emerge, we clearly cannot rely on the concrete experience of texts to help us determine which one is to be preferred. For returning to the concrete case for our answer will, in theory at least, produce endless regress unless one can somehow relink such concreteness either directly to universals or to methods of judgment that somehow have a more flexible version of generality built into them. If we are to keep at the center of our inquiry the Aristotelian concern for how we should live, we have to preserve as a background invoked through the particulars some kind of larger framework of examples and probably at least some principles that give resonance to the concepts of good with which we want to work. Yet once we begin seeking explanatory principles we put at risk the very concreteness that we want to celebrate. There is then substantial pressure to have traditional philosophy articulate these principles and determine to what degree concrete cases can sanction our swerving from them?

Deconstructive theory seems capable of turning my objections to its interests, since it can insist that, unlike the discrimination view, it at least faces up to the gulf between particulars and supporting categorical principles. But its ways of engaging that gulf run a serious risk. For it seems as if the ideal of letting be takes on the function of a moral category and hence produces its own form of violence. And, more disturbing, deconstructive literary ethics has to face the problem of its so far not having done very much to specify what is so valuable about singularity *per se* in relation to literature or so necessarily destructive in the judicious use of categories. This version of ethical criticism may rely on the very individualist values sustaining the modern philosophy that it is quick to reject. And if it is to attribute specific values to what singularities perform, deconstruction may have to find some rapprochement with the expressivist theory developed by Charles Taylor and others. This rapprochement would free deconstruction from relying on a binary opposition between singularity and the categorical, and it would enable it to stress what persons accomplish as they bend rather than break from the categories giving meaning to their actions.

III

Neither deconstructive nor discernment versions of concreteness can produce a satisfying theoretical position. On the one hand, deconstruction cannot even postulate much of an ethical theory for literary experience because it cannot supplement its commitment to singularity without falling into bad faith.⁶ Discernment theories, on the other hand, invite conceptual elaboration, since they so clearly cry out for some account of the more general values at stake in our close concern with the elements that go into ethical

judgments. But these efforts only deepen the problem by showing how difficult it is to establish the necessary conceptual supplements. Therefore I will now turn to two versions of ethical criticism that do provide this conceptual framework. Even though the two models differ from the first two, we will nonetheless find essentially the same difficulties plaguing these as well.

The first conceptual structure for these supplements can be seen as a set of variants on perfectionist principles because its primary concern is with the versions of virtue and the qualities of life produced or reinforced by specific ways of reading. Stanley Cavell is the best-known thinker representing the relevant conceptual moves. But since I have written about him critically on other occasions and since to the best of my knowledge he does not identify himself as an ethical critic, I will turn to the somewhat different but related theorizing of Wayne Booth. There is no clearer rendering of how perfectionist ideals can be realized within literary examples. For Booth sees reading as fundamentally the exploration of desires we may come to desire⁷:

“What sort of character, what sorts of habits, am I likely to take on or reinforce” as
 “I decipher this immensely compact bundle of actions, thought, and allusions?”
 “What ‘better desires’ does it lead me to desire?” (*The Company We Keep* 274)

Formulations like these enable Booth to provide a powerful answer to how texts mediate ethical values without his having either to subsume texts under general principles or to insist upon their close fit with moral philosophy. The values that matter emerge through comparisons we make among the qualities of experience in texts “that are both like and unlike” (70) each other. For we appraise works by examining whether an experience can be seen as “comparatively desirable, admirable, lovable, or, on the other hand, comparatively repugnant, contemptible, or hateful” (71).

Such appraisal is not merely a matter of intuitions or the expression of sensibilities. Booth shows there are clear standards that enter our judgments because ethical criticism is founded on the question of how texts contribute to virtue. To address this concern, critics have to begin with the issue of intentionality, for we cannot have virtue without agency. We have to postulate implied authors, then inquire about the roles these authors might play in conversations about ethical values. The “key question in the ethics of narration [. . .] becomes: Is the pattern of life that this would-be friend offers one that friends might well pursue together?” (222). Now we have both an object of ethical reflection—the friendship relation—and we have an obvious locus for making assessments of texts. We are invited to ask whether the basic qualities of the text contribute to forging such imaginary friendships or if these qualities present hindrances to friendship such as hidden designs or lack of respect for the audience or shoddy reflection on the activity presented? In either case Booth shows that by thinking about texts in terms of questions

about the company we keep, we do not need abstract principles as grounds of their worth because we have clear personal measures based on how the modes of desire for desire they delineate stand up in relation to works to which they can be compared. We do not determine who our friends are because of the conditions they satisfy; rather we determine who we are in terms of the quite concrete company we choose, and the company we reject. Responsibility remains a matter of individual self-definition, yet it brings with it appropriate contexts in which choices can be characterized and judged.

In my view, Booth's is a powerful theoretical position precisely because it appeals so directly to matters of ethos. Nonetheless it is difficult to accept this figure of friendship as an adequate principle for either the qualities distinguishing individual valuations by readers or for the frameworks that give such choices public significance. First, this figure makes it difficult to have theory remain responsive to the full range of values explored by literary texts or to account for the often contradictory values that emerge within this range. Booth's concern for the company one keeps does support a limited pluralism (no single principle is likely to determine our range of friendships). But I suspect we would rather have some of the texts we value highly prove interesting enemies rather than all be admirable friends—not only because we want to be challenged but also because we want the fascination of engaging what refuses to contour itself to the models of dialogue allowed by a virtue-based model of friendship. More important, the idea of virtue itself seems to me to offer a somewhat pious and inaccurate primary criterion for how the friendships contribute to happiness. Invoking "virtue" makes it seem that criticism can admit plural possibilities of value while also achieving a public representativeness based simply on examples and cultural traditions. Yet "virtue" proves an irreducibly equivocal concept because in one register it is simply a measure of power or conative strength, with no distinguishing "ethical" qualities, while in another it brings to bear certain deep moral values in a society.

One can then use Booth for a Nietzschean reading of how literary experience becomes formative for certain groups highly conscious of how their sense of shared strengths makes them different from those bound to social mores. Or one can tilt one's sense of virtue as Booth himself does towards friendships that remain judgeable within moral frameworks, even if it the ground is a set of examples rather than principles. But the more one tilts Booth's way, the more one undercuts the force of the level of intimacy that the figure of friends as a company seemed to afford. The general seems to precede the particular. But in fact we choose our friends (if choose is the right word) for many different positive qualities and in terms of many contingent aspects of our lives. Consequently, Booth's effort to keep the moral force of "virtue" seems an uncomfortable compromise. It evokes an awkward intimacy that is too public for most forms of affection and fascination, while the public

register it provides may well not be sufficiently determinate to establish firm criteria for ethical judgments.

Given this ambiguity around virtue when it is defineable only in terms of affective relations, it is not surprising that most philosophers seek different grounds for ethical criticism. So I will turn for my fourth alternative to Martha Nussbaum's recent *Poetic Justice* because that book offers the best case I know for bringing narrative literature into close proximity with the concerns and the language of traditional moral philosophy. Getting clear on how this work matters and what we can learn from its limitations will take me somewhat more time than I have spent on Booth, but spending that time will also demonstrate why it will ultimately be necessary to return to the Nietzschean possibilities in Booth's argument. These afford models for the interests agents have in ethical values that are lacking in Nussbaum's reliance on Aristotelian rationality.

Nussbaum's previous writings on literature and ethics had stressed the importance of concrete moral discrimination, but always with a keen sense of interpreting that concreteness as a contribution to concerns basic to "even [. . .] Kantians or Utilitarians" (*Love's Knowledge* 27).⁸ Her new book is distinctive for its efforts to extend the "fit" between narrative fiction and moral philosophy beyond issues of judging individual actions to considerations of public policy. She then makes it possible to test the degree to which one can make literary concreteness a medium for more overtly generalized moral discourses. Nussbaum argues that reading narrative fiction actually provides "insights that should play a role (though not as uncriticized foundations) in the construction of an adequate moral and political theory," while at the same time the particular interpretive processes that the narratives invite help develop specific "moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent" (*Poetic Justice* 12). If it is to pursue these ends, ethical criticism has two basic tasks. By bringing to bear the relevant issues formulated from within philosophy, it must first establish a context enabling us to see how the literary text operates in moral terms; then it must show how the text "exemplifies and cultivates abilities of imagination that are essential to the intelligent making" of the relevant "assessments, in public as well as private life" (52). For if literature really has philosophical force, then it ought exercise that force in the same public domain that philosophical concepts try to influence. Where Booth talks of texts as friends, Nussbaum wants to create a context in which we can see deep links between the roles of reader and of judge.

Nussbaum's enterprise is a noble one. But her making explicit the need to project beyond concrete reading to visible public principles seems to me to lay bare the underlying logic of all ethical criticism—in ways that raise very serious problems. Consider for example the fact that to make the arguments of *Poetic Justice* work she has to turn away from James and from Proust, the

major figures of her earlier work on ethical criticism, to the Charles Dickens of *Hard Times*. While Dickens is clearly a major writer, there are few literary theorists who would want to use *Hard Times* as their exemplary text, for exactly the reasons that tempt Nussbaum to make the effort. For where developing ethical claims from James and Proust requires stressing the play of a very complex moral intelligence, developing claims for the Dickens of *Hard Times* entails stressing not so much the processes of judgment in particular dense situations as the ability to develop stances towards large social issues. Dickens is less interested in assessing how characters respond to intricate particular situations than he is in displaying how agents can respond adequately to the general social conditions making demands on them.

Such generalizing scope is not something to condemn, but neither is it something to which most writers aspire directly because of the limited means that fiction has at its disposal to create the appropriate effects. *Hard Times* gains its moral scope by its extraordinary ability to manipulate pathos and hence to position a responsive audience in a situation where it both registers suffering and understands plausible public causes of that suffering. Nussbaum then is quite right to argue that this novel shares with some contemporary philosophers the project of defending “an approach to quality of life measurement based on a notion of human functioning and human capability, rather than on either opulence or utility” (51). Dickens’s pathos allows his fiction an immediate and compelling “measure of how people are doing” because he can bring emotional resonance to “questions of how well their form of life has enabled them to function in a variety of distinct areas, including but not limited to mobility, health, education, political participation, and social relations” (51). From this the leap to contemporary philosophy is not a large one:

Since we read a novel like *Hard Times* with the thought that we ourselves might be in the character’s position—since our emotion is based in part on this sort of empathic identification—we will naturally be most concerned with the lot of those whose position is worst, and we will begin to think of ways in which that position might have been other than it is, might be made better than it is. [. . .] If one could not imagine what it was like to be Stephen Blackpool, then it would be all too easy to neglect this situation as Bounderby does, portraying workers as grasping insensitive beings. Similarly, [. . .] if one cannot imagine what women suffer from sexual harassment on the job, one won’t have a vivid sense of that offense as a serious social infringement that the law should remedy. (91)

This stress on pathos both allows the empathic imagination to leap directly to large value frameworks and produces an inherent socializing dimension for literary texts because it seeks imaginative agreement about ways of redressing the suffering. Yet I think it important to ask whether these advantages outweigh the disadvantages of letting our literary ethics be so dependent on that one emotional attitude. James for example is careful to make characters tempted by the appeal of pathos, like Hyacinth Robinson,

have to learn to make judgments critical of the temptations to self-righteousness that occur when one lets one's awareness of public issues outweigh the need for concrete self-understanding. One could argue, moreover, that this emphasis on pathos allows precious little room for a corresponding emphasis on the various modes of ethos that literary imaginations pursue. In fact one could use this contrast between ethos and pathos as a basic way of challenging assumptions fundamental to Nussbaum's ethical criticism and perhaps to any criticism content to ally itself with moral philosophy. This contrast is especially important for clarifying the various roles that accounts of the emotions might play in our perspectives on literary values. For once pathos is the central link between the literary and the ethical, then Nussbaum's cognitive theory of emotions clearly provides the dynamic energies securing the interactions between the two domains. In my view, however, the costs exacted by this way of linking the domains makes it crucial that we turn from pathos to ethos and see what conceptions of emotion then best articulate the values provided by literary experience.

Nussbaum identifies three specific means by which the emotions elicited within literary narrative can support and extend the work of moral philosophy. While the first is mentioned only in a passing remark, I think it has to play a major role in a full statement of her theory. I refer to the need to make moral sense of the simple but elemental fact that literature seeks to confer pleasure. What kind of pleasure instructs, especially when pathos is the vehicle of instruction? Nietzsche would suggest that we be suspicious of the kinds of pleasures we take in identifying with other people's suffering, since nothing secures bourgeois self-satisfaction so well as sympathy with those who lack the same possessions. Nussbaum is more generous and in some respects more subtle. She sees that pleasure affords a means of making identification attractive, and hence of allowing us to orient cognitive interests towards suffering while resisting the need to locate the pleasure in our own melodramatic consciousness of ourselves as pity producers. For to the extent that we take pleasure in particular characters from underprivileged situations, we are likely to find their company attractive so that we are drawn further into their world and into sympathy with their interests (35). We do not have to let the pleasure be absorbed within our own senses of self-importance.

But any effort to link literary pleasure to moral philosophy brings back another version of the problem with concreteness that we have already considered. For one has to be able to say which pleasures contribute to moral values and which do not. This is why Nussbaum links pleasure to her cognitive theory of emotions. If emotions can provide a kind of knowledge in their own right, then we can secure their role in moral thinking without prescribing in advance what emotions we will allow. Indeed, there are many respects in which emotions produce knowledge and complement what on other grounds we establish as truths. Emotions clearly establish salience conditions by stressing what might matter in particular perceptual fields, and

they bring to bear belief contexts that we have to go on to assess if we are to understand how and why particular options for actions might matter to us. The emotions organized by a sense of pathos provide excellent examples. For pathos attunes us to the facts contributing to someone's suffering, and it brings beliefs to bear that orient us toward specific actions if they prove true (just as pleasure facilitates identifications). As Nussbaum puts it, "The person deprived of the evaluations contained in pity seems to be deprived of ethical information without which such situations cannot be adequately, rationally appraised" (65). Yet because the emotions are bound to beliefs, they do not lock us into attitudes but can be modified by relevant information (such as information that the one bidding for our sympathy is faking it).

The greater the cognitive claims for emotions, however, the more pressing is that same old specter: there seems no stable and capacious way to connect an emphasis on concrete discriminations to the authority of clear principles. There are emotions that provide sustenance for reason. But how do we decide which emotions do and do not have the power to modify reason, especially when we are dealing with imaginary constructs? It seems as if these emotions have to be tested by reason in order to be worthy of having such an influence. Then, however, ethical criticism enters a vicious circle where what is to influence rationality must be influenced by rationality. This prospect does not scare Nussbaum. She handles the danger of circularity by adapting a version of Booth's position where specific human exemplars become the possible mediation defining how emotions can affect what we take reason to be. But rather than invoke the figure of the friend, she relies on Adam Smith's model of the "judicious spectator" because that enables her to tie emotions to dispositions of character. Her focus then is not on how we come to desire to desire but on how we attach ourselves to the general forms of idealizable desire that constitute ethical lives.

Smith develops his model of spectatorship in order to address the fact that many emotions obviously do not prove good guides for our actions. So to assure that the emotion is appropriate we have to determine that it is a "true view of what is going on" (74). And then we have to be sure that the viewer will not overdetermine that truth because of problematic private interests. Theory can make the appropriate distinctions if it can find a way of assuring that the emotion is that "of a spectator not a participant" (74). In a single stroke literary experience moves from being marginal to philosophy to having claims for centrality, since there is no better model for the psychic economies Smith calls for than the self-discipline fundamental to attentive reading. Reading reduces its object to banality if it simply imposes an individual's needs and desires. Conversely, the promise held out for readers requires that they assume spectatorial roles through which they manage both to feel the relevant emotions and to appreciate them for the energies and values they organize. Reading shows how we can treat anger or grief or love as if at the same time we could identify with their intensities and maintain the distance

necessary to make judgments about and through our involvement in the particulars.

Suggestive as this account of reading is in itself, Nussbaum's primary interest resides in the social implications she can draw from it. This figure of the "judicious spectator" allows her to project on to reading important links to the entire dynamics of making social judgments because it gives the agent an interest in being responsive to public measures of the good. Hence the dramatic climax of her book consists in an elaborate effort to put reading as a judicious spectator at the heart of how judges make decisions. Judges have to know principles and procedures. But they also have to know the limitations of the abstractness built into principles and procedures, and they have to find ways to make those imaginative projections necessary for producing justice in particular situations (82). So if one can make literary experience an exemplar for the working of an impartial yet sympathetic judgment, one can then treat the "poetic imagination" as "a crucial agent of democratic equality" (119). This imagination not only tries to sympathize with all the relevant points of view, but it also builds on its own impartiality to seek from that sympathy those actions comprising the greater social good. And this imagination requires casting that understanding in plural and qualitative terms based on those ideals of human flourishing that repeated acts of sympathy enable us to keep in the forefront of our vision.

IV

I dwell on Nussbaum at such length in part because I want to make readers feel a deep emotional problem that her theorizing about emotions in literature raises for me and perhaps for the very practice of ethical criticism. On the one hand, I am made uneasy by the self-confidence and imperialist philosophizing that reduces the great imaginative range of literary experience to the intellectually undemanding but quite important moral and political truths promulgated by a philosophy devoted to spreading the values of human flourishing. On the other hand, I am not happy with myself for being so easily seduced into the equally distressing arrogance of the literary critic appalled at our marvelous complexity being oversimplified merely because someone who has devoted her life to the project wants to use literature for making the world a better place for large segments of its population. I am forced to confront the fact that my view of literary experience can promise only partial modifications in how some individuals approach the world, so it cannot even approximate the kind of social impact that Nussbaum projects for literary texts and that writers like Dickens are in fact capable of producing. Yet I still want to argue that the very grandeur of her enterprise leads our attention away from those concrete processes by which literature does affect individual lives in ways that noble sentiments about public welfare simply cannot accomplish. While my alternative perspective may not be able to demonstrate how literary experience

makes better moral agents of us, it can show how that experience offers substantial values very difficult to get elsewhere.

In Nussbaum's account, on the other hand, literature is primarily an instrument for teaching us discernment and for eliciting from us thoughtful pity. Literature remains subject to philosophy, which ultimately controls how values are characterized and assessed. And while literature proves useful in resisting the utilitarian and rationalist models of assessment that Nussbaum attacks, its relevance in this regard stems less from the passions it mediates than from the inadequacies of those philosophical stances. Therefore I think that in asking literary criticism to pursue clearly defined, public ethical ends, we risk losing sight of what are usually the most compelling and most persuasive experiential qualities the relevant texts produce. And we do so without gaining much more than ideological reinforcement for values that have their sponsoring energies and relevant conditions of judgment elsewhere.

My resistance to Nussbaum does not entail returning to some kind of aestheticism or adapting discourses about singularity and difference and empowerment. The literary values that I want to foreground hover in the shadows cast by work that overmoralizes them, so the best way to appreciate all that lyricism involves may be simply to reflect on why there might be good reasons to remain in constant struggle against ethical criticism. Such struggle promises not only to renew attention to particular qualities of literary experience but also to preserve a tension between ethos and ethics perhaps necessary for an adequate grasp of how we make and maintain investments in the entire structure of concerns that ethical theory adjudicates. Therefore I will close by being as clear as I can on what I take to be three insuperable problems in contemporary ethical criticism, in the hope that we can deepen our appreciation of how literary experience is capable of challenging those philosophical stances that want to domesticate it by making it submit to their conditions for praise.

We have already addressed the first problem, which lies in the logical structure of ethical criticism. This criticism insists on there being something distinctive in how concrete texts engage our moral attention, and yet it has to interpret the value of that engagement in terms of the very philosophical methods and generalizations from which the concrete reading deviates. As Derrida might put it, ethical theory wants the concrete both to establish values and to supplement value schemes, yet the very role of supplement undercuts the concreteness by making it dependent on abstractions, and it undercuts the abstractions by making them dependent for their realization on something that philosophy apparently cannot provide on its own. Because I have nothing more to say about the abstract form of this problem, I will shift to a quite specific and I think telling manifestation of the issues brought into focus by Nussbaum and, indirectly, by Booth. When we realize how philosophy has to strain for the fit that melds it with literary experience, we also understand the pressure to let pathos take over from ethos, or to become the sole relevant

ethos, and we understand why it is so tempting to vacillate between different meanings of “virtue.” That realization in turn leads us to what I am claiming is the shadows or margins of ethical discourse, where we might value literary experiments in ethos precisely because they do not depend on the same kind of underlying distinctively moral sentiments as do examples drenched in pathos and, more important, because they allow us to appreciate imaginative states as directly affecting our experience of values without our having to postulate those underlying reasons. Examples of ethos make their appeal to us in terms of the dynamic capacities they afford our quite particular states of self-awareness as we explore the energies they make available, with no sanction beyond the qualities made possible by a text for intellectual, emotional, and intersubjective intensities.

There is no better contrast to the ethics of literary pathos than W.B. Yeats’s poem “He and She”:

As the moon sidles up
 Must she sidle up,
 As trips the scared moon
 Away must she trip:
 ‘His light had struck me blind
 Dared I stop’.

She sings as the moon sings:
 ‘I am I, am I;
 The greater grows my light
 The further that I fly’.
 All creation shivers
 With that sweet cry.

(286-87)

The first stanza tries to render something like the essence of pathos. For here the character cannot speak for herself but must be represented by another, except for the one moment when she gets to utter her dilemma. And every move seems driven by forces to which the character is unwillingly bound. By the second stanza the very intensity of the pain seems to open a possible fascination with the opposite pole, with more assertive egocentric states that poetry might not only represent but also help focus. At first this stanza also depends on a narrator in order to situate the speaker. But after one line the content of the singing takes over from its visual representation, and the mode of consciousness within that singing then entirely dominates the scene. Just the absoluteness of the singing in turn suffices to produce an assertion of an “I” identical to itself: there seems simply no gap between the subject singing and the objective state that is the song made physical.

Technically speaking, such assertions cannot have any philosophical force, since only god can experience the complete coincidence of subjectivity and objectivity. But the poem is less interested in the truth of its assertion than in the energies and desires that it can make visible by the effort to purify song

of everything but the “I” who as its singer, or better as it singing, manages to glimpse what it means to experience the coincidence of subject and object states. While the poem does not point to any empirical test of the truth of this assertion, it does offer significant formal features that at least give a kind of substance to the desire it speaks. The utter simplicity of the situation in the second stanza, for example, shaped only by a contrast to the dependencies registered in the preceding one, gives us a world in which there might be nothing but the singing, with all impurities driven away by the need to separate oneself from what the moon dominates. Here lyric seems to approach its own inner possibilities—presenting not any one role, any one version of ethos, but the essence of what any role becomes when it can be entirely the matter of song. And, as song, the poem’s physical qualities deepen the all-absorbing nature of the “I am I.” Long I sounds literally take the poem over, spreading the light produced by and as the “I” of the singing. That intensity in turn becomes so great that self-absorption cannot rest in narcissistic states. Just as the “she” of the first stanza is bound to the ways of the moon, the “I” of the second must return to its setting. Only now the self-absorption constitutes a fantasy lover bringing to creation its deepest sexual pleasure because finally creation has an opposite active enough to make its own presence felt, and hence to make creation itself once again something to be loved and not merely feared or respected or moralized.

Had I the time, I would go on to poems that explore the same level of intensity but attach it quite different emotional orientations. Yeats’s “Lullaby,” for example, completely absorbs the ego within that traditional folk form, using literary self-consciousness as its vehicle for giving to care itself a mode of absorption that extends far beyond what would suffice for moral judgment. But my one example is strong enough to allow my going directly to the generalization that what matters most in these literary states is not how they might be justified morally but how they justify themselves as invitations to imaginative participation within what the text elicits from its ways of bringing the world and the psyche into language. Excess lies down with extreme, precise care; no wonder creation shivers. And perhaps ethics can learn from this display. For it seems to me arguable that here we have a telling illustration of how the lyrical dimension of experience influences what Booth calls the desire for desires—not simply because specific states appeal to us but also because we encounter concrete qualities of those desires that become exemplars for what a range of emotions might provide were we attuned to appreciate their intensities. Both ways of encountering emotional fields then have the power to affect how we adapt or modify ethical stances. Lyrical emotions can make certain states attractive because of the modes of self-identification that they allow—here the best example may be the qualities of moral responsiveness that we find in the great epic poets. Or these emotions can affect ethics by giving us standards for what levels of emotional life we might find worth taking pride in as we explore possible dispositions, only

some of which are thematizably moral. By this logic we might even claim that concerns about ethos prove central to how we let ourselves be affected by pathos.

V

The second of the three basic problems I see facing ethical criticism will help me elaborate the specific ways that literary experience develops emotions that affect our visions of ethos even though they are not easily represented within ethical theory. The problem is simply the danger that criticism devoted to ethics will find itself not sufficiently honoring those qualities and values traditionally most important to writers and to the interpretive discourses fostered by their work. Considered logically, this problem repeats the same structure as the one we saw in dealing with claims about concreteness. For on the one hand, ethical criticism has to insist that literature gives moral philosophy access to emotions mediating kinds of knowledge and of investment not available within the conceptual modes of judgment usually called upon by ethical theory. Yet, on the other, while the emotions have to be different, they also have to be contained, overtly or covertly, by the very rationality that they are seen as supplementing—hence Nussbaum’s reliance on the cognitive theory of emotions. But if we stop with the logical problems, we might miss the force and possible social relevance of those aspects of literary emotions that do not so readily adapt to ethical theory. Therefore I want to dwell on one particular instance of the logical problem.

I will take as my example Nussbaum’s use of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* because there we find the cognitive theory of emotions simply unable to deal with the intensities generated by the text, so that Nussbaum’s effort to moralize emotions seems to repress some quite different and threatening aspect of the text’s emotional force. Nussbaum claims that readers of this text clearly find their emotional responses also serving as cognitive instruments—both in generating sympathy for Bigger and in pushing whites to examine their assumptions towards such young black males. Moreover, Nussbaum can also show, Wright is careful to complicate and qualify that sympathy so that it meets real world conditions. Rather than make the easy appeal to figures of universal brotherhood, the novel demands we acknowledge the degree to which social factors have also made literal brotherhood very hard to envision, at least for bourgeois whites. The result of that demand is a deeper sympathy leading the judicious spectator to feel and to think, “This is a human being, with the basic equipment to lead a productive life; [for we] see how not only the external circumstances of action, but also anger, fear, and desire have been deformed by racial hatred and its institutional expression. The unlikeness that repels identification becomes the chief object of our concern” (94).

But Nussbaum's rich analysis of the difficulties whites feel in relating to Bigger makes that unlikeness more problematic than her theory lets her grant. It is clear that Wright's text deepens our capacity to understand Bigger in his unlikeness. Yet the deeper whites come to appreciate how wounded Bigger is by his upbringing in a racist society, the more difficult it is to link that knowledge to unequivocal sympathy. He raises a complex set of emotions in whites (and perhaps not only in whites) involving fear and self-preservation and the resulting need to evade self-contempt. And once those emotions enter it is not possible simply to translate the sympathy Bigger elicits from the judicious spectator into a moral orientation towards specific actions.

Nussbaum is confident that "the reader, while judging Bigger culpable (the degree of his culpability is certainly debatable), is likely to be, other things being equal, inclined to mercy in the imposition of punishment, seeing how much of his character was the product of circumstances created by others" (95). Yet I am not sure that the emotions he raises produce that judgment, nor that Wright even wanted that judgment.⁹ For the sympathy Wright calls for engages us with a seriously wounded psyche that for many readers will not elicit mercy, at least in relation to what they expect of the legal system. It is perfectly possible to respect Bigger's independence so much that one wants him kept away from the white world at all costs. Once sympathy aligns us with his character, and not just with his actions, we have very good reason to think that nothing so merely institutional as a relatively short jail sentence is likely to produce any change in Bigger. Instrumental reason then may well find itself using this sympathy to seek ways of eliminating the threat rather than improving the condition of the one found threatening.

Almost anyone reading Nussbaum's essay is likely to share a desire that mercy temper punishment in cases like Bigger's. But I suspect we cannot arrive at this judgment because of anything our emotions for him tell us. In fact the motivating force here has very little to do with our emotional relation to Bigger's specific condition. Rather, what moves us to that mercy for Bigger is our affective investment in certain images of ourselves based on our overall political commitments. These investments do seem to me crucial to politics and are certainly affected by literary experience. But not quite by the experience of sympathy, or any other pathos-oriented attitude, and certainly not by what Nussbaum celebrates as the emotions of a judicious spectator who manages to control the impulses of the empirical self. For what in part leads us to go against what we know from our sympathy with Bigger is an intensely personal commitment to aligning ourselves with the politics of hope rather than the politics of despair, and with a willingness to take political risks rather than to insist on safe order. These impulses are strengthened not by sympathy *per se* but by developing investments in positive identifications, if not with specific role models then with imaginary worlds that literary texts help us envision and populate with possible judges whom we want to please by acting as nobly as we can. Nussbaum's cognitive model of emotions can neither

handle the dangers attendant on what we do come to know in passionate ways nor address the role of noncognitive fantasized identifications as fundamental to morality, and to the impact literary experience can have in affecting morality by influencing identifications.¹⁰

If I am right, the limitations of Nussbaum's cognitive theory of emotions provide a superb contrastive stage on which to put our spotlight back on Yeats's poem. It seems clear that her position cannot adequately address either of the fundamental lyrical states in the poem—the dependency by which the speaker understands what power is and the assertiveness by which she explores her own access to it. Both are extreme states that require the spectator to suspend impersonal judiciousness. The central drama is less a matter of what we come to know about the world than it is of what our participation in the poem makes available as concrete, elemental abstraction. So from Yeats's point of view it is reason that must learn to accommodate states like those that the poem can make so intensely real and so appealing as representations of what the desire for desire might look like in its pure form. Yeats's poem sets ethos against pathos, insisting that while rationality may require Nussbaum's view of cognitive emotions, there are strong features of literary experience that sharply oppose it, features like Wright's desire to leave his audience in despairing awe at Bigger's life. Where cognition might have been, there Yeats wants fascination to reign, since fascination opens the reader to what we might call pure lyrical power and its capacities to produce modes of satisfying self-reflection. And where Yeats is, there too we might find writers as diverse as James and Shakespeare and perhaps even Dante in his effort to characterize a loving intellect whose reason is far beyond any representations we might produce for it.

My praise of these states does not mean that we as agents can survive without heeding the claims of reason. It does mean that we as agents are not likely to thrive until we recognize how our possible interest in states of self-absorption conflicts with reason, or at least with how philosophers like Nussbaum understand its imperatives. Reason has its claims because we have to act in a world where accurate information is crucial, where laws of all kinds need to be honored, and where society needs shareable principles for assessing actions and agendas. But these claims have to take precedence for us only when we actually need to justify actions (and non-actions) or when we have to make analogous judgments about actions or agendas. Then we need disciplinary ethics, and disciplinary ethics requires the background provided by discussions in moral philosophy. But many aspects of our lives take place on quite different planes where justifications can be assumed or where they are clearly after the fact and hence not fundamental. In these domains the worry about what is right is less pressing than the need to discover what is possible for us to feel and to project and even to speculate upon.¹¹ And in these domains the social impact of our actions proves less central than the possible

impact on our private lives produced by specific imaginative states and related energy fields.

VI

And so I come to the last positive point that I think is sharpened by dwelling on what is problematic within ethical criticism. I want to show how an emphasis on ethos helps clarify the kinds of willing that are fundamental to literary experience, and I want to suggest the possibility that many of the values basic to these experiences emerge in the modes of challenge and provocation, and not simply in exemplary cognitive judgments. That in turn means we have to establish ideals of judgment capable of clarifying how the establishing of challenges can be an accomplishment central to the development of moral values. By examining how we are motivated to action and how aspects of will are brought to the fore in literary experience we can develop a fresh perspective on just how important ethos is to ethics.

Nussbaum's cognitive theory of emotions seems to rest in part on an assumption that the connection between philosophical reasoning and discriminating, sympathetic literary experience is matched by a direct fit between what we come to think is right, how we then make social identifications, and how we go on to act. Therefore if one can specify the fit between empirical judgments and the appropriate emotions, one has powerful terms for handling those psychological factors enabling ethical reading to carry over into influencing ethical practice. Booth, on the other hand, introduces what seems a crucial third term for this psychology. In his scheme one cannot explain actions simply in terms of percept, concept, and elicited spectatorial emotions. One also has to postulate a motivating factor specific to the complexity of individual situations.¹² The figure of the company we keep then provides the motivating factor. That company is not merely something constructed by our judgments about texts. It also takes on the capacity to judge us, to influence what desires we desire and consequently to provide both a measure of failure and a penalty for not keeping our will in alignment with our ideals. Failing those ideals is failing membership within this community.

Booth, however, sets unnecessary constraints on what might constitute the relevant community, and he severely limits the range of motives and interests by which literary experience influences both the decisions we make and the self-representations or modes of awareness that shape our understanding of those decisions. As we have seen, the image of texts as friends simply does not capture the many different kinds of intimate relations texts enter in our lives, nor does it quite address the variety of productive energies brought into play by those intimate relations. Our affective lives can be strongly touched by pleasures, fascinations, and challenges that have their power because they refuse the domesticating ideal of friendship for other less stable and less comforting modes of presence. Moreover, these pleasures,

fascinations, and challenges are not as easy as to subsume under criteria compatible with moral discourse as are appeals to friendship.

Admitting these different lines of relation affects our understanding of the will in two basic ways. First we gain some space enabling us to show how some acts of will need not be governed by specific conceptual categories or idealizing languages charged with providing representations of ourselves to ourselves. Texts appeal as particulars with their own distinctive promise of a relation which allows us to feel ourselves endowed with specific powers or capable of maintaining certain images of ourselves—by identification or by active struggle against domination. Indeed, the more identity issues seem directly at stake, the more we will find it impossible to interpret the specific affirmations as relying on concepts or on specifiable criteria. Instead, we must envision will emerging simply as an extension of where we find our energies satisfyingly disposed. Consider again how identification is invited by Yeats's poem—not because the poem somehow provides us an idea affording a specific image for the self but because we find ourselves taking on the poem's own work of gathering an intensity of productive self-consciousness as its response to the utter loss of personal power represented in the initial situation. In our experiences of the lyrical at least, willing often takes place less through an interpretation of what is true or good about the text than an attachment to what is powerful within it.

This claim about the will is not incompatible with the capacity of literary texts to state the truth or to represent the good. For the willing elicited by imaginative power simply occupies a different plane: it can accompany a range of judgments or perceptions because it simply determines the degree to which the person places stakes upon the particular state. Hence my second claim. Even when we do stress the truth value of an intense literary experience, our affirmation of it as an experience may depend less on the truth it offers than on our finding ourselves intensely identified with how its specific efforts at articulation provide a sense of discovery or sharpen what we thought we knew. We may affirm a text for how it represents moral situations, or we may affirm ourselves in relation to that text for how we find ourselves becoming moved in its presence. And, analogously, when we are moved to pity, we may respond directly to the object of pity or to the states of subjective intensity that the text offers us because of who we can become in our pitying.

Here then we enter another possibility for appreciating why Wittgenstein thought ethics and aesthetics were one. There is a deep connection between how we affirm our own relation to the states or actions we inhabit and how we ultimately come to affirm the sense of completeness and of intense participation afforded us by works of art. From the point of view of ethics, the comparison to aesthetics foregrounds how closely our awareness of various exemplary states, of what carries force as ethos, becomes fundamental to our own senses of identity. We are what we will most intensely, whether the object be our investment in reason or our investments in what provides material for

reason to work upon. In both cases one important measure of who we are as persons consists in the range of passions that we can occupy self-reflexively so that we take responsibility for the roles they play in our lives and in our representations of our lives. Conversely what we call aesthetic emotion is trivialized if we take it as only a reaction to the power of form. I think aesthetic emotion is a condition of will that accompanies our regarding the work as offering a distinctive and powerful state of mind. Aesthetic emotion may even be considered a strange kind of affect because it tends not to be focussed on any particulars within the work but to characterize the force by which we respond to the piece as a whole, as if we were willing to take responsibility for who we became by virtue of our participation in it.¹³ When we make such affirmative judgments, it seems as if we cannot but want this text to be part of our world and we cannot but want ourselves to make this text part of how we see possibilities for affirming our own capacities within that world. On some occasions we could give ethical reasons for such judgments, but we also often find the emotions themselves capable of modifying the quality or degree of investments once relegated only to moral categories.

VII

Even those texts that tempt us by contrast and challenge to explore what such willing against the moral might feel like become part of the company we keep. But they do so less as friends than as imaginative presences not only defining the most powerful and fascinating states of consciousness we know but also holding out the promise that by identifying provisionally with them we are likely to encounter ourselves at our most vital and most capacious. Where ethical criticism is forced, often against its best instincts, to treat texts as ultimately examples of something that philosophy can clarify and help assess, the ethos-based criticism that I am proposing deals directly with the examples as manifestations of qualities and powers that establish what is possible within certain ways of engaging the world. When we reflect on these examples we may decide we have to reject their long term claims upon our loyalties because what they offer us in moments of intensity simply will not fit with the economies we work out as ways of directing our lives. But if we have experienced these works fully, we are hard-pressed to dismiss them as simply behavior we can judge or mistaken identifications we can easily dispel. Think of the continuing impact Shelley and Milton have had on poets who think they should know better. So these presences remain with us as challenges and as measures of the levels of intensity and commitment that we can continue to offer those texts with which we continue to identify.

Among its many lacks, ethical criticism usually has little to say about this kind of struggle, or indeed about any kind of struggle between competing forces. In this respect it is probably not even good philosophy. For example, in Nussbaum there is substantial struggle against other philosophical

positions, but her representation of reading makes it seem that all we need do is let the emotions compatible with judicious spectatorship have their way with us, while all writers need is themselves to learn the role of judicious spectators. And both deconstructive and Heideggerean versions of letting be put the burden of error simply on whether we succumb to categorical thinking and hence submit to some fantasy of the law. This situation makes me long for the psychomachias much loved in classical literature. There at least we find a plausible emblem for what happened to authors as they read their peers and as they struggled to formulate desires for desires that neither made them ashamed before their chosen company nor left them passive followers of the moon in any of its social manifestations.

Perhaps ethical criticism has surrendered that view of the psyche's activity in reading major texts so that it could at least secure for literary experience the possibility of helping us dwell imaginatively within the sense of the self promised by our moral theories. If we are to feel we have any moral control over ourselves at all, we may be tempted to think we have to renounce visions of imaginative activity as a constant challenge to the will. But yielding to such suspicions seems to me to pay too high a price. Minimally, we risk rejecting the demand made by many literary texts that we be worthy of them by bringing to bear a self-consciousness so intensely invested that questions of how a will stands towards the material become inescapable. What's more, we may risk settling for too passive or self-satisfied a morality that either comes to substitute for will or to lose its imaginative hold on us to become a mere wardrobe we reuse for social purposes because we have surrendered any fantasy that we can dress so as to turn an eye and engage a mind. These are reasons enough to make me wary of letting ethical criticism be a major participant in the company our major texts invite us to keep.

Notes

¹ I have an additional reason for worrying about embarrassment and self-disgust because I want to use this occasion to address what I think are misunderstandings of my previous writings on the topic of ethical criticism by those very few people who have engaged them at all. Because I talk about responsibility and the "purposive performance of identity," it is easy to assume that I subsume the work of art under moral categories. But this is by no means a necessary reading of purposiveness or of responsibility, since those concepts point our attention simply to performative features of the work and to its status as the articulation of ethos rather than its quest for justification in moral terms. In particular I want to address Mark Erwin's essay "Wittgenstein and *The Waste Land*" because of the way it attributes to me a "grammatical pragmatism" that it then uses as a contrast to Erwin's challenge "what sort of responsible self-expression we can adopt by reading a modern poem like *The Waste Land*." Erwin suggests that instead of that grammatical pragmatism we turn to a Wittgensteinian mysticism: "For the Wittgenstein of the *Notebooks*, ethics and aesthetics are one, not because they express 'purposiveness,' but because they manifest a way of looking at the world,

seeing it either as a happy world or as an unhappy world. Ethics and aesthetics are both forms of *vision*" (280).

But on what do we focus in order to care about the achievement of happy or unhappy worlds? That is one important question that leads me not to "grammatical pragmatism" but to an expressivism derived from Kant and Nietzsche. They enable us to shift our focus to how investments are shaped and maintained in relation to visions, and they keep us concerned with issues of how agents take responsibility for those investments. For how I see this expressivism applying to Eliot's *Waste Land*, Erwin might have looked at my *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*.

² Philosophers have long been aware of the need for some such distinction between ethics as concerned specifically with processes of justification and more general questions about values and ends. Perhaps the most useful contemporary formulation can be found in Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, where she distinguishes between ethical theory as "the study of substantive ethical positions" and "moral philosophy" as a "general and inclusive rubric covering [. . .] many different types of ethical investigations" (169). This formulation is certainly preferable to the popular distinction between "ethics" as somehow the domain of high principle and "morals" as the mere social coding of those principles in different circumstances because it gets at the distinctive roles played by theorizing within professional philosophical discourse and more general speculations on "how should human beings live" (15). Yet the very generality she wins for the rubric "moral philosophy" runs the risk of collapsing literature's general concern with how values are pursued into a discourse that turns out to look very much like "ethics." Assessing those concerns turns out to require the specific terms of moral philosophy. Consequently, ethical criticism feels licensed to seek "reasons" for the kinds of action that in fact are beggared by assuming that we arrive at them by moral calculi. Moreover, these philosophical assumptions are probably not sufficiently attuned to the deep conflicts in how to talk about values that emerge among different cultural practices.

³ Martha Nussbaum's account of her shifting attitudes towards tensions between passionate love and "the ethical viewpoint" provides a good example of an ethical theorist acknowledging these challenges (*Love's Knowledge* 50-53, and her essay "Steerforth's Arm" in the same collection). But her resolution of the problem by insisting on a "deep link between erotic attachment and a new, more yielding sort of moral rightness" (53) seems also a good example of how the challenge is usually ultimately resolved in terms that restore the ethical, with more chastened but also more imperious interpretive authority.

⁴ Several of my recent essays explore various aspects of this Nietzschean contrast, especially "Poetry as 'Untruth': Revising Modern Claims for Literary Truth."

⁵ Moral realism puts a somewhat different ontological spin on the ideals of judgment since it treats literary texts less as interpreting values than as instances of value claims to be treated as we treat other facts in the world. But moral realism does preserve the same underlying hegemony of philosophical reasoning as do more hermeneutic and perfectionist approaches to texts. I attempt a more elaborate criticism of the relation between moral realism and literary studies in my *Subjective Agency* 139-50, where I respond to Terry Eagleton's recent work.

⁶ I have to admit that Derrida has gone a long way in addressing this problem within his general ethics by developing complex interrelations between

response, responsiveness, and responsibility. Yet while Derrida certainly does not invoke traditional moral values, I think that he manages to evoke them in the background as his way of dignifying his focus on texts as singular working signatures. Without Western morality there would be no reason to care about this singularity, yet Derrida seems to presupposes that singularity can stand as an ultimate value (or as close as his thinking comes to an ultimate value).

⁷ I misspeak. There is one much preferable perfectionist model for talking about the ethical in literary works, namely the treatment of poesis developed by Richard Eldridge in *Leading a Human Life*. But Eldridge's actual applications of this model to literary texts in the literary criticism seem to me still hampered by the effort to make his dramatic situations correlate with stateable principles for what constitutes human flourishing.

⁸ Let me support this claim with specific quotations. This is the literary Nussbaum: "Certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist" (*Love's Knowledge* 5). Repeated acts of complex sympathy and empathy in relation to these narrative situations help forge a "distinctive ethical conception" (26) in their own right because they help us envision what constitutes a good life for human beings and what values make that life shareable. But then on the very next page she is content to argue that we should "add the study of certain novels to the study" of classical works in philosophical ethics, "on the grounds that without them we will not have a fully adequate statement of a powerful ethical conception" that we "ought to investigate." I find the claim that only "certain novels" should be studied especially difficult to reconcile with any argument that there is a distinctive contribution made to ethics by literary experience. At best one can argue that these certain novels support or enrich her enlightened Aristotelianism.

⁹ In conversation Bryan Glaser pointed out to me that Wright himself uses the courtroom parts of his novel to raise questions about judgment which seem to lead away from any possible institutional response to Bigger: to sympathize is patronizing; to execute utterly inhumane. Wright can raise such questions because his larger ambition is to make us see the forces producing our impasse, and to respond to those forces we cannot just sympathize. We have to make our sympathy one feature of a complex political judgment suspicious of all dreams that moral identities matter very much at all in relation to what needs to be done.

¹⁰ In conversation Richard Wollheim has made it clear to me the cost involved in linking emotions only to perceptions, as cognitive theory does, and hence denying all the fantasy dimensions that give the emotions their intensity and their hold on our lives. For a good example of problems that arise when this fantasy dimension is overlooked, see Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* 64.

¹¹ In the book I am writing I argue that the cognitive theory of the emotions makes a perfect fit with ethical criticism's emphasis on narrative fiction because the kinds of emotion stressed are those that can be negotiated by the *phronesis* providing the basic mode of judgment in that domain. But the realm of affects contains much more than the emotions that enter this fit. If one comes to the affects through the experience of lyric states, two other affective domains become at least equally important. These are the feelings, which I take to be the range of ways that our affective being spreads out into the world in particular moments, and the passions, which I take to be those emotions in which the identity of the agent is overtly and intensely at stake.

¹² One could argue that Nussbaum's judicious spectator creates the same problems of moving between ethical reason and empirical personal situations that one finds in Kant and in Rawls. I find Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* the most useful treatment of this topic, but I should also mention Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, an influential critique of Rawls along these lines. In Kant will is not an issue because will is inseparable from reason: if one can enter the impersonal domain of reason, one will have to will—reason is active and self-defining.

¹³ This version of responsibility is what Wittgenstein probably was referring to when he said that ethics and aesthetics are one.

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