LITERATURE AND MORAL UNDERSTANDING

A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education, and Culture

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To
Diana, Melanie, and Sophie,
and to the memory of my father,
Arthur Palmer

Art is a tribute to man's own humanity.
(Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*)

PREFACE

The purpose of this book is to investigate how and in what ways our understanding and appreciation of literary works call upon and further our capacities for moral understanding. Nearly all the questions this task gives rise to have their root in the perennial problem of the relation between art and life. That problem, it seems to me, should not only be of concern to philosophers working in some now (alas) unfashionable corner of philosophy known as aesthetics. It also provides meat for moral philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and what bears the amorphous title 'social philosophy'.

There is a tendency among some recent philosophers to treat the topic of 'fiction and reality' as though it were just a technical matter to be sewn up with the incisive needle of logical theory. This is symptomatic of the impoverishment of contemporary philosophy, which, both in its narrowing range of specialist interests and in its professional jargon, has yielded to the temptation to cut itself off from the human problems that matter deeply to the intelligent layman. As far as the arts are concerned, this intellectual myopia has proved disastrous. Artists of any art do not simply produce. They are profoundly affected by theoretical conceptions of the nature and importance of the activity in which they are engaged. And while mainstream analytical philosophy has turned its nose in other directions, absurd and destructive theories of art and criticism have flourished in its absence, protected from its searching demands. Indeed it is quite paradoxical that some of these theories are far more abstract and less 'humane' than they perhaps would have been had they received more critical attention from analytical philosophers.

Though what I have written is intended to be a philosophical essay, I have endeavoured, perhaps not always successfully, to avoid needless technicalities in the hope of speaking to a wider audience, which it is hoped will include those with an interest in literature and criticism, in the educational value of art, and in the moral dimension of language and culture. The general reader may find the first three chapters more technical than the remaining five, but their inclusion is necessary for the wider matters I go on to explore. My starting

point in Chapter 1 is modern literary theory, which has not only failed to leave room for, but has in some cases actively eschewed, the idea that fictional characters are to be regarded as human beings. It is only a small step from a 'dehumanized' conception of character to a view of literature as devoid of moral ideas, and to a conception of criticism as a scientific or political exercise. However, if in understanding and responding to the representational content of literary works we are to regard fictional characters as persons, we must then take issue with those philosophers whose theories preclude us from talking about or 'referring to' characters as persons, and who make a huge fuss about the ontology of fictional existence. I am thus compelled to confront prevailing theories of reference and argue for their inapplicability to literary fictions.

Having analysed the similar inadequacy of accounting for our experience of and discourse about fiction in terms of pretence and make-believe in Chapter 2, I then proceed in Chapter 3 to a philosophical digression on the moral attitudes. The purpose of that chapter is to argue that moral attitudes necessarily enter into our understanding of persons. Chapter 4 investigates some problems about moral responses to fictional characters, while Chapter 5 considers how far the form of such responses is guided by our experience of fictional representation, which is neither purely subjective nor objective but, instead, is governed by a kind of bargain between the author/playwright and the reader/spectator.

There is a long-standing prejudice based upon genuine insights that, unexamined, can be misleading: that life is one thing and art another. At the opposite extreme there is the politicization of art which expects and demands that it be 'relevant to life', even conveying social truths and social messages. Chapter 6 argues that there is *a* distinction between art and life, but this does not mean that life in art is a different kind of life. Rather, the difference consists in the way that our interest and attention is directed, shaped, and organized.

Chapter 7 contends that agreement with the moral vision of a literary work is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of our perception of its merit. That does not mean, however, that art has nothing to do with morality (a view found in for instance the 'aestheticism' of Oscar Wilde). For not only would such a view make the idea of literary merit or aesthetic qualities quite vacuous, it would run counter to our experience of literature.

The final chapter raises questions which should be of interest to anyone who is troubled by fashionable ways of thinking about education and culture. It is argued that literature (and indeed painting) is a source of non-propositional knowledge (knowledge by acquaintance, rather than knowledge by description). In order to defend that idea there is an examination of the distinction between 'telling' and 'showing'. I also examine some non-propositional features of moral understanding and show how it differs from knowledge of matters of fact or theoretical knowledge. I then suggest how it is possible for literature to deepen our moral understanding without giving us information. The part played by imagination in moral and practical reasoning is here explained, and it is suggested that literature can be a source of understanding not provided by actual life. This debate, however, is not restricted to a consideration of how the individual learns from the individual text (a tendency in recent analysis which in my view involves a short-sighted view of the significance of literature and of the cultural, perhaps even spiritual, content of moral understanding). The discussion is therefore widened through an exploration of how culture, and in particular language, is enriched by art and what this contributes to the moral life.

A slightly shorter version of this work was presented as a doctoral dissertation to London University in February 1988. I am greatly indebted to my supervisor, Professor Roger Scruton, not only for his encouragement and support, but for criticisms which forced me to attend to some matters it would have been easier to pass over in silence. I also wish to thank my examiners, Dr Malcolm Budd and Professor Anthony O'Hear, for their kind and helpful suggestions regarding revisions for publication. Professor O'Hear has also been generous enough to read and discuss some new material I have added to the book. The thesis, which I completed at Birkbeck College, actually began life some years ago (at King's College, London) as an incidental chapter to a topic which was not to be about literature at all, but about interpersonal understanding. My interest in the philosophy of fiction was greatly encouraged by my supervisor at that time, Professor Peter Winch, whose influence on me has deepened over the years—though I do not suggest that he would necessarily agree with what I have written here. That chapter in turn was originally stimulated by a chance remark made to me by Professor Stuart Brown on an

interesting similarity between failing to understand a person and
finding a fictional character implausible. I owe more to that chance
remark than Professor Brown could possibly know. Finally I
must record my appreciation for the kind advice given to me by
the philosophy editor of Oxford University Press, Mrs Angela
Blackburn, both about content and about matters of style. I am
also grateful to the copy-editor and to the desk-editing department
for their suggested improvements.

CONTENTS

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Fictional Persons and Fictional Worlds

> Characters in fiction are mostly empty canvas. I have known many who have passed through stories without noses, or heads to hold them; others have lacked bodies altogether, exercised no natural functions, possessed some thoughts, a few emotions, but no psychologies, and apparently made love without the necessary organs. (William. H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, 45.)

FICTIONAL PERSONS

Any normal reader or theatre-goer is perfectly well aware at all times that the characters depicted in novels and plays do not really exist. Yet we refer to them by name, have conversations about them, reflect upon their plights and predicaments, and even blame or admire them for their non-existent deeds. If we are to regard literature as having moral significance and powers of edification—and it is the purpose of this volume to defend and elucidate this conception of literary art—then how do we justify placing such value on works of literature in view of the fact that the personages and circumstances such works contain do not actually exist?

Philosophical debate about fictional existence has tended to concentrate on one or other of the following questions. There is first the matter of the rationality of emotional responses to fiction: in other words how our emotions can be 'about' things we do not even believe to be actual. This topic will be taken up in Chapter 4, where I shall be expressly concerned with the *moral* emotions we have towards fictional characters—something which has received little attention in recent debates about fiction and emotion. Second, there is the problem of the intelligibility of fictional discourse: the logical status of statements or propositions apparently referring to or describing fictional characters or entities.

To some readers the latter may seem an arid or even irrelevant

matter. Indeed it is a defect in some analyses that the second problem has been treated in isolation from the first: as though we could construct an adequate theory of fictional discourse out of 'pure logic', so to speak. Yet it is for that very reason that the subject demands attention here. It is a central contention of this book that literature would have little or no interest or significance for us as human beings if we did not regard fictional characters as morally responsible agents: i.e. as persons. To regard characters in this way is to be able to talk about *them* and enter into disputes about *their* actions—an implication which is denied by some theories of reference which, as I shall show, tell us that in referring to or describing fictional characters we are really referring to something else (e.g. the author or the work, or even a bundle of abstract qualities or properties).

Two quite different, or even mutually opposed, 'schools' or approaches to criticism nevertheless converge in their agreement that literary characters should not be regarded as human beings. For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to these as the semiotic school and the symbolic poem school.

(a) The 'semiotic' school

Both structuralism and post-structuralism are quite dismissive not only of the idea of characters as persons but more generally of the idea that the meaning of a literary work is reached through a humane interest in the representation of a human world. In so far as structuralism has made an impact on Anglo-Saxon countries, its origins can be traced to the work of the Russian formalists, roughly between 1915 and 1930, who rejected the idea that the meaning and value of a literary work lies in its representational content and turned attention instead to a more theoretical preoccupation with abstract linguistic features of its form or structure. However, structuralism's chief impact has been mediated through the French connection (having escaped to Paris, Todorov was instrumental in founding the structuralist school of criticism there). In the 1960s structuralist theory aspired towards the status of a science, relying for its authoritative aura on the work of the Swiss linguistician Ferdinand de Saussure, with his general theory of 'signs' ('semiology'). On any orthodox structuralist view the literary work is no longer a human voice expressing human experience to those with the imagination, sensitivity, and 'humane literacy' to respond to it,

but a linguistically constituted 'object' or 'text' to be deciphered by those with the necessary theoretical equipment (possessed of course only by those who happen to be propounding the theory at the time).

Post-structuralism (equally known as 'deconstruction') is a supposed revolt against structuralism (though sharing some of its premisses) and has come about largely through the more radical French thinkers such as Barthes, Derrida, and Lacan. Ideological in orientation, it is heavily influenced by Marxism and psychoanalysis. And it is largely as a result of this phenomenon, which has stretched Saussure's 'arbitrariness of the sign' into implying utter detachment from the world and from concepts, that it has become fashionable in some academic circles to believe that 'texts' can only have whatever meaning is imposed upon them since, in themselves, they are meaningless marks on a page. Since language never refers to the world or to 'reality' (a 'bourgeois' notion) and since 'texts' are only composed of words (or, better, 'signs' without reference) any written object constitutes a 'text' and is therefore as worthy (or unworthy?) of attention as any other, and there are no constraints upon interpretation. This is a useful conclusion for those who wish to depart from 'reading' good or great works of literature and 'deconstruct' them in accordance with Marxist or feminist ideologies.

While subscribers to either persuasion would be eager to point to the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism, both are united in their rejection of the view that what concerns us in a literary work of art is the quality of the representation of human experience. As one might expect of an approach to literature that reduces it to bloodless technical abstractions, structuralist treatment of character has been sparse and perfunctory. Characters are merely 'devices' having a purely functional role in relation to other abstract, if not quantifiable, units of plot or narrative. Some would-be defenders of the structuralist approach, e.g. John Sturrock, insist that this abstract 'functionalist' approach to character does not rule out humane 'evaluation' of character.[1] However, this insistence is unconvincing and certainly lacks demonstration. The question that needs answering is how it is possible to move from a purely functional evaluation of an abstract 'element', in its system-

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[1] See John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (London, 1986), esp. ch. 4.

atic relation to other abstract elements, to an ethical evaluation of something even remotely resembling human conduct. It explains nothing merely to say that a structuralist interpretation should 'come first': '. . . we ought to remember that in the first instance the "characters" of a fiction belong together, as elements in that particular fiction, and that whatever evaluations we submit them to subsequently, the first evaluation is a functional one.'[2] But if we begin with a conception of fictional characters that falls so far beneath the idea of human personality that the word 'characters' can only appear, rather grudgingly, in inverted commas, what does it mean to speak of submitting 'them' to further evaluations? For, by definition, 'they' are no more logically capable of bearing moral or psychological predicates than is a quadratic equation.

This confusion, however, is linked to further misconceptions about the very nature of moral and personal 'evaluation', which is different in kind from purely functional 'evaluation':

If we again take the example of the 'characters' in a narrative, a first interpretation of what each character 'means' should be made in terms of the place which that character is seen to occupy within the scheme of the narrative as a whole. Only in that way can we work towards the 'value' of the character. Most readers of fiction probably do this anyway; they compare the characters one with another and reach certain ethical or other conclusions about them: that they are likeable or unlikeable, good or bad, and so on. Such comparisons are made possible by our experience as readers, by our 'competence' that is, but they function within the perimeter of the structure that encloses them.[3]

It is important to note that Sturrock's reference to the 'value' of a character seems to be intended in the Saussurian sense: that is to say that when Saussurian linguistics is taken as a model for literature the text consists of a set of symbolically charged 'signs' and the value of a sign is no more than its place or role in the sign system. (It is in accordance with this vocabulary that Sturrock refers to the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice* as a 'small system' within the 'larger system' of the novel.[4]) In so far as Sturrock wishes to say that a structuralist approach describes what the common reader is up to, one is left wondering what structural-

ism has to contribute to our understanding of literary practice. For if, beneath the technical jargon, all we were being told is that ordinary though literate readers form their ideas about the characters in relation to the narrative (and surely it would have to be in relation to their *understanding* of the narrative), then it would require no great structuralist returned from the grave to tell us this.

If Sturrock is right that 'most readers compare the characters one with another and reach certain ethical or other conclusions about them' he is already appealing to a different notion of character, and one which is rather more full-blooded than the functional ciphers arrived at, or presupposed in, structuralist discourse. In order to 'compare the characters one with another' not only must we be thinking of the characters as bearers of personal qualities (i.e. persons), but we must also already have come to know and understand something of those personal qualities, otherwise there could be no basis for comparison. Furthermore, to speak of ethical evaluation as Sturrock does as one among other 'conclusions' we 'reach' is to imply that our first perception of the characters is value free and that 'ethical or other' values are subsequently added on. Hence the simplistic way in which he sums up the content of our 'ethical or other' conclusions about characters as amounting to nothing more than deciding whether they are 'likeable or unlikeable, good or bad, and so on'. Such epithets sound like labels pinned on *ex post facto*. Precisely what is wrong with this way of thinking about 'evaluation' will be explained in Chapter 3, where I shall argue that understanding human action is saturated with moral concepts.

It is consequential upon that argument, and upon our actual experience of fiction, that we do not, and cannot, 'work towards' an evaluative understanding of characters by first thinking of them as functional devices, such as pieces on a chessboard. Not only can there be no passage from the latter to the former, but since mere devices cannot fornicate, commit murder, or save a damsel in distress the very idea of their 'function' is called into question. The idea seems to be that we approach a text by considering characters as mere 'roles': a 'role' being a 'place' within a narrative scheme. But those secondary abstractions could only begin to acquire descriptive force in relation to the concrete actions and events that are experienced by the reader as the representational content. Duncan is stabbed to death by a man called Macbeth, not by a role

or a place in a narrative scheme. And without a human understanding of Macbeth's deed, which includes some understanding of the man who performs it, there cannot be a place in a narrative scheme for the deed to occupy. Far from 'functional' interpretations 'coming first', we must think of characters as persons from the very beginning to obtain any idea of their function within the literary work as a whole.

A similar point needs to be urged against the concept of character which emerges from post-structuralist analysis (or 'deconstruction'). For within the perspective of the latter—especially from the 'ideology-hunting' that it has licensed—any interest we have in literary characters can never be analogous to the interest we have in human beings: an interest which thrives upon our perception of human beings as individuals. Rather, 'characters'—already reduced by structuralism to a type of technical apparatus—become little more than illustrations or tools of ideology. It is notable for instance that in Terry Eagleton's book *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, the only mention of 'character' (predictably in grudge-quotes) occurs on one page, where he endorses the view that the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England reveals 'in its very *form* a changed set of ideological interests'. One of the ways this is shown is by 'a concept of life-like, substantial "character"; a concern with the material fortunes of an individual protagonist who moves through an unpredictably evolving linear narrative and so on.'[5] Eagleton's contempt for the very idea of a character as a human being (and the 'increasingly confident bourgeois class' of which this idea is the 'product'[6]) is evidenced in his own critical practice. In his book *William Shakespeare*—which the preface describes as 'an exercise in political semiotics'—we read that Cordelia is 'spokeswoman for the material bonds of kinship' and that *Coriolanus* is the 'study of a bourgeois individualist'. In *Macbeth* Duncan is a 'symbol of the body politic', Macbeth is a 'floating signifier in ceaseless doomed pursuit of an anchoring signified', while the witches are not the evil hags we thought but 'signify a realm of non-meaning and poetic play' and call for our approval since they 'deconstruct the political order'.

Now Eagleton and his fellow political semioticians may be the

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[5] *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London, 1976), 25.   [6] Ibid.

extreme example of a fashion which finds it 'difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida'.[7] But one does not have to seek within a semiotic approach to literature to find examples of literary theory which reduce characters to symbolism. It is essential to the impulse of modernism to reject 'naturalistic' conceptions of character. As John Bayley objected, in a book which *The Times* described as 'profoundly subversive of the current orthodoxies of literary criticism':

Criticism does not interest itself much today in the old idea of character. Where the drama is concerned we have quite stopped asking whether a character is 'convincing' or not, or discussing what he is 'really like'; and we more and more assume that the novelist, too, need not start out by making his characters like 'real life', but will subordinate their individuality to the general atmosphere and purpose of the work ... On the new view of character a man with a wooden leg, say, is given it by the author not to individualize him but to reinforce a controlling theme—the impotence of modern society or something of the sort.[8]

(b) The 'symbolic poem' school

For reasons which have nothing to do with the scientific and political orientations of a semiotic approach, this debilitated view of character has also been promoted by a tradition in literary criticism which emerged in the earlier part of this century as a reaction against what was considered to be an overemphasis on character analysis as a technique of criticism. This reaction is most clearly illustrated through consideration of the change in the nature of Shakespeare criticism, though the implications of course were much wider: the general thesis being that one's 'total response' to a literary work, which is seen as symbolic or metaphorical, overrides a concern with character. As this pertained to Shakespeare the 'revolution' in criticism (most often supposed, rather misleadingly, to be against the approach to character typified by A. C. Bradley) took the form of concentrating on the plays not so much as depictions of the 'actions of men' but as poems containing rich textures of symbolic images (see for example Caroline Spur-

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[7] *William Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1987), pp. ix–x. (Eagleton is the general editor of the 'Re-Reading Literature' series.)
[8] John Bayley, *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (London, 1968), 36.