MORAL JUDGMENTS AND WORKS OF ART: THE CASE OF NARRATIVE LITERATURE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since at least the late 1990s, a wide range of contemporary philosophers, aestheticians, and other theorists of the arts have embraced the once heretical practice of ethical criticism. It is not uncommon to find one's colleagues unabashedly discussing the ethical content of literary works, arguing for the edifying effects of literature in general, and attempting to find room for ethical content and consequences under the rubric of the aesthetic. Not everyone thinks this turn toward the ethical a good thing. Academic journals and conference programs are alive with disputes over whether reading literature really can make us better citizens or kinder people, and if so, how; whether the expression of morally objectionable views should be regarded as marring the artistic value of a work of art; to what extent, if any, artists should be held responsible for the effects of their art and so on. The very existence of these debates attests to the status of ethical criticism as a sanctioned topic in contemporary aesthetics.

These debates form the background for my concerns here. The question I wish to pursue often goes unnoticed, yet it is fundamental. It concerns the enterprise of ethical criticism as such. My question is this: What are we doing when we assign moral values to a work of art? In somewhat different terms, what does moral judgment come to when the object of judgment is a work of art? In a broad sense, what do these judgments mean?

In exploring these general questions, I will focus on written narrative. Literary forms such as the novel and short story provide an obvious starting place for inquiring into what we are doing when we bring moral categories to bear on works of art more generally. “Narrative” is, after all, a fancy word for story and I take it as a datum that questions about good and bad, right and wrong, harm and benefit tend to arise naturally in the context of storytelling. Some of what I say may apply to other narrative forms: fictional film, drama, or narrative painting. The urge to make moral judgments arises in our response to these kinds of narrative as well. However, the feature of visual representation in narrative painting and film complicates these cases in ways that require a separate analysis. Similarly, for the element of live performance in the case of staged drama. Hence my focal point here remains exclusively works of narrative literature, works that we engage through reading.

The question of what we are doing when we bring moral categories to bear on literary works—works themselves—should be distinguished from a number of other questions central to discussion of ethical criticism. These include empirical questions about the impact of reading and the role of the moral imagination on human behavior and values; normative questions about artistic responsibility of the kind noted above; and the broader relationship of aesthetic and ethical values in literature. Unlike these questions, the issue of how to understand the content of the moral judgments we make of novels and short stories or what we are doing when we make such judgments remains, for the most part, unasked. Perhaps this is so because defenders and critics of
ethical criticism alike tend to assume that moral judgment functions in literary contexts much in the same way it does in ordinary life. If deeming a novel immoral (or moral) is nothing special, it requires no special analysis. It is part of my contention, however, that what we are doing in making these judgments is special and requires a separate account.

In what follows, I begin by clarifying and motivating the question of what it means to say of a literary work that it is moral or immoral, edifying or unedifying, ethically (ir)responsible, evil or good, and so on. I then turn to the task of providing a framework for answering this question. To anticipate, my leading idea is that moral judgments about narrative literature can best be understood in the context of a particular conception of the nature of narrative fiction. I will argue that novels and short stories have specific features that elicit these judgments and that make the activity of making moral judgments about them intelligible.

II. KINDS OF MORAL JUDGMENT

The moral judgments that interest me here are judgments that take the literary work itself as their object. The existence of such judgments might be questioned. One might argue that judgments that appear to be about the morality of literary works themselves, for example, Heart of Darkness or The Portrait of Dorian Gray, are in fact really about something else. Appearances deceive. On this view, the real object of evaluation when we engage with literary works is something else, typically either the work’s characters and their motivations and actions (Kurtz, Dorian Gray), or the implied author’s (implied) attitude toward the characters or the effects of the novel on real-world beliefs and actions. Another possibility is that the real object of moral appraisal is the actual historical author. That it is Conrad’s actions qua human being (either in writing this particular novel or in doing something else), not the work itself, that we mean to condemn.

We do of course often make such judgments, and they are of course important. My claim, however, is that judgments of this kind do not exhaust ethical criticism. Ethical criticism also involves a distinct class of judgments about narratives themselves, judgments that cannot be reduced to judgments about authors, characters, or effects. It is also my contention that such judgments play a crucial role in ethical criticism.

In support of this latter claim, it will help to examine the nature of these judgments. Consider three examples.

(1) “And if a poet writes of the sufferings of Niobe….or of the Trojan war or on any similar theme…[that] they are of God…such a fiction is suicidal, ruinous, impious.”

(2) “It’s not just the word ‘nigger’ I’m objecting to, it’s the whole range of assumptions about slavery and its consequences, and about how whites should deal with liberated slaves and how liberated slaves should behave or will behave toward whites…That book [Huckleberry Finn] is just bad education, and the fact that it’s so cleverly written makes it even more troublesome.”

(3) “Nabokov has, in the person of Humbert Humbert, completely bamboozled our habitual reactions to good and evil, the ugly and the beautiful. Lolita is a novel of aesthetic and moral trespasses.”

The first example, as most readers will recognize, comes from Socrates in Book II of Plato’s Republic. The second is an instance of ethical criticism cited by Wayne Booth in his discussion of Huckleberry Finn. The third example I take from Colin McGinn’s discussion of Lolita in his Ethics, Evil, and Fiction.

I want to bracket the question of the truth or falsity of these judgments and look instead at their structure. What are these judgments about? In the first example, we find Socrates laying out rules and precepts to which the poets of the just city are meant to conform. The object of his disapprobation appears to be a certain group of poets. Those who write works misrepresenting the gods deserve condemnation, even banishment. In the second case, talk of the “bad education” likely to result from an assigned reading of Huckleberry Finn leads us to see the judgment involved as directed at the book’s consequences. Here Twain’s novel is treated as a causal agent much as one might regard HIV or the SARS virus as a causal agent. It is these effects on the undergraduate reader that Booth’s
colleague finds unsupportable. In the final example, we see McGinn making judgments that can easily be read as directed at Nabokov, the real-life author, and his fictional creation, the character Humbert Humbert. It is the historical Nabokov who has “bamboozled our habitual reactions to good and evil,” and it is the character Humbert Humbert who brings this “bamboozlement” to life. One can see how in each of these instances, the judgment involved can be read as being (or being reducible to), a judgment about something other than the literary work itself.

Let us look again at the three examples before us. In the first case, notice that, while Socrates addresses the actions of the poets, what he deems “ruinous” and “impious” is any poetry, “a fiction,” for example, Homer’s, that attributes the fall of Troy or the sufferings of men to the gods. His criticism is aimed not merely at the moral character of the poets, but at the impiety of the poetry they produce. In the second case, Booth’s outraged colleague directs his remarks not merely at the effects of reading Huckleberry Finn, but at “that book,” the literary work “so cleverly written” by Mark Twain. It is this book that is held to be “bad.” In the last example, a careful reading of McGinn’s remarks reveals that his discussion of author and character is meant to support a conclusion directed fundamentally at the novel, Lolita. It is the novel’s moral and aesthetic trespass that occupies McGinn here. To suggest that these judgments are about nothing more than authors, characters, and effects and not the literary works themselves is to miss the plain meaning of the sentences that express them.

One way to begin to get a handle on the idea of judgments about the novels themselves is by analogy. Moral judgments about novels themselves are like moral judgments about actions themselves. The analogy here is between two different kinds of judgments. Just as we can evaluate the act of breaking a confidence, independent of whether my perfidy is discovered and independent of its harmful effects, so too we can evaluate the morality of a literary work in and of itself. Moral judgments about narrative works themselves are, one might say, deontological.

Still, the idea that these judgments are about the literary works themselves may remain puzzling. Let me try to illustrate what I have in mind and why I think it important by considering a fourth example, the German writer Bernard Schlink’s highly acclaimed, but problematic novel The Reader. Apart from any judgment about its author (of whom I know very little) or its good and bad effects on its German or non-German readers, the novel is deeply offensive. Central to the story is Hannah, a rather unlikely woman who seduces, then deceives and abandons the fifteen-year-old narrator of the story. Hannah reappears years later, on trial for war crimes (e.g., serving as a guard at a German concentration camp and refusing to intervene when a church full of women prisoners under her care is set on fire). Hannah’s crimes are horrible. But literature is full of villains. Hannah may be somewhat worse than some, but surely not alone among fictional characters.

What makes the novel repugnant is that, among other things, it uses its heroine’s illiteracy (and fear of exposure as an illiterate) not only to explain, but also partially to excuse, Hannah’s crimes. The personal shame of her illiteracy is allowed to overshadow larger moral and political issues in ways that seem to me morally problematic. The point here is not that the novel’s characters behave badly, nor that its narrator evidences considerable complacency about human evil. Clearly the novelist might have written such a story precisely to expose the immorality of behavior like Hannah’s or the self-absorption of her heedless lover. This is not, I think, the case with Schlink’s novel. As I read it, the novel allows the individual tragedy of illiteracy to distort the moral terrain it surveys.

III. READING AND LITERARY PURPOSESIVENESS

Let us forget about ethics for a moment. We can approach the question about what we are doing when we direct our moral attention to the literary work itself, by asking what it is to read a novel. This is a complicated question, one I cannot address fully here. But even a limited discussion of the nature of the activity of reading will shed light on the activity of making judgments about novels themselves. When we read a narrative, we read it in a particular way. We do not just take in the words and individual incidents. We typically find ourselves asking...
questions about what is going on; about why the characters and their motives are presented as they are; about the novel’s point of view. Thus, for example, we may ask what attitude *Lolita* takes toward Humbert Humbert’s pedophilia; what we as readers are to make of his predilection; and about the meaning or point of the narrative. This is part of what it is to read a narrative as a story.

When we read novels, we read them as if the text is organized in a certain way. We read it as organized so as to allow us to ask certain questions. And to see a text as organized in this way is to see it as *purposive*. The text *allows* us to ask certain questions. That we come to ask these questions appears to be at least part of the purpose of the novel.

The notion of purposiveness brings with it the idea of an agent. We read the novel as if it has been designed with our interests (cognitive, moral, political) in mind. Kant’s notion of purposiveness without purpose provides a model for the conception of reading I am developing. Kant speaks of our seeing order and arrangement in nature (in a flower or bird plumage). The sort of case he has in mind is one in which we are not able to “locate the causes of this form in a will,” since we have no epistemological access to the existence of a deity. We “are able to render the explanation of its possibility intelligible to ourselves only by deriving it from a will.”

One also finds the idea of purposiveness in Hume. In *The Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Cleanthes elaborates on this idea in advancing a version of the argument from design. “Consider, anatomize the eye,” he directs. “Survey its structure and contrivance: and tell me, from your own feeling, if the idea of a contriver does not immediately flow in upon you with a force like that of sensation.”

Cleanthes’s claim here is that, as Jerry Sobel points out, “the intelligibility of the world is expressible only in terms of design, that is, in intentional terms.”

The same is true of written narratives. We read them in intentional terms. Indeed, their intelligibility rests on a notion of intentionality. As Stanley Cavell maintains, the concept of intentionality is “inescapable” in speaking of art, as inescapable as in our talk of “what human beings say and do.” Absent the idea of intention, “we would not understand what they [works of art or human beings] are.” The idea of a creator, the fact of having been created, “flows in upon us” because it is, so to speak, *built into* the experience of looking at and understanding works of narrative. The idea is that of a literary creator or intelligence presupposed by the activity of reading itself. We read a narrative text as if it were written by an author who has produced the text in such a way as to prompt certain questions and provide the resources to begin to answer them.

It will be useful to have a term for the idea of what we do when we find the idea of a creator “flowing in upon us.” Let us say that we “posit an author.” The “posed author” is the analogue of Hume’s imagined contriver. The act of positing an author, as I understand it, is best understood as a kind of logical act. It is not separate and distinct from the act of making these presuppositions or reading under the idea of literary purposiveness. It is not a datable psychological event. The point is that simply in reading a narrative text, we posit an author. Doing so is intrinsic to the structure of reading itself.

The concept of the posited author is distinct from a number of similar concepts standardly employed in the critical literature. First, the concept of the posited author is distinct from the concept of the historical author. The historical author of the novel, *The Grass is Singing*, is the real-life person, Doris Lessing; what I am calling the posited author is, in contrast, an interpretive construct, “a fiction.” Its function is to allow us to read the text in a certain way, that is, under the concept of literary purposiveness. Access to the particular features of the given posited author is secured through the imagination. The fact that we are not thinking about the historical author when we posit an author is marked by the fact that claims about the posited author are cast as claims about the novel. The point can be put the other way: moral judgments about the literary work itself are moral judgments about the posited author. The idea of the posited author is not an alternative to the idea of the work itself, but an explication of what this idea is.

Second, the concept of the posited author is distinct from the concept of the novel’s fictional narrator. Narrators may be unreliable (cf. the
purblind butler in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*). They may espouse points of view the novel itself rejects or criticizes. The posited author, narrator, and historical author can in principle share any number of properties and, presumably, in the normal case, there will be a fair amount of extensional overlap. But overlap does not identify yield. Even in cases like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, where Claudia is a “reliable narrator,” the novel offers a broader point of view than that of this one character. The idea of the posited author is the idea of the highest controlling intelligence of the work. We think of the posited author as presenting this character, for example, Claudia, to the judgment of the reader.

Lastly, and most importantly, the concept of the posited author is distinct from the notion of “the implied author” introduced by Wayne Booth. Booth’s notion is murky. In places, the implied author appears to be a version of the author himself or herself, a self created for the work itself, a persona. The implied author is the self the author becomes to *become* the work. The implied author is the wiser, Wittier, more generous—or perhaps crueler, more ambitious, unfaltering—self the author imagines for the creation of the work. On this strand of Booth’s view, the implied author is the author’s fictionalized rendition of the author. But just as the posited author is distinct from the notion of the historical author, so too is it distinct from the idea of a fictionalized version of the historical author.

In other places, “implied author” appears to be a name for the imagined personification of the novel, the organizing intelligence of the work. It is this “implied author” who offers us “friendship,” to use Booth’s metaphor. The text invites, promises, advises, and gives pleasure. Booth’s notion here is very similar to my own. The features of the implied author and the features of the posited author are bound to overlap in places. Still, it seems to me that the two notions are distinct. The notion of the implied author brings with it aspects of what real-life authors do that are simply absent from the notion of the posited author. The notion of the posited author is more abstract. For Booth, the implied author is something optional, something that may or may not be there, something that may or may not be found. For me, the notion of the posited author is a presupposition of reading a narrative. To read a narrative is to posit an author. For Booth, the implied author is constructed by the historical author. For me, the posited author is a construct of the reader. Thus, although I think that Booth probably does have the notion of the posited author, the notion is not captured by his conception of the implied author.

Though abstract, the notion of the posited author is not empty. Questions about the posited author allow of real discussion. We can ask whether the proposals advanced in Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* are ironic—or meant to be taken seriously. We can dispute whether *The Merchant of Venice* criticizes, endorses, or merely investigates the idea of moral payment embodied in Shylock’s “pound of flesh.” The evidence for our judgments about the posited author will consist in texts and the reading of texts. Our access to the posited author is secured through the act of interpretation.

With this in mind, let us reexamine the mindset from which the idea of making judgments about the novel itself appears outlandish. When we raised skeptical doubts about the meaningfulness of moral judgments about texts themselves, we were thinking of the novel as a book, something constituted by ink and paper and glue. As readers, however, the primary object of our attention is not the pages—the ink on paper—but the *story*. To make sense of such judgments we must consider the narrative from the standpoint of the reader. Seen from that standpoint, the posited author becomes intelligible. We read under the concept of literary purposiveness. Positing an author is a presupposition of reading itself.

Now that we have a basic grip on the idea of the posited author, we are in a position to look at the conception of the novel that goes with it. The conception I have in mind is familiar and traditional. Lionel Trilling draws on it when he observes that the novel “is an especially useful agent of the moral imagination.” This characterization of the novel sees the novel as a kind of moral tool. It accentuates the capacity of the novel to reveal the wide range and complexity of human types and their development over time, something less easily achieved with less capacious literary forms like poetry or short stories. Iris Murdoch notably develops this idea, describing the “calm merciful vision” of the
novelist, a vision that allows the reader imaginative access to “how different people are and why they are different.” The result, Murdoch observes, is “the breath of tolerance and generosity and intelligent kindness” that great novelists achieve.

On this traditional conception, the novel provides the possibility of something like moral education. This education takes place by schooling the imagination and what Hume calls the sentiments: providing means for the reader’s emotional engagement with “centers of reality which are remote from oneself.”

So understood, the novel offers the possibility of understanding, empathy, and tolerance. The claim that the novel may, at least in good hands, allow the development of imagination, and that the well-exercised imagination may in turn foster virtues such as compassion and generosity, is one that many other contemporary aestheticians and literary theorists wish to make.

In adopting Trilling’s conception of the novel, however, I am not assuming that all authors set out to create works that will engage us in explicitly moral terms or that those who do will necessarily succeed. Still less am I suggesting that novelists ought to write with the purpose of engaging in moral instruction or that works of literature must be judged, in whole or in part, by their success in inculcating moral virtue. My claim is rather that we do make moral judgments about novels themselves and that this activity can be shown to be intelligible.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEBATES OVER ETHICAL CRITICISM

As we have seen, the approach advocated here allows us to explain claims about literature’s moral goodness or badness in terms of ordinary moral judgments. The moral judgments we make of the novel’s “posed author” parallel our moral judgments about real human agents. Seeing narrative works in this way, that is, under the concept of literary purposiveness, turns out to have implications for how we are to do ethical criticism, indeed for how we are to do criticism generally. Let me conclude then by saying something about the ramifications of this approach.

For too long, we have faced an interminable debate over the legitimacy of ethical criticism. Typically this dispute gets cast in terms of an opposition between the moral and aesthetic dimensions of art. Even in the best hands, as in exchanges on this topic between Martha Nussbaum and Richard Posner, setting up the problem in this way does not get us very far. The opposition it begins with is false, as Murdoch and a number of contemporary thinkers have noted. Let me at least briefly indicate why and point to a direction for moving beyond this framework.

Take, for example, the dispute between Posner and Nussbaum. Posner rejects the legitimacy of ethical criticism. Nussbaum endorses it. Despite their disagreement, both miss something crucial about literature, and about ethical criticism itself. Posner fails to understand the centrality of the ethical to literature, particularly in the case of the novel, a form inescapably concerned with imagining lives better or worse than our own (and the focus of his debate with Nussbaum). For Posner, the ethical dimension of literature is optional: something we can attend to or not. Like most aestheticists, Posner recommends the latter. Ethical criticism, on his view, merely directs our attention away from what makes literature literature. It is a distraction. Why? Because it reduces literature to “moral pep pills” or a call to action.

Now Posner is surely right that moral judgments that take as their object the work’s real-world author or its effects may, and in some cases will, turn our attention away from the stylistic and structural matters central to the value of literature. Then again, they may not. Moral concern with the fact that Nabokov manages to make the pedophile, Humbert Humbert, sympathetic need not exclude attention to Lolita’s literary strategies; to the contrary. More importantly, however, Posner fails to recognize that some kinds of moral judgments, as I have argued, take the literary work itself as their object. (More on the consequences of this oversight in a moment.)

Nussbaum makes the same mistake. She fails to recognize the centrality of the moral standing of the narrative itself, locating the moral dimension of literature too narrowly in its effects. In this, she leaves herself wide open to Posner’s objection that, in her hands, literature is
diminished, reduced to a causal lever in the world, a call to action for a given political agenda. Despite nuanced attention to language and style, Nussbaum’s literary interpretations in Poetic Justice, for example, leave little doubt that she employs literature—and literary criticism—primarily in instrumental terms. Native Son and the other novels she discusses are intended as a means to improve the moral sympathies of the judiciary. This effort to restore literature to its ancient and honorable position in public life, commendable though it is, leads too readily to the mistaken view that ethical criticism involves nothing but judgments about the moral effects of the work (and indirectly about the historical authors responsible for those effects). What I hope to have established here is that such a view of ethical criticism is incomplete and misguided. That said, it is worth stating that both sides of the traditional debate between aestheticists and ethicists get something right. Defenders of ethical criticism correctly stress the importance of ethical engagement with what literature has to offer us—that in the context of art, moral judgment is a natural and appropriate part of appreciation and evaluation. Opponents of ethical criticism rightly insist that without considerable sensitivity to literature’s aesthetic features, we lose much of the pleasure and instruction literature at its best provides. And if I am right, we do ethical criticism by developing just this aesthetic sensitivity. Ethical criticism demands awareness of features such as the irony, ambiguity, stylistic complexity, and the rhythm of language—precisely those features of the text that Posner calls literary. So, at least for a certain subclass of moral judgments—those that take the novel itself as their object—made about a certain subclass of works of art (novels and other narrative fictions), ethical judgment and aesthetic judgment come together. I cannot make a competent moral judgment about the text without engaging with the work’s literary form, with how its content is presented and structured. Why? Because in order to form a principled moral judgment about the work—whether it is morally good or bad, enlightening or demeaning—I need to determine what the values and commitments of the work itself are. This process is not simple. I cannot, for example, merely count up the number of times Twain uses the n-word or Lawrence the f-word; nor can I simply look at what the characters of the work say and do. Nor is it enough merely to examine how competent readers are likely to respond. I have to engage the whole text—with all its overarching detail and subtlety, contradiction and confusion—a task that requires careful reading, imagination, and hard interpretive work. The conception of moral judgments about narratives themselves that I elaborate here provides the resources with which advocates of ethical criticism can argue for the legitimacy of ethical criticism. Contrary to the fears of Posner and others, ethical criticism need not direct us away from the features of good writing and subtle literary form. Good ethical criticism requires good literary criticism. Nor does aesthetic consideration of the work preclude moral judgment. Ethical criticism, like other forms of criticism, varies in quality. It may be something done well or badly. But when done well, ethical criticism is just that, criticism.
5. A note on terminology: in the context of this paper, I am using ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ interchangeably. I am also using these terms in a very broad sense, including more than might ordinarily be counted under the label ‘moral.’ For my purposes, the label ‘the moral’ includes the political, the ideological, the religious, and so on. Lastly, I am not committed to the claim that the terms ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ are indicative of the political, the religious, and so on. Lastly, I am not committed to the claim that the terms ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ are

6. I owe this line of objection to an anonymous reviewer of The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.

7. Plato, Republic II, 380b.

8. Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction (University of California), p. 3.

9. Colin McGinn, Ethics, Evil, and Fiction (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 110.

10. Of course, there are significant problems about how to establish particular empirical claims about the literary text and its consequences, but there is nothing mysterious about what we are doing in making such judgments given assumptions about presumed causality.

11. McGinn, Ethics, Evil, and Fiction, p. 110.

12. In the actual practice of ethical criticism, these different kinds of moral judgment frequently run together. Unworthy critics easily fall prey to the common error of confusing a work with its author or its fictional creations. The latter occurs particularly in cases such as Lolita, where the character of Humbert exercises such a powerful presence. This proclivity to erode the distinction between the work and something else may be even stronger in the case of works and their presumed effects, where moral reservations about a given outcome get freely transferred to the work presumed to bring it about. In other instances, we are not confused. We mean to use talk of the “work” as a kind of shorthand. Claims that Huckleberry Finn is “racist” stand presumed to bring it about. In other instances, we are not confused. We mean to use talk of the “work” as a kind of shorthand. Claims that Huckleberry Finn is “racist” stand

13. Bernhard Schlink, The Reader, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Vintage International, 1995).

14. Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, 1952) §10, p. 220.

15. David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1947), p. 154.

16. For this reading of Kant and Hume on authorial design, I am indebted to Jerry E. Favel’s illuminating discussion in “Arguing, Accepting, and Preserving Design in Heidegger, Hume, and Kant,” Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 271–305.

17. Stanley Cavell, “Music Discomposed,” Must We Mean What We Say? (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), p. 198.

18. Ibid.

19. It is worth noting here that the novel also develops in such a way as to obscure or refuse answers to the questions it poses.

20. In work on interpretation published in the early 1980s, Alexander Nehamas developed a notion of what he calls the “postulated author.” This author is postulated “as the agent whose actions account for the text’s features.” Although I discovered this work subsequent to developing the account presented here, there are similarities in how we understand the notion of the author figure. We agree that the author at issue is an interpretive construct. One main difference in our accounts, however, is that Nehamas’s notion of the author is a figure who emerges from a whole oeuvre, not from a particular text. A second is that I wish to employ this notion in the service of an analysis of moral judgments of works of art, whereas Nehamas’s project concerns the process of literary interpretation more generally. See “The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal,” Critical Inquiry 8 (1981): 145.

21. Booth, pp. 128 and 457 passim.

22. Booth, p. 128.

23. Noël Carroll first raised with me the worry that ironic works like Swift’s may pose special problems for my account. It is true that if irony is very subtle (not I think the case in Swift!), many readers may miss it. The possibility of misinterpreting the work, of “getting it wrong,” is not restricted to ironic works. It is something readers always risk. A more sustained, careful examination of the text may reveal such errors, but complex works will likely give rise to a variety of competing, but plausible, interpretations. The point of my account is not that in making moral judgments about literary works we can never go wrong, but that in doing so we are necessarily engaged in an interpretive enterprise, one that we appeal to the literary text itself to sustain.

24. Lionel Trilling, “What is Criticism?” in The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965–75, ed. Diane Trilling (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 67.

25. Iris Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 29–30.

26. Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature, p. 29.

27. For recent work on the moral imagination, see, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum, Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), Ted Cohen’s “Metaphors of Personal Identification,” Frank Palmer’s “Literature and Moral Understanding, and the essay by Mullin noted above (n. 4).

28. I leave aside for now the much discussed question of how much, if at all, a novel’s success or failure in cultivating tolerance or other virtues should count in evaluations of its literary standing. In addition to the works cited above (n. 4 and 27), see Berys Gaut’s argument on behalf of the legitimacy of ethical criticism, “The Ethical Criticism of Art” in Levinson, Aesthetics and Ethics, pp. 182–203.

29. See Richard A Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism,” Philosophy and Literature 21 (1997): 1–27; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” Philosophy and Literature 22 (1998): 343–365; Richard Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two,” Philosophy and Literature 22 (1998): 394–412.
30. See, for example, Kendall L. Walton’s “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Supplementary 68 (1994): 27–50. For an example of how the aesthetic and ethical come together in the analysis of a given work, see my “Beauty and Evil” in the Levinson volume cited above.

31. It is worth noting the considerable recent literature on the ethicist-aestheticist debate. I focus on the debate between Nussbaum and Posner for a couple of reasons. For one thing, their exchange in the pages of *Philosophy and Literature* avoids the regrettable tendency to direct arguments at nameless and generic opponents (for example, “the ethicists,” “traditional aestheticians”). For another, both Nussbaum and Posner have articulated and defended positions that have had considerable influence not only within philosophy but also within legal studies.

32. While not relevant to my interests here, it is worth noting that much of the argument between Posner and Nussbaum involves a substantive dispute about political and judicial matters. See, for example, Posner’s discussion of market relations, race, and the legal controversy over gay rights, “Against Ethical Criticism,” pp. 12ff.

33. Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism, Part Two,” p. 399.

34. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*.

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