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Literary Form and Ethical Content

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Abstract

The paper offers a qualified endorsement of Terry Eagleton's striking claim that "a work's moral outlook … may be secreted as much in its form as its content". A number of points are raised in defence of the claim: an argument for the inseparability, under certain conditions, of form and content in a literary work; an idea of moral content, not as derived moral principle, but as inward-facing interpretation grounded in an ethical vocabulary; the possibility of internal and external perspectives on fictional characters; and an emphasis on emotions expressed in, rather than caused by, narrative. Three literary examples are explored, to show how vocabulary, syntax, implicature, and tone, contribute to the emergence of moral salience. A consequence drawn is that the ethical stance readers take to a scene or incident is partially shaped by the narrative modes of its presentation. The overall perspective of the paper is that of aesthetic autonomism: the view that the aesthetic value of a work of literature is distinct from, and not reducible to, any instrumental moral values (positive or negative) attributed to the work.

Keywords

expressed vs felt emotion, form and content in literature, moral content and literary interpretation, opaque/transparent modes of reading, Terry Eagleton.

1 Introduction

The literary theorist Terry Eagleton chides analytic philosophers of literature for failing to recognise what he sees as an important fact about ethics and literature, namely that "a work's moral outlook … may be secreted as much in its form as its content—that the

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language and structure of a literary text may be the bearers and progenitors of so-called moral content" (Eagleton 2012: 46). He elaborates with examples:

> A neoclassical poem which exploits the order, symmetry and equipoise of the heroic couplet; a naturalistic drama which is forced to gesture off-stage to realities it cannot credibly bring into view; a novel which garbles its time sequence or shifts dizzyingly from one character's viewpoint to another: all these are instances of artistic form as itself the bearer of moral or ideological meaning. (Eagleton 2012: 46)[1]

I largely agree with Eagleton on the relation of literary form to moral outlook but will propose a relation far more radical than his. Eagleton, at least in the examples on offer, focuses on what might be called macro-narrative features (genres, work-structures, general stylistic character, etc). But I will propose that the ethical character of a passage or incident in a literary narrative can be manifested in far more fine-grained detail (a turn of phrase, a sentence's structure, a fractured dialogue, irony, tone, implicature, atmosphere). This makes a significant difference to where interest in a work's moral outlook ultimately resides and how we conceive of literary judgments, aesthetic or moral.

When we move from the large scale to the small scale, we see how deeply ingrained ethical values are in literary narrative. The examples of "ethical literature" that are most likely to come to mind in an initial reflection would be works that convey an overt, often didactic, moral perspective: *Hard Times*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *1984*, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. On somewhat deeper reflection, however, it becomes clear that any novel that portrays, in a broadly realistic manner, the lives and interactions of human beings will elicit ethical responses from readers at every turn. What I mean is that readers will, more or less self-consciously, bring to mind epithets like *generous*, *kind*, *thoughtful*, *sympathetic*, *sensitive*, or perhaps *cruel*, *heartless*, *irresponsible*, *thoughtless*, *insincere*, while contemplating narrative content such as a comment in a dialogue, an action taken, an internal monologue, a discursive description. A reflective reading process will be informed by thoughts of these kinds, normally characterised with "thick" ethical concepts. They might be explicitly prompted by the text, they might be implied in the text, or they might even contradict or challenge what is explicit or implicit. These minor passing judgments are part of what it is to engage with a work of literature, in the service of finding significance and interest in it. We will look at examples in detail later.

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[1] He gives other examples on p. 65.

Noël Carroll recognises and has elaborated on this very process: "Reading a novel … is itself generally a moral activity insofar as reading narrative literature typically involves us in a continuous process of moral judgment" (Carroll 2001: 285). That, with some reservations about "moral activity" and "continuous process", seems broadly right. However, Carroll is not content to leave it there, insisting on some further value to be found. He completes the sentence with this: "which exercise of moral judgment itself can contribute to the expansion of our moral understanding". It is the potential of the reading process to expand our moral understanding beyond the work (providing a kind of moral education) that really interests him.

My own account makes no such claim. Of course, a claim about what the reading process "can" do is quite weak, and it would be unreasonable to deny that this benefit (under a suitable definition of "moral understanding") could occur for some readers. But of more interest, as I see it, is the benefit of this reading process in deepening our understanding and appreciation of the work itself. These passing moral judgments help us to appreciate the work better, and to make more substantial our imaginative engagement with it, not least our grasp of character and theme. Indeed, the moral understanding we bring to a work (in those passing judgments) is likely to be of more significance in our appreciation of a work than any moral understanding we take from the work and apply in other contexts. I hope the examples that follow will provide support for that.

Before we move to the examples, a further observation is needed about these passing ethical judgments. For a serious literary reader there is a higher-order level of reflection beyond the first-order ethical characterisation of individual incidents or actions. Suppose we reflect that a character's action seems heartless or cruel or that a conversational exchange displays warm-hearted generosity. We need to ask the further question of what function is performed by the cruelty or the generosity within the artistic design of the work more generally. Is the cruelty gratuitous or well-integrated? Is the generosity well-grounded or merely sentimental? These further judgments are not themselves ethical but aesthetic. They ask about the coherence and integrity of a work, how elements fit together, what contribution they make to any overall thematic vision that the work develops.

2 Form and content in literature

Let us return to Eagleton's thought that "a work's moral outlook … may be secreted as much in its form as its content—that the language and structure of a literary text may be the bearers and progenitors of so-called moral content". More needs to be said about "form"

and "content", and indeed their relation. A simple starting point might be to distinguish the "how" from the "what", such that content is *what is expressed*, form *how it is expressed*. There is something obviously right about that but already it shows that form and content cannot always be entirely distinct. After all, how I greet you—tone of voice, expression used—can dictate what kind of greeting it is: a friendly welcoming one, or a cold and sarcastic one. Speech act theory and Gricean pragmatics (meaning, implicature) have taught us that the contextual content of an utterance can diverge from its semantic content due to the conditions under which it is uttered, including the mode of its presentation.

In the literary context, it is a critical commonplace, although not without controversy and often expressed with a high degree of vagueness, that form and content are ultimately inseparable, even if at one obvious level they can be identified and characterised separately. The point is most often made in the case of poetry but similar arguments for narrative prose have also been defended. In fact, I have defended versions of form-content inseparability for both poems (Lamarque 2009) and novels (Lamarque 2014: esp. ch.8). I shall not rehearse the arguments in detail here but will present certain salient points relevant to the discussion in hand.

On poetry I have offered a re-interpretation of A .C. Bradley's famous defence of form-content identity in his lecture "Poetry for Poetry's Sake" (Bradley 1926). For Bradley, content and form in poetry "are one thing from different points of view, and in that sense identical. And this identity of content and form … is no accident; it is of the essence of poetry in so far as it is poetry" (Bradley 1926: 15). My own suggestion is that we think of Bradley's "content" as *the-subject-as-realised-in-the-poem*, and his conception of "form" *as the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-in-the-poem*. A poem's subject is broadly what it is about (a nightingale, despair, a visit to Tintern Abbey) and different poems can be about the same subject at that level of generality. But *the-subject-as-realised-in-the-poem* is unique to the poem itself because it embodies precisely *this* realisation of the subject (in these words, on this occasion). Likewise, the form of the poem, characterised as *the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-in-the-poem*, is also unique to the poem, for similar reasons, for it embodies how the subject is realised here, in this poem. If we want to identify the content, *the-subject-as-realised-in-the-poem*, we point to the poem itself; if we want to identify the form, *the-mode-of-realisation-of-the-subject-in-the-poem*, again we point to the poem. This is the subject as realised in the poem and *this* is how the subject is realised. The poem itself just is the form-content unity.

In answer to the objection that it is always possible to speak of a poem's subject and its form separately, it is important to stress the difference between subject and form

abstracted from the poem and subject and form under strict conditions of work-specificity or finegrainedness (Lamarque 2015). A subject abstracted from some individual poem, like the kinds mentioned (nightingales, despair, etc), can be shared by numerous poems and indeed between a poem and a paraphrase of the poem. Similarly, general poetic forms can be abstracted from a poem—the sonnet form, iambic pentameter, rhymes, rhythms, assonance, enjambment—and shared by different poems. But if we turn to the specific realisation of the subject *here* and the poetic devices *here*¸ we find both content and form to be unique in virtue of being realised in precisely *this* way, and thus to be inseparable within the work.

It should be noted that on this account the unity of form and content is not an intrinsic feature of a poem. It is not *discovered* in a poem but *demanded* of a poem when read *as a poem*. In effect form-content unity is a product of a certain kind of attention to, or interest in, a poem. A reader who attends to the specificity of a poem would always find it relevant to ask, "why is *that* particular form of expression used?" The focus on the finegrainedness of expression in a poem seems to be, in Bradley's words, "of the essence of poetry in so far as it is poetry".

Note that the issue is not primarily about paraphrasability.[2] The familiar question as to whether poems can be paraphrased is simply the wrong question in the debate about form-content unity. Any poem could be paraphrased with a suitable degree of accuracy relative to specific contexts. In an English lesson at school, paraphrase can play a vitally important role in comprehension. The right question is not whether paraphrase of poems is possible—it nearly always is—but whether a reader with an interest in a poem *as a poem* could accept a paraphrase as a genuine substitute for the poem, in the sense of accepting that *reading the poem* and *reading the paraphrase* are of equal value. The answer to that is surely "No." But it should be admitted that not every reader has an interest in poetry at this demanding level of specificity.

The argument that something comparable to form-content unity in poems can be found in novels follows similar lines. Again, it is not a matter of any quality intrinsic to novels, or narrative prose, but rather something to do with the kind of attention invited by novels, when the focus of interest is on their being works of literature or works of art. Here I have suggested a distinction between two modes of attention: reading a narrative *transparently* and reading a narrative *opaquely* (Lamarque 2014). To read transparently is,

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[2] For illuminating considerations about poetry and paraphrase see Currie & Frascaroli 2021.

speaking metaphorically, to look through the text at a world of character and action as if that world is largely independent of the text itself, or as if that very same world could be described in other ways. Plot summaries or even film adaptations of novels are in effect transparent readings; they give the essence of the narrative content, including perhaps its atmosphere, suspense, emotional impact, and so forth, but without being tied to the specifics of the original text. No doubt most novel readers, interested primarily in character and plot, read transparently and there is no objection to their doing so.

To read opaquely, in contrast, is to attend to the specifics of the text itself, the representational modes in which the content is conveyed. It is to reflect on the content as intimately tied to the modes of its presentation. It is not to look through the text at a world—fictional or real—in principle independent of it but rather, again metaphorically, to perceive the world that is configured in the text itself. This is where content and form merge. How the content is presented, linguistically and rhetorically, determines what the content is. In that sense form and content are inseparable, just as we found in the case of poetry.

Again, paraphrase is not the main issue. Of course, a novel can be paraphrased—that is what plot summaries do—but few readers, at least those interested in a novel as literature, would be content to substitute the plot summary for the novel, as if all the necessary information is conveyed in the former. Although film adaptations of classical novels might be thought by many viewers to be an adequate substitute for reading the novel itself, that could not be the attitude of those interested in a novel "from a literary point of view". And it is precisely the opaque mode of reading that is of the essence of reading a work as *literature*.

A final caveat, however. It would be absurd to suggest that in a long novel every word or phrase or sentence commands the same level of salience or significance as found in the case of short lyric poems. But, accepting that, it might seem surprising, in a close reading of a novel, how many details at this level of specificity do reward close attention and do contribute in a substantial way to the emergence of a world presented to the imagination. It should also go without saying that the authoritative text of at least a canonical novel is taken by those adopting a "literary point of view" to be sacrosanct, in the sense that tampering with the text, through substitutions, additions and deletions, would be viewed

as a kind of violation.[3]

3 First case study: Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*

Now we have the framework in place for substantiating Eagleton's claim that "the language and structure of a literary text may be the bearers and progenitors of so-called moral content" (developing the more pithy claim that "a work's moral outlook … may be secreted as much in its form as its content"). What I hope to show is how that point goes deeper and has deeper ramifications than Eagleton himself seemed to realise. The focus in what follows will be on novels rather than poems although the parallels noted earlier between the two suggest that similar points about "moral content" could be applied to poems.

The idea of attending to a novel opaquely, with its drawing together of form and content, shows immediately that the kinds of moral reflection that, as we saw, are elicited by details in a novel arise out of the very fabric of the novel itself. To appreciate the literary achievement, we need to form our own judgments about how these moral reflections, if well-grounded, contribute to the effective working of the novel as literature or art. And these higher-order judgments, as remarked, are themselves fundamentally aesthetic rather than moral. This is a theme I will pursue because I believe it gives weight to a kind of aesthetic autonomism that gives priority to aesthetic judgment over moral judgment in the appraisal of works of literature.

So how does form "secrete" a moral stance? The simplest, and most reductive, case might be the names of fictional characters where moral standing is made explicit in the names themselves. I am thinking of names like "Good Deeds", "Discretion", "Fellowship" in the fifteenth century morality play *Everyman* or, similarly, "Goodwill", "Faithful", "Obstinate", and "Hypocrisy" in John Bunyan's seventeenth century allegorical work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

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[3] There are serious issues about the status of translations of literary novels. Should we think of these (high standard examples at least) as somehow equivalent to the originals? Or close enough to be near equivalents? After all, we naturally acknowledge that those who have read English translations of, say, the Russian or French classics have read the actual novels. But arguably, under stricter criteria, such translations are more like transparent than opaque readings of the novels in question. Of course, a good translator will attempt to reproduce the fine-grained character of the original, its tone, its nuances, its atmosphere, even its linguistic and stylistic peculiarities. But it will never capture all of those characteristics. So the form-content unity that is a translation (however accurate) can never be identical to the original so, *stricto sensu*, is a distinct work.

The term "character" here does double duty: the names, we might say, both name an allegorical character and identify the moral character embodied: form and content are indistinguishable. Nor is this a feature of works remote in time. Even novels in the realist tradition continued the practice: the genial Squire Allworthy in *Tom Jones*, or numerous cases from Dickens, such as the superficial Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*. Sense-bearing names in fiction are now more likely to have a merely playful role but the allegorical tradition shows in its own, albeit simple, way how ethics can in all literalness be secreted in form.

More substantial examples are at hand.

Eileen John has drawn our attention to a minor but intriguing passage near the beginning of Edith Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth* (1905) and makes some perceptive comments about it, which illustrate well how easily ethics can emerge unannounced in literary description (John 2010). The passage involves an unplanned visit by the main protagonist Lily Bart to the apartment of her friend the lawyer Lawrence Seldon after a chance meeting while waiting for a train. The visit is innocent, if mildly flirtatious, and involves a cup of tea and a friendly conversation. The relevant passage describes her leaving the apartment.

> On the landing she paused to look about her. There were a thousand chances to one against her meeting anybody, but one could never tell, and she always paid for her rare indiscretions by a violent reaction of prudence. There was no one in sight, however, but a charwoman who was scrubbing the stairs. Her own stout person and its surrounding implements took up so much room that Lily, to pass her, had to gather up her skirts and brush against the wall. As she did so, the woman paused in her work and looked up curiously, resting her clenched red fists on the wet cloth she had just drawn from her pail. She had a broad sallow face, slightly pitted with small-pox, and thin straw-coloured hair through which her scalp shone unpleasantly.
>
> "I beg your pardon," said Lily, intending by her politeness to convey a criticism of the other's manner.
>
> The woman, without answering, pushed her pail aside, and continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture? Half-way down the next flight, she smiled to think that a charwoman's stare should so perturb her. The poor thing was probably dazzled by such an unwonted apparition.
>
> But were such apparitions unwonted on Selden's stairs? Miss Bart was not familiar with the

> moral code of bachelors' flat-houses, and her colour rose again as it occurred to her that the woman's persistent gaze implied a groping among past associations. (Wharton 1964: 15–6)[4]

Here are some observations from Eileen John:

> Here we have an encounter that has minor, incidental status within the plot. It is a momentary exchange early on in the story, but it has some weight for the reader partly because it is one of the first indications of the protagonist's limitations—she is not able to avoid defensiveness and uses a marker of social status to assert her superiority. We might have a slight bristle of distaste for Lily, as she insinuates that the other woman has no right to stare at her and as she uses polite words insincerely. The brief interaction has certain kinds of potential that we experience as morally significant: there could be sincerity, respect across social class lines, or appreciation of each other's vulnerability. In this example, none of this is achieved, and, while this is also due to the charwoman, whose curiosity probably is aggressive in this context, the focus of our interest in the novel is Lily, and it seems we gather a small bit of morally critical data about her—she could not react in the moment without an effort to claim superiority (John 2010: 288–9).

John is right to note that, however minor the incident itself, the reader will experience it as "morally significant". Lily Bart's impoliteness to the charwoman invites moral censure. Ideally, she could have shown not just more courtesy but more of a sense of the shared vulnerability of each party. However, John goes on to acknowledge a degree of empathy towards Lily, likely to be experienced by a reader, when Lily's own social vulnerability (essentially the main theme of the novel) is recognised.

> In that moment she [Lily] cannot imagine how far she herself could (and will) sink, and she cannot find a footing with the woman [i.e. the charwoman] that would allow her to be genuinely polite. But we can easily see why she is unable to find that footing—her social context only gives her reason to isolate herself and to fear the woman's stare. (John 2010: 289)

Here then is an example of that higher-order reflection that tempers the first-order ethical judgment. John is fitting Lily's behaviour into the wider pattern of the novel showing how the overall design makes her action, and its defensiveness, almost inevitable, with its

[4] This is a longer quotation than used in John's paper

function of prefiguring what is to come.

But there are other kinds of ethical tension and reader discomfort in the passage. What are we to make of the description of the charwoman? Is she not being unfairly, even cruelly, presented? The physical description itself seems almost gratuitously negative: "stout person", "clenched red fists", "broad sallow face", "pitted with small-pox", "thin straw-coloured hair", "her scalp shone unpleasantly". Might we blame the novelist for depicting such a negative stereotype? Perhaps. But another explanation might be that we are picturing the charwoman through Lily's eyes, where only negative features are salient. Lily's embarrassment and defensiveness have created in her mind this "creature" with her "odious conjecture" and her vision allows no room for positivity. As far as the text itself is concerned we are given no objective reason to ascribe disapproving thoughts to the charwoman (these are only in Lily's mind) and even John's own comment that her "curiosity probably is aggressive" does not seem fully justified. But the negative description in the text gives us no reason to view the charwoman sympathetically. The tone, we might say, is not in her favour.

A number of conclusions arise from this instructive example. The moral judgments elicited from a reader (about Lily's behaviour, even about the charwoman) are entirely inward facing. They are essentially involved with a reader's attempts to construct a picture of the central character, building up, in John's words, "the first indications of the protagonist's limitations".

They belong in an interpretative process, an aspect of literary appreciation, and are not the basis for extractible, outward-facing, moral homilies. The passage raises several questions of an aesthetic nature. Is the negative portrayal of the charwoman gratuitous or can it be integrated, as earlier suggested, into the broader functions of the developing narrative? Is Lily's own attitude to the charwoman justified in the context? To which John's answer is "probably yes" given the way her social vulnerabilities become more evident as the story unfolds. We should note how the passage anticipates these later developments through the word "always" in the sentence "she always paid for her rare indiscretions by a violent reaction of prudence" and perhaps also through the insecurity evident in her internal questioning: "Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting one's self to some odious conjecture?" The tone of the passage is tense with anxiety and unease, reflecting the momentary turmoil in Lily's mind and inducing an ethical discomfort in the reader.

4 Second case study: Thomas Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*

A feature of the first example is that the ethical judgments elicited in the reading process are nuanced and qualified. The next example offers a striking contrast because at least one of the passages for consideration carries a strong moral valence which in itself is unequivocal. However, as we shall see, other related passages are not entirely lacking in nuance and qualification.

In Thomas Hardy's novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the principal character Michael Henchard, in a drunken and impoverished state, auctions his wife Susan and baby daughter Elizabeth-Jane at a country fair. Although he soon shows remorse for the act, and it blights his life, there is no escaping the moral abhorrence of what he has done and a reader who fails to recognize the moral perspective inherent in the scene has failed to understand it.

The scene builds up slowly and in the early stages onlookers do not take the proposal seriously, any more than Susan herself does. But when a bidder, a sailor unknown locally, comes forward and makes a bid, putting money on the table, the mood changes.

> Up to this moment it could not positively have been asserted that the man, in spite of his tantalizing declaration, was really in earnest. The spectators had indeed taken the proceedings throughout as a piece of mirthful irony carried to extremes; and had assumed that, being out of work, he was, as a consequence, out of temper with the world, and society, and his nearest kin. But with the demand and response of real cash the jovial frivolity of the scene departed. A lurid colour seemed to fill the tent, and change the aspect of all therein. The mirth-wrinkles left the listeners' faces, and they waited with parting lips. (Hardy 2004: 8)

The sale goes ahead and "[s]eizing the sailor's arm with her right hand, and mounting the little girl on her left, she [Susan] went out of the tent sobbing bitterly". It is a sombre moment. Even Henchard, for all his drunken bravado, seems taken aback: "A stolid look of concern filled the husband's face, as if, after all, he had not quite anticipated this ending."

Following shortly on from this dour scene is a remarkable passage, where the author himself seems to intervene, drawing a contrast between the cruelty of the human action so described and the seeming innocence, or at least indifference, of nature. But Hardy cannot resist concluding that cruelty is in fact distributed right across nature:

> He [Henchard] rose and walked to the entrance with the careful tread of one conscious

> of his alcoholic load. Some others followed, and they stood looking into the twilight. In contrast with the harshness of the act just ended within the tent was the sight of several horses crossing their necks and rubbing each other lovingly as they waited in patience to be harnessed for the homeward journey. Outside the fair, in the valleys and woods, all was quiet. The sun had recently set, and the west heaven was hung with rosy cloud, which seemed permanent, yet slowly changed. To watch it was like looking at some grand feat of stagery from a darkened auditorium. In presence of this scene after the other there was a natural instinct to abjure man as the blot on an otherwise kindly universe; till it was remembered that all terrestrial conditions were intermittent, and that mankind might some night be innocently sleeping when these quiet objects were raging loud. (Hardy 2004: 9)

Literary readers are trained to be wary of what look like authorial interventions in novels. Too often these turn out to be something other than the author speaking *in propria persona*, either because the reflections are offered, if only implicitly, through the mind of an independent character or narrator, or because they are steeped in irony or wry humour. This passage, although set firmly in the scene at hand, has all the hallmarks of a sentiment from Hardy himself. For Hardy the natural world has no intrinsic meaning or value and is blindly indifferent to human folly or suffering. The sentiment is more metaphysical than moral. It offers a cosmic rather than world-grounded perspective on the scene just played out. In the great scheme of things Henchard's cruelty is of no significance, even if at the time it is undoubtedly cruel. It is not that nature is essentially good, as manifested in the bucolic tranquillity of the scene outside the tent, and that humans are somehow a blot on this. There is no good or evil in nature, only the appearance of such, so the natural world is not in a position to make or imply a moral judgment about what occurs in it, human or otherwise. This metaphysical context complicates, rather than reinforces, the moral depravity of Henchard's action. Should we too not be tempted by the perspective of cosmic indifference?

A further complication might lie in the way that the sailor—later revealed to be Richard Newsom—is presented. He after all is complicit in the appalling act, by engaging in the auction and in effect buying Henchard's wife. The other key person complicit in the act is the man who volunteered to be the auctioneer, but he is given no name and is condemned as morally contemptible by the comedic description offered of him: "a short man, with a nose resembling a copper knob, a damp voice, and eyes like button-holes". But what we learn about Newsom in this brief appearance is far from negative. There is no implicit moral condemnation in either the tone or substance of how he is presented. For example, while sealing the transaction, he engages in this dialogue:

> "'Tis quite on the understanding that the young woman is willing," said the sailor blandly.
> "I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world."
> "Faith, nor I," said her husband. "But she is willing, provided she can have the child. She said so only the other day when I talked o't!"
> "That you swear?" said the sailor to her.
> "I do," said she, after glancing at her husband's face and seeing no repentance there.
> "Very well, she shall have the child, and the bargain's complete," said the trusser [Henchard]. He took the sailor's notes and deliberately folded them, and put them with the shillings in a high remote pocket, with an air of finality.
> The sailor looked at the woman and smiled. "Come along!" he said kindly. "The little one too—the more the merrier!" She paused for an instant, with a close glance at him. Then dropping her eyes again, and saying nothing, she took up the child and followed him as he made towards the door. On reaching it, she turned, and pulling off her wedding-ring, flung it across the booth in the hay-trusser's face.
> "Mike," she said, "I've lived with thee a couple of years, and had nothing but temper! Now I'm no more to 'ee; I'll try my luck elsewhere. 'Twill be better for me and Elizabeth-Jane, both. So good-bye!" (Hardy 2004: 8)

Newsom does not act cruelly or unkindly towards Susan, in spite of the extraordinary circumstances that brought them together. There is nothing in the form of the dialogue that invites moral censure: indeed the words "I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world", "smiled", "kindly", "the more the merrier" are positive. Also, for all her anger and dismay at her husband's behaviour, Susan goes willingly with Newsom who seems to act more as her saviour against a bully than a partner in the crime. Newsom does not play a major role in the rest of the novel, but we know that he and Susan live together as man and wife for eighteen years and, after the early death of Henchard's daughter, they bring up their own daughter, using the same name Elizabeth-Jane.

Both in the Lily Bart case and in this early scene in the Hardy novel a reader is presented with some fundamental aspects of the two main protagonists. In Lily's case, the focus is on her social vulnerability and defensiveness, in Henchard's it is on his impulsiveness, volatile temper, and tendency to make rash decisions. In both cases these flaws set the tragic trajectory of the novels, leading to the social failure and untimely death of both protagonists. One might, I suppose, call both novels "moral tales" but that rests more on how they explore the complex moral lives of two engaging characters than on anything substantial they might have to offer by way of a "moral education" that might improve the lives of readers.

To speak of the trajectory of the characters reminds us that fictional characters can be thought of in two fundamentally different ways: either as imagined persons in a world, thinking and acting (in realist novels) like real persons in the real world, or as functions with a role in an artistic design. The former conception involves adopting an internal perspective on a fictional world; the latter is to adopt an external perspective on a work of art (in the real world). The difference is apparent in the two different kinds of answers that might be given to the question: "Why did Henchard auction his wife at the country fair?" From an internal perspective the answer is: he was drunk, angry and impulsive. From an external perspective, reflecting on the character's role in the novel, the answer might be: the scene at the country fair is the main driver of the plot and the novel's theme. What drives the plot and gives interest to the story is how Henchard responds to his irresponsible act, wracked with guilt, and concerned about protecting his good name from infamy. In spite of acquiring some prosperity and a position of responsibility (becoming Mayor of Casterbridge), and even remarrying Susan, Henchard repeatedly makes rash judgments with further acts of unkindness, ending his life in poverty and despair. It is a trajectory, like that of classical tragedy, somehow foretold in the opening scene which anticipates an outcome increasingly inevitable. The developing theme is that of insecurity driven by guilt leading to self-destruction. The Henchard character, from the external perspective, has a pivotal function in this literary design.

Where does ethics come in? A reader adopting the internal perspective on a character constructs a picture of the character through the ongoing narrative. Information about the character is accrued, actions explained, motives explored, attitudes detected. Also, as we have seen, moral judgments are made, in the sense that an ethical vocabulary is elicited to characterise actions, events, attitudes. This is a familiar reading process and includes much of the pleasure derived from narrative. On an opaque (or literary) reading of a novel these judgements arise out of close attention to the forms in which the content is presented. There is nothing mysterious about that. We might think of this process, largely grounded in the internal perspective on character, as focused on micro-forms in the narrative: phrases, sentences, short passages, that prompt ethical reflection, and contribute to the rounding out of character.

In contrast, attention can shift to macro-forms—perhaps of the kind that Eagleton describes—where work structures, themes, and genre conventions are in play. Characterising a work like *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a tragedy indicates a kind of trajectory in the plot, with conventional expectations about character development and final outcome. Macro-forms have an ethical dimension because the great literary themes, worked and reworked

through history, are never far from ethical concerns: power, ambition, guilt, the pursuit of happiness, hope and despair, envy and jealousy. Once again, though, we should not be too hasty to identify the macro-forms of a novel, its themes and structures, with moral education or the articulation of a moral lesson to be derived. Neither of our two examples lend themselves to a summation in terms of moral principles extractible and applied to real lives. They are more substantial and engaging than that. Perhaps individual readers might see aspects of Lily Bart and Michael Henchard in their own predicaments—and that can be part of the pleasure of reading—but they should be wary of deriving life lessons from examples of this kind. The power of the themes lies more in the way they are developed through the particularities of the works than in their ability to guide action.

5 Third case study: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

Let me consider one more example, this time focusing not on the beginning of a character's trajectory but at the end. And also illustrating how emotion can intersect with form and with ethics. The example is from another of Thomas Hardy's novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). This passage comprises the final two paragraphs of the novel:

> Upon the cornice of the tower a tall staff was fixed. Their eyes were riveted on it. A few minutes after the hour had struck something moved slowly up the staff, and extended itself upon the breeze. It was a black flag.
>
> 'Justice' was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess. And the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing. The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time, absolutely motionless: the flag continued to wave silently. As soon as they had strength, they arose, joined hands again, and went on. (Hardy 1979: 329-30)

The black flag on the prison tower signals that Tess is dead: she has been hanged (for the killing of Alec d'Urberville). The two "speechless gazers" are Tess's sister Liza-Lu and Angel Clare, Tess's husband. The mood is dour and dispiriting, reflected in the flat prose, but there is also bitterness and sarcasm in the passage. The narrative point of view is unmistakable. Placing inverted commas round "Justice" mocks the injustice manifested by the hanging, given the circumstances of the killing; and the sarcastic phrase "President of the Immortals" to refer to a supreme, but implacably cruel, god (based on Zeus as portrayed in Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound*) emphasises the crushing of Tess by forces (fate, the gods) quite beyond her control. The term "sport" reminds us of Gloucester's anguished cry

in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods. / They kill us for their sport". The sentence "the d'Urberville knights and dames slept on in their tombs unknowing" confirms the utter futility of Tess's search for "kin" with a local noble family, a course of events that destroyed her. And the final words in the novel "they arose, joined hands again, and went on", echo the end of *Paradise Lost* when Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, "They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way". Such allusions again reinforce the expression of gloom and despair.

Our earlier distinction between internal and external perspectives on characters applies here. To the question "Why was Tess hanged?" the answer from the internal perspective is that she was convicted of Alec's murder. The answer from the external perspective is that this was the inevitable end of the tragic trajectory of Tess's life, from being raped by Alec as a girl, from being abandoned by the man she marries, Angel Clare, to being essentially imprisoned by Alec, from which she had no means of escape, to being confronted with Angel seeking to win her back. Throughout the novel there are intimations of the tragedy to come.

The relentless misery of the unfolding story and also the dark pessimistic philosophy underlying it (as surfaces in this passage) have been frequently criticized, including by contemporaries of Hardy's. The critic Lionel Johnson, writing in 1894, condemned Hardy's heavy handedness in over-stating his pessimism in the novel:

> Either the story should bear its own burden of spiritual sorrow, each calamity and woe crushing out of us all hope, by its own resistless weight: or the bitter sentences of comment should be lucid and cogent. But had Mr Hardy denied himself all commentary, and left the story to carry its own moral into our hearts; I doubt whether we should all have received quite the same moral. (Hardy 1979: 389)[5]

This is a comment largely about the novel's form: that the unremitting hopelessness driving the plot is hard to explain or justify, yet Hardy's attempt to inject his own pessimistic philosophy barely helps as it lacks lucidity and cogency. Fellow writers like Robert Louis Stevenson and Henry James also condemned the novel on similar grounds (Hardy 1979: 388).

The ending of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* serves not only to reinforce the pessimistic theme in the novel but to consolidate a growing sense of despair in a reader. What other response could there be to the end of Tess's tragic life in this lonely and macabre setting? This is

[5] Lionel Johnson, extract from The Art of Thomas Hardy (London, 1894).

the catharsis of tragedy. Our pity for Tess leaves as drained and exhausted, a state rather similar to that of Tess herself when the police finally catch up with her: "'It is as it should be,' she murmured. 'Angel, I am almost glad …I have had enough.'" (Hardy 1979: 328)

With the introduction of emotion, it is helpful to distinguish *felt* emotion and *expressed* emotion. The former encompasses any actual emotion felt by a reader, such as despair or desolation. These are real psychological states. In contrast are the emotions expressed in a narrative. These are a formal quality of the narrative itself, its expressiveness. They might coincide with corresponding psychological states, or be part of the cause of them, but they are not identical, being properties of a text not a mind. To identify an expressed emotion calls for aesthetic acuity in the reading and interpretative process, although in this case the expressed emotions are not hard to discern. Very often an emotion expressed in a narrative will be associated with a character whose words are the vehicle of the expression. However, in the passage under consideration, the expressed emotions are not attributed, at least directly, to any character. The observers are "speechless". The solemn gloominess and bitterness expressed in the passage show themselves in the fabric of the prose.

There is a connection between emotions—expressed in or caused by a narrative—and the moral judgments readers make about the narrative content, through attention to its form. The inclination to characterize an action or incident in moral terms—cruel, heartless, kind—is likely to be grounded in a recognition of emotions expressed or felt: outrage, anger, joy. There is no systematic relation between the two but at least one connection seems relevant, namely that the "thick" ethical concepts deployed in interpretation will bear a negative or positive valence. To describe an action as cruel is to judge it negatively and a corresponding negative emotion—anger, repulsion—will be a natural concomitant. Another connection might be this, that identifying the expressive character of a narrative passage is largely an aesthetic response (perhaps, but not necessarily, prompted by a psychological response, a felt emotion) and grounded in interpretation. Likewise, I have been arguing that characterising a passage in ethical terms, although having the appearance of a moral judgment, is itself more accurately described as an aesthetic judgment, again arising out of interpretation. And these acts of interpretation will not be unrelated.

6 Conclusion

Let me briefly assemble some conclusions. I have largely endorsed Eagleton's striking claim that "a work's moral outlook … may be secreted as much in its form as its content". But immediately the strikingness of the claim might seem weakened by my own qualified

endorsement of the inseparability of form and content in novels. Have we not just returned to moral content? The answer is: not quite.

First, the argument for form-content inseparability, as I have defended it, rests essentially on a mode of reading, which I have described as "opaque". Opaque reading involves close attention to the fine-grained form of a narrative. In contrast, "transparent" reading is satisfied with a looser, less text-bound, delineation of character and plot. My deliberate use of fairly long quotations in the examples is meant to highlight the importance of detail, where tone and connotation of phrases and sentences acquire salience. Content emerges out of this fine-grained detail. So, second, we are left with moral content not quite in the way that is normally conceived. On this conception moral content is woven into the very fabric of narrative description and this contrasts with a view of moral content resting on extractible truths or prescriptions.

When readers in the opaque mode imaginatively reconstruct character and incident out of the finer details of the narrative itself, this reconstruction, as we have seen, will often involve the use of an ethical vocabulary ostensibly taking the form of moral judgment. However, I have been urging that the passing moral judgments we make in a literary context—Lily's rudeness towards the charwoman, Henchard's cruel auctioning of his wife, the injustice of Tess's execution—can be seen, and should be seen in certain reading contexts, as having primarily an inward facing function, as part of an interpretative process, furthering an understanding of the characters and fitting their actions into a narrative pattern. From this perspective they become more like aesthetic judgments than purely moral ones. This would not be true if we were to think of the judgments from an outward facing perspective, in other words, pointing towards a derived moral prescription to be extracted from the work and applied to the world at large.

There are two ways we can think of the wrongness of Henchard's action: either as telling us something important about the character and how it sets him on the tragic trajectory of the novel; or as reminding us of the depravity of action of that kind, to be deplored in any real-life instantiation. The first of these is inward facing, fundamentally rooted in aesthetic judgment; the second is outward facing, rooted in moral prescription. No doubt we could accept both. I have no objection to readers using novels as primers for moral improvement. But I do not believe this is the most rewarding approach to works of literature, nor that such reductive didacticism does justice to the literary achievement attained in the canonical works. Its effectiveness will always be contingent on local dispositions of readers and is likely to arise from a transparent not a literary (or opaque) mode of reading.

What emerges from this picture is a kind of aesthetic autonomism, giving priority to

the aesthetic over the moral. The highlighting of form and finegrainedness in the reading process and the emphasis on the inward facing rather than outward facing role for ethics-centred interpretation both suggest that critical acuity (directed to appreciating a work of art) can matter more in reaping the rewards of literature than any search for moral insight. Furthermore, the focus on expressed rather than felt emotion under opaque reading also gives priority to the aesthetic, not in this case over the ethical, but over the psychological. That again reinforces the autonomist perspective.

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