

IN DEFENCE OF THE ETHICAL EVALUATION OF NARRATIVE ART

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I. INTRODUCTION

IN THIS paper I will evaluate two distinct models defending the ethical evaluation of narrative art—moderate moralism and ethicism. Both models can be defended against criticisms current in the philosophical literature but at some cost. Moreover, further considerations show both accounts to be deeply problematic. Nonetheless, I will argue, the insight that narratives are sometimes properly assessed as art in terms of their moral character can be adequately defended.

II. MODERATE MORALISM, ETHICISM, AND MODERATE AUTONOMISM

Moderate moralism, as proposed by Noël Carroll, holds that in some cases a moral defect in a work may count as an aesthetic one and sometimes a moral virtue may constitute an aesthetic virtue.¹ If a narrative fails to elicit the sought for emotional responses required to achieve its purposes then the narrative fails as art on its own terms. Hence such a failure is held to be an aesthetic failure. Many such failures are unrelated to moral considerations. But some such failures can be and sometimes are due to the moral perspective a narrative endorses. Hence moral features of a narrative can directly affect its value as art. So where the emotional responses a work needs to elicit in order to achieve its purposes are withheld or forthcoming from an audience due to the moral features of the work, then the work's aesthetic failure or success is an upshot of its moral character. For example, Carroll states that a tragedy with Hitler as the central character may fail where we refuse to share the defective moral perspective required to secure the response of pity.²

The central problem identified with this account is that the moral features of a

¹ See Noël Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1996), pp. 223–238, and his 'Moderate Moralism versus Moderate Autonomism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1998), pp. 419–424.

² Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', p. 234.

work *qua* moral features play no direct role here.³ Rather they are only significant in so far as they block an audience's actual responses to a work. Thus the relevance of moral features is established only as an indirect side effect of the primary aesthetic importance of absorption or engagement with a narrative. What counts is whether a narrative is engaging or not, and this is an aesthetic matter—whether it solicits a defective moral perspective or not is a conceptually separate matter.

We can draw out the nature of this criticism by considering the following point. Objects can have multiple aims. A gun, for example, can be made both to function well as a gun and to be highly decorative. Now in certain cases it may be that the overly elaborate nature of the decoration may impair the ability of the gun to function as a gun—the baroque decoration may weigh the object down too heavily, the detail may stop the mechanism from working properly, and so on. But this does not show that as such the nature of the decoration is relevant to evaluating the nature of the object *qua* gun. All it shows is that sometimes other aspects of the object may impinge upon its capacity to function in this way. It is not internal to the nature and evaluation of an object *qua* gun that decoration as such be taken into account.

A second criticism relies on pointing out that many audiences are capable of and often do become wholly absorbed in narratives we take to have a morally defective character.⁴ This may be because they share the defective perspective themselves or because they are at least prepared to entertain it for the sake of engaging with the narrative. According to moderate moralism, it looks as if the morally defective features of a work would be irrelevant in such cases since they do not actually block an audience's engagement with it. Thus, again, moral features of a work play no direct role in the evaluation of a narrative as art.

Indeed, one might go further and point out that, if Carroll's account were to be taken as predicating the relevance of a work's moral features to its aesthetic value on what is descriptively true of audience response, his account would be even more problematic—it would entail a crude relativism concerning the value of a narrative as art which would fluctuate according to different audience responses.

Lastly, a narrative may fail to elicit the sought for affective responses in its audience in a way which improves rather than lessens the value of a narrative as art. Imagine a didactic writer who aims to elicit responses of admiration for poor people as such, on the basis that poor people are necessarily honest, and disdain for rich people as such, on the basis that the materially well off are necessarily morally corrupt. In writing the novel the didactic author unintentionally renders some of the central characters in a more complex fashion than is consistent with

³ James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean, 'Moderate Autonomism', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 38, no. 2 (1998), pp. 150–166.

⁴ Anderson and Dean, 'Moderate Autonomism'; James Harold, 'Moralism and Autonomism', delivered at the Central Division Meeting of the APA, Chicago, April 2000.

her aims—some of the poor characters seem devious and scheming whilst some of the rich characters seem altruistically motivated and sympathetic. Now the didactic novel fails to achieve its aim of conveying the notion that elevated material status necessarily corrupts moral character because it fails to elicit the sought for responses. But it fails because the responses the work does elicit are more complex, sophisticated, and less sentimental than those it sought to evoke. So in this case the work's failure to achieve its aim by not eliciting the sought for responses constitutes an improvement rather than a diminution of the work's value. In virtue of the way the work fails on its own terms *qua* didactic novel, it may be of greater value *qua* narrative art than it would have been had it succeeded in realizing its didactic aim.

However, at various points Carroll suggests that his account should not be construed in terms of whether an actual audience's responses are psychologically blocked but, rather, in terms of how a morally sensitive ideal or decent audience would respond. Hence Carroll states that 'a moral defect can count as an aesthetic defect even if it does not undermine appreciation by actual audiences so long as it has the counterfactual capacity to undermine the intended response of morally sensitive audiences'.⁵ Thus Carroll's argument may properly be construed in normative rather than descriptive terms. At one point Carroll suggests that this seems to dovetail neatly with an argument for ethicism articulated by Berys Gaut.⁶ Gaut's argument, in summary form, is as follows.

Where the content of a work prescribes affective responses toward the events as represented, they are intrinsically tied to a work's value as art. Narratives can fail to elicit such affective responses because they are not merited by the characters or states of affairs as represented. In other words, we do not believe that the state of affairs as represented to us warrants the endorsement of the evaluation prescribed by the work, hence we believe the response it seeks from us is unmerited. Where the merited response comes apart from the prescribed response, in this respect, the work is a failure. In some cases the relevant criteria of evaluation will include ethical ones. Just as a horror movie may fail to scare us because the character as represented is not scary, so too a work that prescribes us to pity a vicious character may fail because, due to his vicious actions as represented, we believe him to be unworthy of pity.

Now if Carroll's argument, construed in terms of morally sensitive audiences,

⁵ Carroll, 'Moderate Moralism', p. 234.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237, n. 11. See Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', delivered at the 1994 American Society for Aesthetics national conference and later published in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), pp. 182–203. Gaut claims that such evaluation extends over all art and Jerrold Levinson, 'Evaluating Music', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, no. 198 (1996), pp. 597–600, makes suggestive remarks in this regard concerning music. However, I will restrict my considerations to the evaluations of narratives as art since it is the paradigm test case and one may think that certain considerations germane to narrative art may not arise in relation to abstract art or pure music.

collapses into Gaut's ethicism then moderate moralism is not really that moderate. For it follows that all moral flaws in a work will constitute aesthetic flaws. A morally sensitive audience will always be repelled by prescriptions to assent to moral vice or dissent from moral virtue—in other words, appropriate moral characterization promotes aesthetic absorption and inappropriate moral characterization hinders it.⁷ Thus the assimilation of moderate moralism to ethicism brings with it the cost of making moral considerations, wherever they bear on the responses prescribed by a work, always relevant rather than only being sometimes relevant.

However, to some at least, the benefits of such an assimilation may seem to outweigh the costs. Given that what matters is whether the responses prescribed by the work are merited or not, the problem concerning the novel which fails in its didactic aims in virtue of eliciting more complex, sophisticated, and less sentimental responses does not arise. For independently of what the multiple aims of the work are, what we are evaluating is whether the characters and states of affairs as represented merit certain responses. As long as the sought for responses are merited and cohere, the work will be a success *qua* narrative art. Furthermore, morally defective audiences responding as solicited by a work to a morally defective perspective in no way affect the value of the work as art. For, on this account, the point is that the audience is not merited in responding as they do. Such responses merely reflect the moral defectiveness of the audience. The value of *Triumph of the Will* as art, for example, is lessened by virtue of soliciting admiration for that which should be condemned independently of whether an actual audience does respond in the manner solicited.

Lastly, ethicism, as formulated by Gaut, explicitly embraces cognitivism about artistic value.⁸ Apart from the narrowly aesthetic values of art, such as beauty, elegance, and grace, we aesthetically value cognitive aspects of a work, such as the insight afforded or its expression of emotions. Of course, not all cognitive aspects of a work are relevant to its value as art. Hence merely adding a list of true propositions to the end of a work will not enhance its value as art. But the relevance criterion which specifies when and where the cognitive aspects of a work are relevant to its value as art, as articulated by Gaut, concerns the emotional responses prescribed by a work. Hence whether the responses are merited or not is directly relevant to its value as art. In some cases, as stated above, this will necessarily involve moral evaluations about the states of affairs as represented to us. Hence ethicism affords a direct link between the moral character of a work, via the sought for emotional responses, and its value as art.

However, the assimilation of moderate moralism to ethicism diminishes the

⁷ See Oliver Conolly, 'Ethicism and Moderate Moralism', *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 40, no. 3 (2000), pp. 302–316, for a more detailed development of this point.

⁸ Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), p. 183.

appeal of the claim that the moral character of a work affects its aesthetic value. Firstly, ethicism explicitly depends upon embracing a cognitivist account of the value of art.⁹ Yet this is precisely what moderate autonomists and sophisticated aestheticists are at pains to deny. Paradigmatically moderate autonomism and sophisticated aestheticism hold that a work's moral character can affect its artistic value, as an indirect side effect, if and only if it mars or promotes a work's aesthetically valuable features such as its coherence, complexity, intensity, or quality of dramatic development.¹⁰

On this kind of view we must be very careful to keep distinct the fictive, literary, and moral aspects of a work. A work's fictional status has no direct relation to its artistic value nor does the moral character of a work, though the latter may explain why we think certain kinds of literature, such as tragedy, are worth attending to. It is only the literary or artistic aspect of the narrative, principally in terms of the narrative's development, which realizes a work's artistic value. Hence to criticize a narrative on the grounds that its theme or moral characterization is inappropriate or false is irrelevant to its value as art. But if a theme is not of human interest, if it is badly or incoherently developed, both of which may be indirectly affected by the moral character of a work, then the work's value as art is significantly lessened. Whether an artwork conforms to what we believe to be the case, affords us insight into the way the world is, or solicits what the appropriate response would be in the real world is, as such, external to the value of a work as art. Thus for anyone with such leanings, ethicism has little pull since they will not grant a major premise in Gaut's argument. Carroll's moderate moralism, by contrast, attempts to show how moral evaluation may sometimes be directly relevant to a work's value as art without having to appeal to cognitivism—it is just a matter of whether one can be absorbed by a work in order for it to succeed in realizing its aims.

This leads us into a second worry concerning ethicism. To hold that the moral aspects of any work, where it is related to our prescribed emotional responses, will always figure in our evaluation of the work as art seems overly strong.

First, we tend to distinguish between the essential and incidental character of a work. For example, imagine a novel where one of the central characters is

⁹ Cognitivist accounts of the value of art can be found in Hilary Putnam, 'Literature, Science and Reflection', *New Literary History*, vol. 7 (1975–6), pp. 483–492, included in his *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1978), Martha Nussbaum, 'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Literature and the Moral Imagination', in her *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1990), pp. 148–167, and Richard Eldridge, *On Moral Personhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Sophisticated aestheticism is at least implicit in Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), is argued for by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 255–456, and is explicitly articulated in relation to moral considerations by Peter Lamarque, 'Tragedy and Moral Value', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1995), pp. 239–249.

portrayed as being casually anti-Semitic but this plays no significant role in the story or thematic development of the book (which is not too far removed from some of Dorothy L. Sayers's thrillers). The novel prescribes us to admire the character and respond with affection towards him. According to ethicism we ought to withhold our admiration and affection, at least to the extent we believe such a view to be immoral and this qualifies our admiration and affection for anyone who holds such views. Thus the value of the work is lessened in this regard. Yet, given that the morally dubious aspect of the central character plays no essential role, it is hard to see why this feature should play any role in our evaluation at all. We can and often do pay little attention to features of a work which have no significant bearing upon the central point and purpose of a work.

Secondly, there is an important difference between narrative art which merely seeks to entertain, and may thus qualify as good narrative art since it does so well, and serious narrative art which seeks to inform our understanding of the world. In engaging with something as merely entertaining narrative art we are only instrumentally concerned with its relations to the world. Hence, in purely entertaining narrative art, as long as the main plot devices are coherent and consistent with the rest of the narrative they are not subject to any further assessment in terms of what they significantly imply concerning our understanding of the world. We do not, for example, fail to respond to John Woo's action thriller *Face/Off* on the grounds that the main plotting device, whereby characters' faces can be cut off and transplanted seamlessly onto the face of another, would be impossible. For it is merely a device used in order to get the plot going and no significant understanding of the world is thereby implied. Similarly, consider the comedy film *Addicted to Love*. The basic plot device of the film is that the two characters, played by Matthew Broderick and Meg Ryan, spy on their respectively estranged partners seeking revenge—only to fall in love themselves. To criticize the film because it prescribes us to accept and gleefully indulge in laughing at the malicious pranks and attitudes of the two main characters is irrelevant to its value as entertaining narrative art. For the morally dubious aspect is merely a device which enables the narrative to draw our interest in and entertain us. We are not meant to take it seriously as implying any significant understanding of the acceptable mores of spurned lovers in the real world. As such, the moral character of the sought for responses are not subject to the same kind of criticism we would make were the film striving to be a work of serious narrative art.

Thirdly, there is something overly restrictive about being required to respond emotionally to artworks only in the ways we take to be merited. Thus, each and every time our emotional responses to a work come apart from what we take to be good and right, the work is taken to be flawed in that respect. Yet part of the value of engaging with artworks seems to derive from the peculiarly powerful ways in which they can get us to entertain or imagine different possibilities. There are many responses narratives elicit from us which we judge in actuality

to be unmerited but which we nonetheless find intelligible—a matter which concerns not what the correct moral perspective is or should be but how the moral perspective could have been or could be seen to be. The responses solicited by *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, depend upon entertaining the moral perspective of Catholicism, but this does not nor should it preclude atheists from responding to the novel appropriately since they are nonetheless capable of entertaining the perspective to the extent they find it intelligible. Similarly J. G. Ballard's *Crash* may not only successfully prescribe imaginings about characters who are driven by an auto-erotic fixation upon technology and violence but may also get us to respond in ways concomitant with such an attitude. If one holds a standard conception of sexual desire, one will take such responses to be unmerited. But it is a mark of the novel's success rather than failure that it renders such responses intelligible through evoking them in the reader even though we may take such responses to be, in actuality, unmerited. What is crucial is whether the moral perspective or features of the novel as represented are rendered intelligible in order to successfully elicit the prescribed emotional responses. Indeed, many art works of the past, not to say many contemporary works, have moral aspects which we believe to be at best partially if not downright wrong. From Homer's poetry and the Icelandic sagas, which prescribe admiration for certain heroic virtues at odds with an emphasis on forgiveness and mercy, to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, which at least in part prescribe disdain for traditional sexual morality, many works successfully get us to imagine what we take to be, in real life, unmerited and yet we take this as a mark of their success, their imaginative power, rather than think lesser of them for it. For what matters is not straightforwardly a question of whether the work conforms to what we take to be right or good in real life but, rather, whether we find the characters and states of affairs as represented intelligible or not.

Lastly, the scope of the proposed relevance criterion is too narrow. Although affective responses are sometimes an important aspect of our engagement with narrative art, they are far from the only thing essential to it. 'Affect' here does not merely mean the phenomenological elements which may be incorporated when, say, one has an imaginative experience such as entertaining what it would be like to see Westminster Cathedral from a particular viewpoint or entertaining the belief that humankind is intrinsically good. Rather, more substantively, it is constituted by the phenomenology of feeling concomitant with the cognitive judgement one is prescribed to make regarding the fictional state of affairs.¹¹ Yet we often evaluate images, thoughts, and judgements lacking affective aspects which narratives prescribe us to entertain. For example, given we are dealing with naturalism, Zola's imagery and descriptions characterizing the working

¹¹ Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', pp. 192–197, and confirmed to me by Gaut in correspondence.

conditions of the miners in *Germinal* are to be praised for their mimetic aspect. Were his descriptions distinctly at odds with the kinds of conditions miners were then working under, we would consider the imaginative experience conjured up by the novel in this respect to be significantly flawed. Conversely much of Mary Webb's *oeuvre*, portraying English country life as one of minor struggle and idyllic bliss, is open to criticism just in virtue of its implausible idealization of country life. Hence Webb's rustic naïvity was so successfully satirized by Stella Gibbon's *Cold Comfort Farm*. Similarly a realist narrative may prescribe me to imagine its black characters as intrinsically ape-like, as contrasted with 'truly human' Caucasians, as a reflection of their lower moral character. It may not seek to elicit any particular emotional response to them as such—that is just the way they imaginatively 'are'. However, we may find it difficult to imagine them as prescribed because we find it unintelligible as to why we should consider them in this way. This is a matter which is prior to, and independent of, any further particular affective responses I may or may not go on to have in my engagement with the work, i.e. we need not avert to any affective responses further down the line in order to identify what is problematic about such a narrative.

Furthermore, one central aspect of narratives which often involve no prescribed affective response concerns asides to the audience or reader. Commentaries by the chorus in Greek tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* constitute substantial parts of the plays themselves and serve to direct the audience's understanding of the meaning of the narrative. A similar role is often performed in modern plays by declarations, asides, summaries, and even soliloquies to inform the audience of the nature of the underlying themes, action, and aspects of character that would otherwise remain indeterminate. In the novelistic tradition of Fielding, Austen, and Dickens, authorial asides, ranging from self-conscious critical commentary to general statements of the form 'as Burke once said all that is required for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing', constitute an integral part of a narrative's character. Dialogue and even whole scenes which are redundant in terms of the audience's affective responses are often essential in order to articulate and convey ideas and beliefs that the audience must entertain in order to apprehend the imaginative experience afforded and are properly evaluated as such. Even epigraphs, such as Eliot's quotation from Petronius' *Satyricon* prefacing *The Wasteland*, sometimes constitute an integral part of a narrative in fixing the allusions and meaning of the work.

III. MOST MODERATE MORALISM

In the light of the above considerations I would like to propose the following revision to moderate moralism.¹²

¹² I am not as such disavowing ethicism nor the cognitive account of the value of art on which it depends. Hence my argument is not inconsistent with what I have argued elsewhere in, for

The moral features implicit in and central to the imaginative experience afforded by a work are relevant to a narrative's value as art to the extent that they undermine or promote the intelligibility, with respect to appropriately sensitive audiences, of the characters, events, and states of affairs as represented.

There are five crucial points to note about this proposal.

1. The first point ties in with standard forms of critical evaluation of narratives as art as ridiculous, implausible, unintelligible, or improbable in relation to how a character, events, or states of affairs are characterized.

When we think of works whose value is often taken to be marred in some way by their moral character we tend to think of works like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, in terms of its sentimentality toward the poor by representing them as necessarily honest, or Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, or D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, in terms of their racism. If we consider common criticisms of these works, by professional critics and ordinary appreciators alike, some of their flaws are identified in terms of the ridiculousness or unintelligibility of their moral character. This is despite the positive contributions of these problematic elements to their respective thematic developments in achieving aesthetic unity and coherence. Hence, for example, George Orwell criticizes Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter* on the grounds that Scobie's actions as represented involve the sacrifice of everything that is humanly good for the sake of what he takes the requirements of God, as understood by Roman Catholicism, to be. The novel prescribes a certain kind of pity and admiration for Scobie. Orwell's criticism, however, is not based on the claim that he should not respond as prescribed because the emotional responses are unmerited. Rather, he cannot take the novel seriously or respond to the novel as prescribed because he finds the moral psychology as characterized ridiculous and the moral requirements as characterized unintelligible.¹³ After all, adequacy to standard critical practice is at least a *prima facie* marker of the appropriateness of any account.¹⁴

example, 'Art, Imagination and the Cultivation of Morals', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 4 (1996), pp. 337–351. However, in the argumentative dialectic I think the proposed reformulation of moderate moralism is the most compelling since it retains the broadest appeal, i.e. those who are sceptical about or reject cognitivism should nonetheless accept most moderate moralism.

¹³ George Orwell, 'Review of Graham Greene's *Heart of the Matter*', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds), *The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), pp. 439–443.

¹⁴ Indeed, the self-professed reliance of Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, on adequacy to standard critical practice renders the basis of their account somewhat problematic in this regard.

2. The criterion of relevance, what is central to the imaginative experience afforded by a work, includes but is broader than that of affective response.

It is important to recognize that we can and do evaluate the prescribed images, descriptions, authorial asides, and commentaries of a work, in so far as they develop or shed light on what is central to the imaginative experience afforded, even where they may not be designed to elicit any affective response whatsoever.

3. The quality of the imaginative experience afforded by a narrative concerns its value as art and is, in part, a function of how intelligible that experience is. Intelligibility is thus internal to the evaluation of a work as art.

Intelligibility here is not merely to be cashed out in terms of the coherence and consistency of the imagery, description, thoughts, and affective responses sought. If this were all that were meant then the position would merely be a variant of moderate autonomism or sophisticated aestheticism. Intelligibility further concerns how plausible or psychologically probable, informative, explanatory, or insightful the understanding afforded through the imaginative experience is held to be. The recognition that this is so is an upshot of at least the following two considerations.

First, appraisals of the imaginative realization of a narrative as banal, implausible, trivial, shallow or profound, significant, subtle, insightful, and nuanced are not wholly specifiable without appeal to considerations of explanatory informativeness. This is not to reduce the question to considerations of truth, hence the proposal does not presuppose cognitivism.¹⁵ For many narratives explore issues such as free will, and whether works endorse or reject the notion, such as Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* and, conversely, Kafka's *The Trial*, is less important than the way the vision is developed.¹⁶ Nonetheless, in order for the vision to be well developed it must be done so intelligibly.

Consider Lars von Trier's *The Idiots*. The film follows a group of middle class twenty- to thirty-somethings who pretend to be mentally handicapped, often going on 'spassing' outings. The film is coherent and consistent in its development of events and the relationships of the characters involved. However, the group's self-avowed motivation for their actions is not that they 'spass' just for fun (which they recognize would be bad, thus implying that they would not do it merely for that reason) but because in some way 'spassing' enables them to get in touch with their true selves (their 'inner idiot') in some sub-Rousseauesque way.

¹⁵ Berys Gaut, *Philosophical Review*, vol. 105, no. 1 (1996), pp. 84–86, and Jerrold Levinson, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. LVII, no. 4 (1997), pp. 964–968, both of which are reviews of Lamarque and Olsen's *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, tie such considerations to the concept of truth. But, for the reasons given above, this strikes me as too quick.

¹⁶ I owe this point to Peter Lamarque.

Now, at least to the extent that it remains mysterious why anyone would intelligibly think that ‘spassing’ could achieve any such thing, the imaginative experience afforded by the film is radically diminished. It is a failure of the narrative as such not to render intelligible why the characters as represented might plausibly hold the beliefs and motivating desires they do. Thus one cannot appeal to appraisals concerned with the quality of imaginative realization divorced entirely from considerations of intelligibility. Once one eliminates all considerations of intelligibility from all contexts where appraisals are involved, many of the most basic critical evaluations we make of narratives as art are rendered baseless.

Secondly, the sharp separation between the quality of the imaginative experience and considerations such as plausibility, explanatoriness, and insight cannot be supported if we consider what it is for something to be valuable as great narrative art. A narrative is something that, via the imaginative experience afforded, intelligibly connects a series of events and characters over time in terms of how they are to be understood and their significance. Good narrative art does so artfully in a reasonably intelligent and absorbing fashion—it constitutes a tale well told. Run-of-the-mill thrillers, romances, and literary entertainments can all be absorbing and entertaining, but we would not typically consider them to be candidates for great narrative art. Great narrative art aims to deepen our appreciation of how the kinds of characters, states of affairs, and events as represented to us should or could intelligibly be understood.

This explains why most works in certain narrative genres are not really candidates for great narrative art, ranging from detective to historical or fantasy novels, such as works by Agatha Christie, Catherine Cookson, or Tolkien, to even self-consciously literary novels, such as the work of Anthony Powell or P. G. Wodehouse. Moreover, it also explains how certain works in such genres can transcend their standard limitations. For example, some of P. D. James’s detective novels or Conrad’s earlier adventure stories, in their thematic development, are concerned with cultivating our understanding of how human nature might intelligibly be seen. For the imaginative experience afforded the reader is not merely instrumental in moving the plot forward but affords insight into how and why the characters as represented feel and act the way they do. Two narratives may display the same artistry and may be equally absorbing, but where one does so merely to entertain and one does so in order to deepen our understanding then we consider the latter to be a more valuable or greater work as narrative art.

4. We should recognize that the way in which characters and events are represented affects how intelligible or otherwise we will find the imaginative experience afforded by the work to be.

One cannot sharply separate off whether a work deepens our understanding, in terms of the intelligibility of the characters, events, and putative relations to our world, from questions concerning its artistry, the way in which it entertains us

and the extent to which we may find it deeply absorbing. There are many ways in which this is so but I will merely mention three.

First, genre constraints play a significant role. The intelligibility of a narrative in part rests upon a tacit background assumption that, *ceteris parabis*, the author and reader assume that the fictional world is in rich and complex ways much like the actual world. What genre a narrative is in will rightly affect the ways in which this background assumption operates. It would be silly to question the transparency of characters' inner thoughts in works of psychological realism, or the transportation across time and space in magic realism, or bemoan the happy ending as implausible in a fairy story or condemn as gratuitous the mournful fate of the central character in a tragedy. Alexander Mackendrick's Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*, for example, is a black comedy where a series of murders is treated as a huge joke. But it would be foolish to condemn it for treating life with contempt, for the point in no way concerns how we ought to view murder as hilarious. The murders are a pretext for the comedy, which lies in the fanciful old lady much given to bothering the police with reports of possible criminal activity housing a lodger who plans an armed robbery. What genre a work is in will itself affect when, where, and why questions of intelligibility and plausibility arise.

Secondly, even within genre constraints, what the putative relations are between the narrative and the real world will affect how intelligible the work is. Consider two works of science fiction in which there are several classes of people ranging from the superhuman to the subhuman. In one this is to be understood as one of the ways in which this fictional world is very different from the real world. In the other, however, this is portrayed as a projection of our world and the inevitable upshot of natural selection. Questions of intelligibility arise in the latter case, where they do not in the former, if we think it highly questionable that natural selection would necessarily lead to any such thing.

In a different genre, consider William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. The narrative concerns the murder of a white man in the deep south of the USA. An elderly black farmer is the obvious culprit and is arrested with the evident threat of summary lynching hanging over him. The central protagonist is a young white boy who repays an old debt by proving the black farmer's innocence. The thrilling twists and turns of the narrative add up to an enjoyable and highly suspenseful thriller. However, threaded through the novel, and in parts articulated by the moral polemicizing of one of the boy's uncles, the view emerges in the novel that the south should resist meddling from the north over negro rights allied with the notion that it is racial integrity or the lack of it which shapes distinct moral characters. Thus we have both an articulation of the way in which the nature and significance of the narrative is supposed to stand in close relation to the real world and, moreover, the implication that in both the world of the fiction and the actual world racial integrity in part explains moral character. At least to the extent we judge such a racial view of moral psychology hard to credit

we will find part of the imaginative experience afforded by the work implausible—for the representation of why certain characters are the way they are will be less than fully intelligible.

Thirdly, the sheer artistry and expressiveness of a work may enable us to entertain thoughts, attitudes, and responses we might otherwise have considered unintelligible. For example, whether J. G. Ballard's *Crash* is a good novel or not depends upon whether it not only successfully prescribes imaginings about characters who are driven by an auto-erotic fixation upon technology and violence but also gets us to respond in ways concomitant with such an attitude. This is something, at least for many, which would normally seem unintelligible. But, at least to the extent the work succeeds, this is a mark of the novel's success rather than failure—that it renders such responses intelligible through evoking them in the reader even though we may take such responses to be, in actuality, unmerited. What is crucial is whether the perspective or features of the novel as represented are rendered intelligible in order to successfully elicit the prescribed imaginings and emotional responses.

5. The proposal retains the original attraction of moderate moralism, namely its moderateness, whilst bypassing the problems adduced above.

The criterion of relevance with respect to a narrative's value as art concerns the intelligibility of the imaginative experience afforded by a work. As argued above, this is a criterion that moderate autonomists and sophisticated aestheticists should accept. In many cases lack of intelligibility will have nothing to do with the moral features of a work, but in some cases it will. Where a work is essentially concerned with moral features, attitudes, and perspectives, moral considerations are internally related to considerations of intelligibility. Furthermore, that the moral perspective of a work may be defective, in the sense of unmerited, is not relevant, but whether it is intelligible or not is. If it is unintelligible, or to the extent that it is, then the work fails to make sense. Hence we cannot be fully engaged by it. Thus the moral perspective of a work may sometimes contribute to or lessen its overall value as art. Some moral features of a work will concern the intelligibility of the moral perspective and others may concern whether the perspective is merited or not. The former are aesthetically relevant whilst the latter are not.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I would like to thank Noël Carroll, Berys Gaut, Peter Lamarque, Jerry Levinson, Derek Matravers, David Novitz, Nick Zangwill, and colleagues in my department for comments which have helped to improve this paper. Different versions of this paper, or parts thereof, were presented whilst I was a visiting fellow at Rhodes University, South Africa, at the British Society of Aesthetics annual conference, the Philosophy Department, University of Liverpool, and in reply to James Harold's 'Moralism and Autonomism', Central Division Meeting of the APA, Chicago. I am very grateful to those who raised points in the various discussions.