

Lee Clark Mitchell
Princeton University, USA

DOES READING GOOD BOOKS MAKE US BETTER?

Abstract. The long-standing debate over the ethical value of literature has never been satisfactorily resolved. Those in favor of reading classic texts from an ethical perspective often have trouble stating precisely what is at stake, precisely because the literary qualities of a text regularly draw us away from moral to aesthetic considerations. That tension between the ethical and the literary lies at the heart of our most sustained reading experiences.

It once was thought (for many centuries) that reading “the good book” was a prerequisite to behaving well. And while the Bible was honored as a sacred and didactic text long before it became “literature,” there is a sense in which its special mix – moral content expressed in high style – became the measure by which texts are judged to be not just literature but themselves “good books”. That premise, once a given, was radically revised in the past century, with objections taking two forms. Those who believe “beauty is truth” argue that great literature is salutary *because* of its aesthetic play. Others simply deny that aesthetic play has anything to do with ethics. The former argue literature is an enchanted art that plays out human possibilities within ethical constraints, even as it allows aesthetic qualities to shape one’s sense of truth. The latter argue literature is nothing other than configured words, more akin to painting, music or dance than to philosophy. The two sides could hardly be better parodied than they are in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, which famously opens with a preface by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., announcing:

more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic

mother, the panting maniac – these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. ‘Lolita’ should make all of us – parents, social workers, educators – apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (5-6)

Some hundreds of pages later, this fictional preface is countered by Nabokov’s putatively *soi-disant* afterward, in which he protests that:

despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas. (314-15)

The two viewpoints prove caricatures of positions taken ever since. Twenty years after *Lolita*, John Gardner asked “what has gone wrong with criticism” and answered that it was a failure to realize that “true art is moral”. True art “seeks to improve life, not debase it”. (5) More recently, William Bennett compiled *The Book of Virtues*, subtitled *A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, “intended to aid in the time-honored task of the moral education of the young”. Speaking up for “moral literacy,” Bennett argues that we need “to show parents, teachers, students, and children what the virtues look like, what they are in practice, how to recognize them, and how they work.” (11-12)

John Ray, Jr., M.D. would have loved that. Yet before dismissing Bennett, we should acknowledge that his response to literature had a well-respected pedigree up until forty-odd years ago. F. R. Leavis, after all, devised a “great tradition” of the English novel wholly contingent on moral preoccupations. That Leavis’s actual readings of Austin, Eliot, James, and Conrad were insubstantial did little to detract from his conception of the novelist as someone who “admired truthfulness and chastity and industry and self-restraint, [and] disapproved of loose living and recklessness and deceit and self-indulgence.” (23) This novelistic stance seemed to Leavis so “favourable to the production of great literature” that he even argued English was Conrad’s language of choice “because of the moral tradition associated with it”. (27)

Leavis' successor in this line was Lionel Trilling, a more nuanced thinker for whom novels were "the most effective agent of the moral imagination". Their greatness as an art "lay in [the] unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it. It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety". (221-2) This expression of a "liberal imagination" sustained a generation of critics, even in the face of such notorious ripostes as Nabokov's that "literature consists, in fact, not of general ideas but of particular revelations, not of schools of thought but of individuals of genius . . . [L]et us remember that literature is of no practical value whatsoever, except in the very special case of somebody's wishing to become, of all things, a professor of literature". (*Lectures* 116, 125) As he added, mocking Trilling's humanism: "Only children can be excused for identifying themselves with the characters in a book". (150) Well, Nabokov always found his high horse tethered conveniently nearby, but the question of psychological projection and identification cannot be simply dismissed by declaring it puerile.

In the 1960s, criticism took a turn from Trillingsque liberalism to considerations more strongly formalist *and* more narrowly social. As we have lurched from structuralism to post-structuralism to New Historicism, literary interpretation has been braided together with a search for the cultural and political significance of fictional works, even if the two activities sit uneasily together. For decades, readings that readily gain an academic hearing have come to seem radically unlike: one sort assesses a text in terms of the pleasure principle (delighting in its formal design), while the other looks to a reality principle (alert to a text's secret patterns of power, exclusion, and surveillance). The more traditional idea that literature does embody social meanings – not surreptitiously, but openly in order to teach the general reader, or to provide broad ethical guidance, or to offer models for civic behavior – has come to seem a quaint and bankrupt enterprise.

Perhaps that has is not all to the bad. After all, given how often complex texts were presented as a calculus of interest and sacrifice that reduced their brilliant *textuality* (rhetoric, narrative, even sheer sound) to simple moral algorithms, one can understand the allergic reaction and recoil. But there has been a loss, and the fascinations of ethical questions in literary texts have refused to slumber indefinitely. Recently, readers have become more open about a practice that never really waned, despite Nabokov's fierce adjurations. For literature does engage us in ethical

considerations willy-nilly, if only because its frothy concoctions present even the most outlandish of fictional figures acting in ways we quietly approve or disapprove. We can try to avoid that engagement, but for those drawn to understanding it, the issue becomes simply this: how does one invoke the ethical domain without becoming reductive? How can we find nuances beyond the precept invoked by Martha Nussbaum, that novels worth reading “are written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion, and [therefore] involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling”? (48) So broad a prescription begs more questions than it answers, not least why we should then want to read novels or poems at all, rather than particularly well-written philosophy. And the hardest question of all remains: is there room at this table for Nabokov’s “aesthetic bliss”?

Among the messier proving grounds for such questions is the pressure to think of what to say to undergraduates, who almost always want to treat textual characters as culpable people, independent of any fancy literary strategies that put them there on the page. Invariably, students start by rejecting an association of literature with the more abstract, apparently non-representational arts like music or dance. Yet treating novels that way, as they soon realize, makes the whole array of literature’s characters finally too much the same, archetypal citizens of a uniform fictional universe. Making Falstaff half-brother to Oedipa Maas, or either even distantly related to Ahab, is to reduce each to something less than they so distinctly are as creatures of Shakespeare’s or Pynchon’s or Melville’s imagined world. The idiosyncratic diction, the stilted syntax, the lush grammar of an author’s creation is what commands attention to the gestures, talents and feelings his characters display. Favored moments in literature occur not as philosophical set-pieces removed from the exact twists and turns of their formation, but as emblems of both certain kinds of actions and the certain kinds of narratives that bring them to life. Here, then, is a first nuance: we read literature ethically *because* we read aesthetically, delighting in moral dilemmas that engage us by the very textual terms in which they are presented.

Pause over some favored moments of mine: Henry Adams recalling himself as a boy vehemently opposed to attending school, being walked by his aged grandfather, the former President John Quincy Adams, down a long dusty road to the schoolhouse, silently, patiently, irrevocably: “this act, contrary to the inalienable rights of boys, and nullifying the social compact, ought to have made him dislike his grandfather for life”. (13) But it didn’t, even if his grandfather seemed “a tool of tyranny”. The

exorbitant tone, the melodramatic staging, the quiet resolve, are not only part of Adams' continuing outsized bewilderment through *The Education* at a world gone horribly awry, but as well a self-deflating account that captures the need for stalwart resolution even in matters so juvenile.

Or consider Cash Bundren responding in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* to a question about his broken leg – "How far'd you fall Cash?" "Twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches, about" (90) – illustrating an absurd meticulousness that nonetheless allows him to control the grief at his mother's death by giving it a form, unlike his brother Darl, who simply goes mad.

Or consider the blithe lawyer in Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener", bewildered in the face of a recalcitrant employee, blind to the limits of his own benevolence as he recalls Christ's injunction to love one another: "Yes, this it was that saved me. Aside from higher considerations charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle – a great safeguard to its possessor". (88) So calmly intoned a trust in prudence is undermined for the reader in its very expression, and offers scant comfort in the face of Bartleby's radical challenge to the limits of Christian charity.

Or consider the scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, when the slave Sixo explains why he walks thirty miles each night to visit his love: "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order". In a world that denies the slave bodily possession of himself, where houses magically come alive and ghosts return full-bodied from the past, Sixo's characterization of himself as "the pieces I am" (272) now gathered in bonds of affection offers chattel slavery its most profound refutation.

Or one last scene: Isabel Archer's return to Gardencourt at the end of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, standing in the same room she stood in when the novel began seven years before, "nervous and scared – as scared as if the objects about her had begun to show for conscious things, watching her trouble with grotesque grimaces". (614) Curiously, James complements Morrison's vision of a world animated by one's own enslaved diminishment, even though the intonations, the setting, the transformation Isabel imagines are each characteristically different for the two authors, and for the characters they create.

These moments resonate for reasons having as much to do with their specific textualized form as with the ostensible pre-diegetic scene lurking somehow beyond diction and syntax. Before awarding Nabokov a gold medal, however, it is worth remembering the powerful undergraduate

bias that assumes reading is charged with assessing actions, with exploring the ethical implications of making a certain choice. The plastic arts (painting, photography, architecture) rarely require that of us, and certainly not with the same force or terrible detail. Instrumental music cannot pose dilemmas or solicit judgments (even if some claim otherwise). This is rather the province of philosophy or history or law, each of which engages aspects of what humans might do, or have done. The only arts that consistently bridge a divide between human form and human choice (in the process inciting a schizophrenic response) are literary. Even works that try deliberately to avoid ethical scrutiny – *Sister Carrie*, say, or *Waiting for Godot* – force us to reconsider why their fictional characters should *not* be questioned about what we persist in assuming are “their” choices. Ethics keeps blundering in, which may be unavoidable. But that is not to agree that either John Gardner or William Bennett offer satisfactory models in their requirement that literature provide moral reassurance. At a minimum, literary works would seem to pose unsettling questions about ethical categories. But while this may be a more nuanced approach, is it enough? For even in interpretations approaching this skeptical mode, the actual payoff with practitioners of an “ethics of reading” tends to be long on ethical claims, short on attentiveness to specific aesthetic wonders.

So is there room at the table for aesthetic wonder? For George Steiner, they seem to occupy every seat, though his objection to mere ethics takes an idiosyncratic form. Forty years ago he argued that an ethics of reading was a bankrupt idea, a will-of-the-wisp for intellectuals long before Matthew Arnold made the case for “the best that has been thought and said”. Steiner, troping Arnold, contended that the Holocaust discredited any assumption of literature’s capacity to humanize. “The simple yet appalling fact”, he wrote, “is that we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*. We have little proof that a tradition of literary studies in fact makes a man more humane. What is worse – a certain body of evidence points the other way”. (60-1) By which he meant the notorious example of cultivated Gestapo officers reading poetry in the concentration camps. Yet Steiner’s point is even more radical than the suspicion that literature does little to cultivate true moral feeling. For him the specter looms that literature may indeed be actively *unethical* and *immoral*, inuring us to outrage, easing our revulsion from horror in the phenomenal world. And unnerving as it is to take Steiner seriously, he strikes at the heart of what it is we do in teaching a novel, poem, or play. “Unlike Matthew Arnold and unlike Dr. Leavis” Steiner observes:

I find myself unable to assert confidently that the humanities humanize. Indeed, I would go further: it is at least conceivable that the focusing of consciousness on a written text which is the substance of our training and pursuit diminishes the sharpness and readiness of our actual moral response. Because we are trained to give psychological and moral credence to the imaginary, to the character in a play or a novel, to the condition of spirit we gather from a poem, we may find it more difficult to identify with the real world, to take the world of actual experience to heart. (61)

As he adds (in an image at once unthinkable and eerily persuasive),

thus the cry in the poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside. The death in the novel may move us more potently than the death in the next room. Thus, there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity. What then are we doing when we study and teach literature?

The question is meant to haunt us, as Steiner himself is haunted by the Holocaust and the lack of restraints felt by cultured, book-loving men and women bent on genocide.

In the end, there is no adequate response to Steiner, except to acknowledge that art does not inoculate against immorality, every time, once and for all. His more troubling intimation is that art itself helps cultivate immorality by encouraging a fuller responsiveness to imagined ills than real ones, or by providing a *hortus conclusis* to which we can retreat. But this can be turned on its head, as many have long realized: that literature represents more possibilities for a life than we might otherwise imagine. When we normally narrate our lives, our accounts are flat, uninflected, straightforward (as in the casual excuses we offer up, or the legal pleas we contrive, or the philosophical examples we formulate), without the resonance we expect from fiction or poetry. Someone cuts in front of us on the freeway, or changes their mind about a promise, or bothers us impetuously for this or that favor, or fails to live up to their evaluation: in these and dozens of other daily instances, we mostly respond through dismissive narratives. And what opens us up to implications in our own and others' behavior are the nuanced or unexpected emotions, the responses explored in fiction, drama, and poetry – the possibilities,

in short, that we regularly overlook or shortchange. The philosopher Bernard Williams has expressed this view succinctly. "In seeking a reflective understanding of ethical life", he states, philosophy "quite often takes examples from literature. Why not take examples from life? It is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature". (*Shame* 13)

This does not deny how repugnant it is when the cry in the poem becomes "more urgent" than "the cry in the street outside". But poetic anguish does not inevitably create this response. We simply do not know what effect a refined appreciation of literature has on our conduct, for good or for ill. We cannot tell whether a thoughtful reading of *The Golden Bowl*, say, or *The House of Mirth* will alter how a reader copes with a flawed marriage or face-losing social decline, much less the larger issues that prompt Steiner's dismay.

Which leaves those of us still interested in ethical inquiry stripped of global absolutes, or of the need to answer questions like: Do works of art foster or impair possibilities for moral behavior? Can we gain reliable knowledge on how best to live? What we are left with instead is a second nuance, a reduction in scale, involving immediate queries about the relative strength of different *kinds* of ethical reading. Limiting the field this way does not simplify the case or ease discussion, however, if only because critics committed to ethical readings of literature begin with very different notions of what such a reading might involve, which itself becomes a thermometer for measuring moral fervor. Steiner, for instance, who looks to literature for self-transformation, values novels that directly assault one's deepest assumptions. "What we must have", he says citing Kafka, "are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us". (67) Michael Levenson, on the other hand, in an incisive account of modernism, argues the contrary – for disinterestedness as a moral good – and invokes the example of Conrad's Marlow and James's Strether to underscore his point. Martha Nussbaum prizes the condition of being "finely aware and richly responsible" (borrowing her phrase from James), and looks to characters like Maggie Verver as a model for our lives. The ethical precepts with which readers begin tend to dictate which novels get read, and how they perform. Being transformed is not here an issue.

Interestingly, that is one of the issues we rarely pause to address: whether we are predisposed to texts that provide the answers we already

know and prize. And the converse question then would be whether some texts evade certain ethical considerations more readily than others. Is there something about a recondite style or a convoluted narrative structure that makes general ethical analysis more or less promising? Consider two very different kinds of texts – James’ *The Ambassadors* and Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* – each of which engages us on both an aesthetic and ethical level. Still, it’s not at all clear that Sendak – whose book consists of a mere twenty-one lucid sentences, “so he was sent to bed without eating anything” – is more transparent ethically than James. More to the point, Chad Newsome’s abandonment of Mme. de Vionnet and Max’s rejection of his mother – when stripped to bare essentials – are essentially similar actions. Yet if each author represents these scenes of abandonment very differently, neither one reduces that action to something “merely wrong”, however large ethical considerations loom in each. We respond to these characters with varying degrees of approbation or disapproval, as we do in life. We mull over fictional decisions and actions, we scrutinize invented intentions and fanciful consequences, once again as we do in life.

The difference is that literature, unlike life, is already so thoroughly *textualized* that two things tend to occur: first, decisions and actions are mitigated by the forms in which they are represented, making them less straightforward, thus more open to contested interpretations. And second, those verbal forms themselves begin to dazzle the eye more fully than the worlds they supposedly represent. In short, the more complex a story (the less flat it is as account), the more our attention shifts from what used to be called “story” to “discourse”, from signified to signifier – or from Joe Friday’s “Just the facts, ma’am” to imagery and characterization, to narrative plotting and descriptive power: to Max in the book’s illustrations, not Max the admonishment of bad character. It is not that we forget moral rules, but that we become lost in wonder at the artistry involved in making words (and images) move so brilliantly. After all, only a moral simpleton or the most tone-deaf reader would want to ban, say, Humbert Humbert from literature simply because his reprehensible activities are rightly banned in life.

What clinches Humbert’s escape from silence in *Lolita* is the self-consciously literary merit of the novel, its “aesthetic bliss”. Any reservations we have about Humbert’s character or the ways he acts are displaced by our awe at his voice, which so often gets us to laugh out loud. Take only one example, when he considers marrying Charlotte Haze in order to secure her daughter, “and boldly imagined . . . how eventually I might blackmail” – no, that is too strong a word – mauvemail big Haze into

letting me consort with little Haze". (71) The slick play on words here, like the coarse disjunction of emotional tones, evokes humor despite our horror at Humbert's blatant intentions. The intensely comic timbre of so much of his confession (surprising, even shocking us, as we read) depends on this crossing of distinct verbal registers, which coalesces in an experience utterly beyond paraphrase. Humbert's plangent voice induces emotional extremes independent of the scenes it describes, reminding us of what literature demands at both its ethical *and* aesthetic poles. One might even claim that awe before the words of a text – the attention we pay to the written forms in which characters emerge – constitutes the single ethical position all art requires. Elaine Scarry argues this point (in defiance of Steiner), that attentiveness *is* translatable to the real world and our actions in it. We are more likely to notice, to become engaged, because we are schooled in noticing. Careful reading *becomes* a good in itself, in the attention spent on recalcitrant details, the lingering over verbal nuance, the inventing of generous but scrupulous readings – treating texts as individuals, with their own distinctive requirements. From this point of view, a reader's inattention to words on the page registers an ethical flaw, just as much as flat-footed projections *onto* the text. A narrow interpretation of the ethics of reading, in other words, would be simply to become as sympathetic a reader of texts as we are of each other, responsive to idiosyncrasies, resistant to imposing our views, flexible in the face of contradictions, and so on.

To value how things hold together in complex forms is to come a bit closer to understanding the convergence of the aesthetic and the ethical, in the process alerting us to the problem involved in paraphrase. I won't rehearse Cleanth Brooks' notorious New Critical indictment of paraphrase, or the commentary he inspired on interpretation as a necessary reduction of the text. Still, while worth recalling that any reading always compels us to paraphrase complicated images into conventional categories, the test of great literature is its ability to get us to accede momentarily, imaginatively to reversals in our own ways of thinking. Necessary as paraphrase is to interpretation, then, part of what literary achievement means is resistance to such co-optation, to such absorption by the reader, whether into simply reductive forms or into another domain altogether, of philosophy, say, or history, or politics. Great art achieves its status by compelling our attention, even inspiring us with admiration for characters, scenes, motives, and achievements that in more normal waking moments we would never countenance. As Wendy Steiner remarks, "What art *can* do, and do very well, is show us the relation between what we respond to and what we

are, between our pleasure and our principles. As a result, it inevitably relates us to other people whose pleasures and principles either do or do not coincide with our own". (59) This, then, is one important aspect of reading as an ethical activity: to compel us to slow down, to pay attention, to foster an attitude of respect, at least, for people, places, things, attitudes, emotions, actions off the radar screen of our daily lives.

Yet there is another half of the equation to which I keep returning, exemplified in the figure of Humbert Humbert, and that is that we *do* bring to *Lolita* the moral baggage that makes any reading of him an unsettling one. We live not simply in the details, in the brilliant passages of excoriating prose, but in the connections as well that those details make with ideals of how we want to live. That is not to agree with John Ray, Jr. M.D., who brings a "moral in tow" to his reading of the novel. But we *are* made aware of how irrepressible the impulse is when even those opposed to ethical readings end up importing ethics via another route. Recall that Nabokov himself, that notorious aestheticist, described "aesthetic bliss" as the "sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm". (314-15) The sequence of four descriptive nouns entered appositely, parenthetically ("curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy") registers a curious recursion of the ethical back into the novel, and in so doing offers the terms by which a reading of Humbert should be pursued. After all, "kindness, curiosity, tenderness" each represent virtues Humbert lacks in his cruel possession of Lolita.

Here is where literature anticipates conclusions arrived at by more recent moral philosophers: most centrally, that our values clash, and that no overarching ideal aligns them or redeems one at the cost of another. What we are left with are choices among contested values, among irreconcilable goals, and any choice well may involve irreparable loss. All we can do, as Isaiah Berlin observed, is to "engage in what are called trade-offs – rules, values, principles must yield to each other in varying degrees in specific situations". (17) And they must yield not to the abstract and general, but to the specific and local. Or as he says, "The concrete situation is almost everything. There is no escape: we must decide as we decide; moral risk cannot, at times, be avoided". (18) In short, a comprehensive harmony exists no more in ethical contexts than literary ones, with no common standard of measurement allowing us to adjudicate some *summum bonum*. Human life (as one of Berlin's explicators notes) "is something invented, and perpetually reinvented, through choice, and it is plural and diverse, not common or universal". (Gray 23) This is a far cry from Kant's conception

of a categorical imperative, which defines a single moral standard to be applied in all situations. In fact, no such standard *could* apply, any more than Esperanto could displace our different languages, and that is as we would have it. "We determine our fate in the end", Jeff Stout observes, "not . . . by finding the right general principle of acceptability, but by drawing the line here or there in countless particular cases, given our sense of the daily detail". (242)

This focus on the local and particular informs a strong strand of moral philosophy, which rejects those who would reduce ethics to certain blanket virtues, and in the process erode competing notions of what constitutes human well-being. As Bernard Williams points out, in a comment that extends well beyond moral philosophy, "Theory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons." (*Ethics* 116). He goes on to observe, however, that the opposing need to make one's rules seem feasible requires examples, examples that are realistic, and the more detail one adds to make such realism convincing, the more the example tends to dissolve. This tug-of-war between theory and practice never ends, of course, though to credit too fully their irreconcilability is to be reduced to all-embracing moral platitude on the one hand or to the incoherence of vivid detail on the other.

The point of this excursion is to show that at least some moral philosophers themselves are hesitant before the kind of sweeping ethical claims often made by literary critics. My earlier description of the "ethical" readings offered by Levenson, Nussbaum, and Steiner suggests that even better critics fall into a trap of offering up normative views of idiosyncratic episodes. And it would be easy to cite other examples on both sides of the aisle, not only of those committed to salutary readings of literature but of those indignant at the thought, unwilling to have their pleasures marred by any moral considerations at all. Nabokov's extremism on behalf of unadulterated bliss can quickly come to seem as partial and misguided an account of what we do when we read as that of his straw man, John Ray, Jr., Ph. D. To appreciate how misguided this exclusive attention to aesthetic effect can be, listen to Stanley Fish describe his response to a line of Milton:

For me the reward and pleasure of literary interpretation
lie in being able to perform analyses like this. Literary

interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward. I do it because I like the way I feel when I'm doing it. I like being brought up short by an effect I have experienced but do not yet understand analytically. I like trying to describe in flatly prosaic words the achievement of words that are anything but flat and prosaic. I like savouring the physical "taste" of language at the same time that I work to lay bare its physics. I like uncovering the incredibly dense pyrotechnics of a master artificer, not least because in praising the artifice I can claim a share in it. (110)

There is much to agree with in Fish's description of the delight we get in reading, but there is also a certain oddness in talking so narrowly about aesthetic pleasure in the case of Milton, one of the more morally rigorous of our canonical writers. It is as if Fish were self-consciously holding back from the most obvious pressures Milton applies – a Milton he himself had read early in his career as willing to surprise the reader into sin.

This is, if not a barren, at least a bad-faith gesture, resulting from the kind of absolutism expressed earlier by George Steiner: that since great literature *did* not prevent the Holocaust, it *cannot* reliably frame ethical sensitivity. Or as Katha Pollit has declared, "Books do not shape character in any simple way, if indeed they do so at all, or the most literate would be the most virtuous instead of just the ordinary run of humanity with larger vocabularies". (210) Yet we might well retort that no one is arguing that literary sophistication is at one with propriety. And it seems deeply miscalculated to ask of literature that it take a larger role in the shaping of character than we grant to any other cultural force. Especially given the complicated tensions that shape each of us, it is hard to know what might *count* as ethical suasion in a poem or a novel, or what the connection between a text and our given behavior may be. This extends from sermons to self-help manuals, from parental injunctions to national narratives, from laundry lists to lectures.

Or perhaps that is not quite true, which is where the difficulty begins. For it is in its oscillating quality that literature *becomes* literature – in the fluctuation between form and content that rarely matters in the kinds of generic examples I've just named, and that allows a novel to become both philosophic example *and* aesthetic icon. The more discursively flat the text (the less distinctively "literary" it seems), the less attention it draws to its own forms at the expense of some represented world. This is not meant to suggest that an abstruse style like Henry

James's succeeds by its very abstruseness more than Hemingway's, say, or Raymond Carver's. In all three cases, style itself *is* the issue, with rich rhetorical tones measured not by subordinate clauses or metaphorical play but by the attention each author draws to the surface of his prose, the constructed nature of his fiction. The more self-reflexive and obviously stylized a text (that is, the less directly representational), the readier we are to read it aesthetically, in terms not of a human dimension but of sheer forms, sounds, colors, and so on. And by the same token, to the extent that a novel or story *is* conventionally representational, it invites us to map it against accepted understandings of the way things work, of how objects appear, of why people behave as they do. *That* is where ethical questions become pertinent.

Literary texts create tension between representational and non-representational, which has sometimes been understood (wrongly I think) as a tension between paraphraseable content and inimitable form. There are very few instances of literature that are fixed solidly in one camp or the other: so transparently representational on the one hand as to have nothing "literary" about them (like a news account, or a legal indictment, or the kind of bad philosophic examples Bernard Williams had in mind); or, on the other hand, so fully non-representational that words fall on our ears as nonsensical phonemes (like dadaesque drama or concrete poetry, but thankfully short-lived). The best literature tends to fluctuate instead between these two spheres, holding human beings up for inspection in language that can occasionally verge on pure sound, as if created in a self-contained system of symbolic relationships. And the alleged "literary" quality that interests us in these texts consists of features that paradoxically turn our attention away from mortal activity, away from the world itself, toward the pleasures of narrative closure, of verbal legerdemain, of linguistic complexity (or its converse, zero degree writing). These privileged texts perform a fragile balancing act, focusing on the kinds of knotty personal situations that always involve moral considerations – of vengeance, self-sacrifice, ambition, marriage (and adultery), indecision, and so on. We continue to wonder about those powerful narrative considerations, whether it is Hester Prynne's supposedly originating sin, or Ahab's maniacally destructive ego, or Huck's shabby treatment of Jim, or Daisy Buchanan's "carelessness", or Ike McCaslin's troubling renunciation of his legacy (and this is only to select from American literature). But what compounds our wonder are the ways these texts *lose* their transparency, almost as if the words that fleshed out the lives of characters we imagine became somehow colored, shaped, electrified, or otherwise transformed

into marvelous patterns and strange effects. And this process is as true for John Updike as for Robert Coover, for Richard Wright as for Ralph Ellison, for any *realist* author as for any *magical* realist.

Of all these, Nabokov is our most self-conscious artist, eager to immerse us in the troubling oscillations of literature. Why else choose the most scabrous of themes (pedophilia compounded by nominal incest) only to transmogrify it into a novel that keeps us aglow with delight in its verbal pyrotechnics? Deliberately conceiving the most extreme version of the “literary”, Nabokov encourages the reader into moral considerations that seem at last irrelevant, since the murderous Humbert is so obviously only the effect of his “fancy prose style”: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul, Lolita”. (9) Exploiting this artful fictional stance to pose the literary against itself, Nabokov allows Humbert to alternate between self-indulgent stylistic excess and a self-conscious effort at realistic transparency that seems equally constructed. Humbert’s framing of his first physical encounter with Lolita is representative, stated with a concern for the reader’s response that curiously deflects our outrage: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay... So let us get started. I have a difficult job before me” (57).

Humbert’s narrative self-consciousness confirms Nabokov’s sly awareness of the way we process fictional accounts, projecting judgments onto the page as we do in everyday life, filling out details, presuming a larger pattern that involves conventional moral and aesthetic ideals. Yet Nabokov turns the tables, never quite allowing us to conceive of Lolita, Humbert, Quilty, or anyone else as actual or even wholly fictional characters. Whatever outrage we feel at Lolita’s victimization is deflected by the delight the novel takes in its own extravagant wordplay, its mix of literary allusion and lyrical depiction, of parody and puzzling cross reference. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, the novel creates a realm in which letters (e.g., Q) and numbers (e.g., 342) enjoy the same full (or rather impoverished) “reality” as characters. Gruesome events become mordant occasions for humor we would never otherwise countenance.

Yet however much comparison with *Alice in Wonderland* makes Nabokov’s novel seem exceptional or aberrant, we should keep in mind on the contrary how eminently representative it is of the “literary”, in arousing ethical considerations it fails to resolve but never ignores. The novel’s “ethical impact”, like that of any other novel, derives not from a lurking “general lesson” (as John Ray Jr, M.D. asserts), but from its focus of our attention on what Nabokov identified as “curiosity, tenderness, kindness”. Or rather, the *absence* of these qualities looms larger as we

learn of Humbert's narcissistic subjugation of Lolita – a subjugation we ironically reinforce in our own delight at his dazzling verbal skill. All literature taxes us in this strangely paradoxical fashion by transforming human life into something as interesting for its verbal representations as for its represented experience, as interesting for its aesthetic as for its ethical qualities. Sensitivity to the one may help sensitize us to the other – as Leavis, Trilling, and Nussbaum believe – but no more certainly than any of countless other activities. Part of the problem is simply that far less clarity exists about ethical than aesthetic issues. The ethical more often becomes a translation out of the text into another realm, a supposedly untextualized space where values do not seem to clash and where a *summum bonum* is presumed to exist.

To give a short answer to my title, then, books good, bad, and indifferent all illuminate the conventional virtues of generosity and grace under pressure, of tolerance and curiosity, of self-knowledge and mutual respect – virtues so rare these days as to seem no longer conventional. But true literary triumphs illuminate such virtues through contestation and ambiguity, elaborating them in forms neither easily paraphrased nor readily translatable into our daily rounds. What one may gain from reading them is a continuing desire to be more “finely aware and richly responsible” in circumstances that allow perilously little of either – circumstances outside as well as within the text. That desire for an ethical clarity we never quite achieve is, along with a verbal exhilaration we never quite expect, at the heart of all great literature. And the reason we keep returning to books we count as canonical is because they challenge us, ethically *and* aesthetically, so unremittingly. More fully than others, those books refuse to let us be, even though (or especially because) we never quite get them right. And that is what makes them good books.

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