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Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple

> Auden's assertion that poetry doesn't make things happen is a tidy conceit for a melancholy afternoon's tea break, but as the prayers smoke from the mosque and the young thousands chant rap, my era will re-examine what is happening. Nor in that circum-audient air can one deny—terrifying, some of it—the power of prose.
>
> —Hortense Calisher

I

This essay is one of many recent efforts, by myself and others, to challenge two critical schools popular through much of this century: those who think ethical judgments have nothing to do with genuine "literary" or "aesthetic" criticism, and those who think that ethical judgments about stories can never be anything more than subjective opinion. My thesis is thus double: ethical criticism is relevant to all literature, no matter how broadly or narrowly we define that controversial term; and such criticism, when done responsibly, can be a genuine form of rational inquiry. It is true that it will never produce results nearly as uncontroversial as deciding whether it rained in New York yesterday, or even whether President Clinton lied. What's more, many of its judgments, such as Plato's exaggerated attacks on Homer, will be rejected by most serious ethical critics. Yet when responsible readers of powerful stories engage in genuine inquiry about their ethical value, they can produce results that deserve the tricky label "knowledge."[1]

The very phrase "ethical inquiry" is for some thinkers an oxymoron. Ethical *indictment* of a story? Of course you can have that, as a personal expression. Ethical celebration? All right, if it will please a collection of fellow believers. But inquiry? The word implies the chance of arriving at established, decisive conclusions: *knowledge*. About ethics, many still claim, there can be no such conclusions—and thus no genuine inquiry about them. For some these days, the claim has been strengthened by a flood of aggressive and often carelessly performed denigrations of first-class works on grounds of sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, or "classism." Though seldom travelling under

moral or ethical terminology, these intrusions of "ideological" interests have seemed to some a total corruption of the formal or structural standards that dominated criticism in mid-century.[2]

Meanwhile, over-confident ethical or moral indictments and calls for censorship seem increasingly fashionable, many of them pursued so irrationally as to provide evidence that genuine inquiry may flee whenever questions about ethics enter the room. The responses to those would-be censors are often equally subjective and opinionated, too often divorced from any serious digging into the potential dangers for readers who really listen to what the story-teller tells. (From here on I use the term "listen" to cover all serious engagement with stories, whether by readers or viewers or listeners). Many of the defenders against censorship, resting strictly on first amendment grounds, talk as if to engage in ethical or moral criticism is itself an act of censorship: once we step onto the slippery slope—"this story is ethically faulty"—the censors will buy our words and hurtle us on to the bottom.

More challenging efforts to rule out ethical criticism come from those who fear that it will destroy our most precious narrative possession: the "aesthetic" domain, the world of true art, a world that is not just different from the quotidian world of moral conflict but in effect far superior to it. As Wendy Steiner says in the conclusion to *The Scandal of Pleasure*, genuine art "occupies a different moral space" from the world of practical affairs. For her, since art is obviously "virtual," not primarily concerned about "reality," it should not be subject to the kind of moral criticism we offer when everyday behavior in the so-called real world offends us (211).

What is striking, however, is that whether or not critics defend or attack ethical criticism, and whether or not "ideological" critics use ethical terms, nearly everyone concedes that no matter what we do or say about the ethical powers of art, those powers are real. Not even the most ardent opponents of censorship or ethical criticism deny that many stories can actually harm at least some of those who "take them in." And even the most ardent attackers on immoral art works imply by their every gesture that certain other works, in contrast, are not just morally defensible, not just beneficial, but essential to any full human life.

Claims about the transformative ethical power of all art are perhaps least questionable when we turn from "all art" to literary art, art that, because its very nature entails language loaded with ethical judgments, implants views about how to live or not to live. When the word "literature" is expanded to include all stories that we may listen to—not just novels, plays, and poems, but also operas, memoirs, gossip, soap operas, TV and movie dramas, fictional and "real," stories heard in childhood—the power of narrative to change our lives, for good or ill, becomes undeniable.

That power is, however, tacitly denied by many a critic, simply by writing as if the ethical effects of stories are irrelevant to quality. In a recent lengthy favorable account of the thirty novels by Stephen King, Mark Singer

has not a word about what King's three hundred million sold copies have taught the world's mostly unsophisticated readers: about what actions are really contemptible or admirable, about what views concerning aliens and phantoms are naïve or sophisticated or mentally destructive, about what narrative devices are in effect ethical corruptions. The only ethical judgments Singer intrudes are against critics like me, what he calls "arbiters": those who, "without bothering to read King, feel comfortable dismissing him as a hack."[3]

As my ambiguous use so far of the words "ethical" and "moral" suggests, one reason no progress is made in our battles is that too many reduce both terms to the narrowest possible moral codes. The essential issue for critics—perhaps in contrast with politicians—is not whether some part of a given story violates this or that moral code; rather, it is the overall effect on the *ethos*, the *character*, of the listener. And that effect is not to be measured by some simple study of overt behavior after listening: it must include the very quality of the life lived while listening.

Actual effects on behavior are extremely elusive and will, I suspect, never be conclusively demonstrated. It's true that whenever I ask adult readers if they can think of works that changed their lives in a significant way, whether recently or in childhood, almost all of them offer at least one powerful example. Sometimes they stress their regret ("How I wish I had not stumbled upon Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* when I was sixteen; I went 'on the road' for a full year, self-destructively").[4] More often they express deep gratitude ("Reading Tolstoy's *Resurrection* in my forties transformed my attitude toward religion; I had been an atheist for twenty years, and after reading that work—thank God!—I was not"). When the question is generalized—"Do you think that a large share of your ethical education, your construction as a person, was performed by stories, from infancy on?"—most answer decisively "Yes." They agree that when we really engage with the characters we meet and the moral choices those characters face, ethical changes occur in us, for good or ill—especially when we are young.

To underline my point once again: no one who has thought about it for long can deny that we are at least partly constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by the stories we have heard, or read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals: the stories we have really *listened* to. Their authors built successful stories by creating *characters*, characters exhibiting an *ethos* that could be thought of as a collection of virtues and vices, presented as admirable or contemptible.[5] Though many modern authors try to disguise this fact by dealing overtly with character qualities not ordinarily thought of in moral terms—such virtues as uncompromising pursuit of existential truth or honest probing of post-modernist mysteries—I can think of no published story that does not exhibit its author's implied judgments about how to live and what to believe about how to live.

The point is underlined when we think about how the world's most successful moral teachers have taken it for granted: they have chosen to tell stories. Rather than resorting to blunt, non-narrative preaching, they have implanted their messages into engaging narrative worlds. While it's true that some moralizers have turned their tales into prosaic sermons, with simple summarizing moral tags, the most effective teachers—those who recognize moral complexities—have chosen narrative, with its inevitable ambiguities, as the chief vehicle.

Why did the authors of the Bible choose mainly to be storytellers rather than blunt exhorters with a moral tag at the end of each story? They did not rest with the laying down of bare codes, like a list of flat commandments. Though they sometimes tried the brief commandment line,[6] they more often told stories, like the one about a troubled abandoned-child-hero who, as leader of his liberated people, almost botches the job of obtaining some divine rules printed on a tablet, and about a people who largely botch the job of receiving and abiding by them. The pious preachers did not just print out the sermons of a savior; they placed the sermons into a story, and they surrounded them with other stories, especially the one about how the hero himself grappled with questions about his status as savior, and about how he told scores of radically ambiguous parables that forced his listeners into moral thought. They did not openly preach that for God to be incarnated as a man entails irresolvable paradoxes; they *told a story* about how the God/man at the moment of supreme moral testing is ridden with doubt and cries out, as any of us would have done, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

All those biblical authors must have known, perhaps without knowing what they knew, that serious stories educate morally—and they do so more powerfully than do story-free sermons. Just imagine how little effect on the world John Bunyan would have had if he had put into non-narrative prose the various messages embodied in *Pilgrim's Progress*.[7]

In short, the great tellers and most of us listeners have known in our bones that stories, whether fictional or historical, in prose or in verse, whether told by mothers to infants or by rabbis and priests to the elderly and dying, whether labeled as sacred or profane or as teaching good morality or bad—*stories* are our major moral teachers. Some stories teach only a particular moral perspective, one that can be captured with a moral tag, as in some of Aesop's fables and the simpler biblical tales. Many of them teach a morality that you and I would reject. But all of them teach, and thus in a sense they are open to moral inquiry, even when they do not seem to invite or tolerate it.

In the face of this general acknowledgement of the power of stories, how could it happen that entire critical schools have rejected criticism that deals with such power? One obvious answer is that critics have wanted to escape the threatening flood of controversial judgments we land in as soon as ethical judgments are invited into aesthetic territory. Ethical judgments are by

their nature controversial: the very point of uttering them is to awaken or challenge those who have missed the point. Consequently whenever a feminist critic, say, judges a novel or poem to be sexist, she can be sure to be attacked by someone who sees her values as skewed. To praise or condemn for political correctness is widely scoffed at as absurd: political judgments are merely subjective. To judge all or part of a poem according to religious values is seen as even more absurd, since religious views are widely seen as even less subject to rational argument.

A second powerful reason for suppression is the fear already mentioned: that ethical criticism of any kind, even when critics agree with the proclaimed values, is an invasion of "aesthetic" territory. As Charles Altieri reports in "Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience" (above), to be seen as an ethical critic can trigger thoughtless responses from purists who fear that the "lyrical" or the "beautiful" will be sacrificed to preaching.

The third reason, my main interest in this essay, is too often overlooked in today's controversies. "Literature" itself is not just a controversial term: the works it covers are ethically and aesthetically so diverse, both in their intent and in their realization in multiple acts of listening, that any one critical method can at best "cover" no more than a fraction of actual works. The consequence is that a large share of attempted ethical criticism deserves to be attacked as unfair or irrelevant; methods and stances appropriate to one kind of story can be useless or destructive when applied to other kinds.

In what follows, I explore, for the five hundredth time in the history of criticism, some of the varieties of literary intention, as they inevitably reinforce the conflicts about ethical criticism. My basic argument is that only a fully developed critical pluralism, of principles, of methods, of purposes, and of definitions of subject matter can ever reduce the quantity of pointless quarreling over ethical matters. Different genres, different intentions, invite or reject different ethical judgments.[8]

II

Even the word "intention" already lands us in deep controversy. The anti-intentionalists have dominated many fields in recent decades, as they have for the most part ignored the powerful arguments and distinctions made by William Empson, Ronald Crane, E. D. Hirsch and others throughout the "New Critical" wars.[9] The most important of these distinctions, obscuredby all of those who have declared the author and his or her intentions dead, is between the *flesh-and-blood author*, whose intentions, whether or not recorded outside the work, are only loosely relevant to one's reading of the work, and the actualized *text's* intentions: what one can infer from the collection of choices that every work worth bothering about reveals. The author implied by those choices *made* them, consciously or unconsciously, and our judgments of the worth of any work depend on our decision, again conscious or unconscious,

about whether the choices were good ones. Whether we use the word "intentions" or not, we are all dependent, in everything we say about a work, on an implied relation between our intentions and the intentions embedded in the author's choices.[10]

Now as everyone who ever consults her own soul knows, our intentions in real life, as in any construction of a novel or poem, are manifold in kind and often confused or ambivalent in product. We are social selves, multiple selves, most of us moving always, or almost always, in many directions at once. Though sometimes we manage some degree of focus in daily choices, our genuine focusing usually comes when we move in the direction of artistic or technological production: the effort to pull the parts of life into some coherent interrelation. It is when we aim for a goal, especially when we try to *make* something coherent, that our multiplicity sometimes becomes reduced to a single, however complex, target. Like the badge-winning infantry rifleman I aimed to become in my World War II basic training, we concentrate so intently on the target that everything else is, for the time being, simply forgotten.

Artists—painters, musicians, novelists, poets—generally achieve something like that concentration, sloughing off many, though usually not all, of their rival selves. Many have testified to the way in which, as they pursue draft after draft, the manifold possibilities get reduced to a range of centered choices. Even those who have pretended to have no center, to celebrate their own uncontrollable richness, have in fact been forced, by the very nature of producing anything whatever, into a reduction of multiple or divided selves toward what critics used to call a "unity."

My favorite illustration of this point, one that I've printed several times before, was my encounter with Saul Bellow, back in 1962 or 1963. Memory reports it like this:

> WB: What are you up to, Saul?
>
> SB: Well, I'm spending about four hours a day revising a novel that's still much too long.
>
> WB: What'll it be called?
>
> SB: *Herzog*.
>
> WB: What are you actually doing, as you spend four hours a day revising?
>
> SB: Oh, just cutting out those parts of myself that I don't like.

It is important to remember that he was not only cutting out parts of his "self" that he did not like (actually his manifold manuscripts reveal several selves that he was wise to remove); he was cutting out parts of the book that did not harmonize with other parts of *that particular making*. He was changing the text's intentions, which slowly became a different thing from the flesh-and-blood author's original muddied intentions as he wrote many earlier drafts: a new and presumably superior self was being created.

It is the ignoring of that process by the "author-is-dead" crowd that has so often torn their criticism away from the ethical relation between the work, as published, and the reader. If there is no author, how can you talk about an ethical relation with anything? But if there is an author inflicting choices upon me, I have not only a right but a responsibility to think about whether those choices are ethically good or bad.

III

Once we revive the notion that texts do have intentions, we are still faced with a far more overwhelming multiplicity than most criticism acknowledges. Even the more sophisticated post-modernist works tend to lump all literature into a single pile, to be explored for this or that preconceived kind of data, as if all literary works were of the same kind. Such lumping is disastrous for every critical effort, but especially for ethical criticism. To judge a work as ethically praiseworthy or contemptible without determining what its implied author's intent was is like judging a dish of food not by tasting it but by how the waiter's description fits your preconceptions.

Of all the mistakes made by the enemies of ethical criticism, the most absurd is failing to recognize that a great proportion of what we call literary works are not only implicitly ethical, in the ways I have just described, but explicitly designed to elicit ethical responses. Unlike the authors of some lyrical poems and some playful or farcical stories, the authors of many works we consider worth our attention would feel offended if we ruled aside all consideration of ethical message (often in political form). Indeed, for some of our greatest authors—Milton, Dante, Swift—*overt* message is the center, and for many others—Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot—to leave the work untouched by the message would be to miss the full experience.

Yet these works cannot be lumped as inviting the same ethical attention. The potential chaos requires us to turn to the distinctions that, as I said at the beginning, are disastrously ignored by those who would divorce the aesthetic from the ethical or moral.[11]

How many kinds of literary effect are there? It will be useful first to trace Sheldon Sacks's three, though to me they fall far short of exhausting the pile.

First, think of the absurdity of ruling out ethical criticism when we deal with works that are overtly polemical: stories that reveal themselves to every experienced reader as satires.[12] Such stories, if they earn any lasting interest, do exhibit a great many literary or aesthetic qualities: original style, gripping plots, amusing characters. But in reading them (or viewing dramatic productions), our attention is not primarily on the action they present as action but on the targets they are attacking. To read *1984* as a "novel," as if it were designed primarily to yield pleasure or excitement about its plot, is to be an

ignorant reader. To engage in criticism of such a work without appraising the validity of Orwell's attack on various political and moral outrages would offend not only the implied author, "George Orwell." The flesh-and-blood author, Eric Blair, would call us just plain stupid. To discuss the movie *Dr. Strangelove* without addressing its satirical message might pass in some cinematographic quarters, but the makers of the film would feel simply bypassed.

The difference between such satires and other stories can be determined—when controversy arises—by whether or not all of the text's choices can be defended as in the service of the satirical point. In every satire, one finds elements that would not be justified if the point of it all were only to engage us in a powerful story. On the other hand, if the satirical force is in any detail sacrificed for the sake of heightening a beautiful, coherent plot, then the work is not fully a satire: it's either a bungled mixture or it has become—something else. Whatever that something else is will be subjectable to ethical inquiry, but since it does not demand it openly, as the center of an appropriate response, the inquiry will itself be transformed into—something else, something radically different from what is invited by satire.

Turning from satire to a second kind, think how absurd it would be to rule out ethical considerations from any discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or *Paradise*. In all of those works, as in thousands of contemporary so-called novels, the central organizational point is not the effective action or plot, and also not a specific satirical target, but the probing or inculcation of an *idea* or collection of ideas that the author is dramatizing. While such works will never succeed without employing innumerable literary devices, including interesting story lines, the ultimate drive is toward patterning the world of ideas in a persuasive form. They are what Sheldon Sacks called apologues.

Just imagine how Toni Morrison must feel when critics misread and dismiss *Paradise* for having a muddied plot line, when what she wrote is an immensely complex, difficult work that enforces, line by line, *thought* about race relations about temptations to violence and about how forms of "white" violence have infiltrated the "black" world. To discuss her *Beloved* according to its novelistic structure, appraising it as either a gripping or moving or bungled story, without discussing one's agreement or disagreement with its ever-present penetrating thought, would be, I feel sure, offensive to the author—at least to the implied author.[13]

Moving beyond satire and apologue, we come to works that are designed to grip us as what Sacks called "actions": novels like those of Jane Austen or Cormac McCarthy or, moving down the line in quality, Agatha Christie or Louis L'Amour. Though they often contain satirical and apologic elements, those elements are subordinated to the center, which is the action—the engagement with characters who are themselves caught in an action that the proper reader comes to care about. Every detail, when examined closely,

reveals itself as having been chosen to heighten the effect of the action, and thus of the reader's engagement with the story line. It is not surprising that many an author who has tried to write an effective action has been furious when post-modernists and ethicists have imposed ethical criticism on this or that value implicit in the action or made explicit by heroes or narrators. Nor is it surprising that anti-ethical critics object strongly when we ethicists criticize first-class action-creators for anti-Semitism, racism, or sexism. For them, the beautifully formed action, conveyed in beautiful or witty or original style, is what counts. Consign the ethicists to hell, where they belong.

Unlike satires and apologues, action-stories thus do not openly demand ethical criticism. They in effect imply a battle between the implied author and any ethical critic who comes ploughing into the scene asking, "Is reading this story good or bad for you?" That battle must be conducted in ways entirely different from the encounters invited by satires and apologues.

So much for Sheldon Sacks's account of three major kinds of authorial invitation. Though Sacks himself never made this point, it is to me obvious that he was classifying fictions precisely as philosophers—from Plato through Kant to the present—have classified human goals in general: authors pursue either the good (through satire, attempting to make the world better), or the true (through apologue, teaching a truth) or the beautiful (through creating perfected actions or plots). Much controversy could be avoided if critics made clear just which of these three goals they pursue as they praise or condemn this or that story.

But these three piles are much too general to deal with the many different varieties of goods and truths and beauties that authors have pursued. For example, as Charles Altieri argues, the trouble with too many defenses of ethical criticism, even those that honor one kind of beautiful structure, is that they have ignored the ethical import of one aspect, or kind, of the beautiful: what he calls the lyrical.[14] Toward the end of his life, Sacks himself was exploring the need to add a fourth kind to his three, using Altieri's word for it. Reading and re-reading Virginia Woolf's novels, he could not get them to fit under the labels of satire, apologue, or action. What they pursued was an evocation of the full aesthetic feeling of life when dramatized beautifully, but not as a coherent plot or action but rather almost like a series of beautiful illustrations. They did not really work as actions: readers were offered nothing remotely resembling a powerful plot. Even more obviously they did not work either as apologues, teachers of coherent thought, or as satires, attackers on sins or follies in the world. To judge this lyrical kind by the same standards one would apply to the other three would be, he was beginning to suspect, a radical distortion.

But the expansion to this fourth kind still oversimplifies the landscape of story. It can never be reduced to a final list of kinds.[15] Though the kinds cannot be infinite, it seems clear that literary devices and qualities can be used

to achieve every conceivable (or defensible) effect: sheer farce, for the romping fun of it (a special form of "lyricism?"); sheer warning about impending disaster (a sub-version of the pursuit of "goodness," but quite different from satires or apologues); stimulation of intense but disorganized thought and linguistic probing, as in *Finnegans Wake* (in the sense a pursuit of "truth," but a truth so diverse and unpin-downable that no truth emerges; it would be absurd to condemn this novel because one or another line or character was considered morally offensive). With a little effort we can twist any literary experience into the service of improving thought, improving the world, or creating a new piece of beauty.

IV

The literary kind that I think is most important in all considerations of ethical criticism (and the one I care for most) has no label and is most resistant to simple ethical categories. When stories manage not only to engage us in serious thought about ethical matters, based on the reinforcement of certain ethical positions as admirable and others as questionable or indefensible, but also hook us into plots-of-conflict that are inseparable from that thinking, we meet what I consider the most admirable invitation to ethical criticism. The plot, in such stories, does not just present virtue and vice in conflict; the story itself *consists* of the conflict of defensible moral or ethical stances; the action takes place both within the characters in the story and inside the mind of the reader, as she grapples with conflicting choices that irresistibly demand the reader's judgment.

Take as a prime example the novels of Henry James, which are sometimes described as above morality or immune to ethical criticism. His tales are never moralistic, in the sense of being reducible to a simple code, obedience to which will produce ultimate blessing. On the other hand, they always reveal, to any careful reader, an extensive list of judgments about what constitutes defensible and indefensible human behavior. Nothing is more naive than criticism of his works as if they were ethically neutral. Any reader of *The Portrait of a Lady* who fails to judge Gilbert Osmond as a monstrously immoral villain would shock me and perhaps infuriate James. How can we think that any author who would revise, for a second edition, Osmond's view of Isabel from "as bright and soft as an April cloud" to "as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm," was not wanting to guarantee a negative judgment of the manipulator.[16] At the same time, no reader can reduce the action to any easily resolved conflict between such a villain and our heroine. James thus doubles the plot: it is enacted both within the story as written and within the mind of the reader who engages fully with the dilemma faced by Isabel.

An even more striking example of this unnamed sub-class of apologue, the thought-inducing action that resists reduction to summary or thesis, is

James's *The Wings of the Dove*. The plot cannot be summarized adequately, because it takes place in four different minds: within the mind of Kate Croy, as she experiences the conflicts James lands her in throughout; within the mind of Merton Densher, as he experiences a different set of conflicts forcefully dramatized by the author, and within the minds of the reader and author as they experience the double conflicts of Kate and Merton and the intricacies of point-of-view that the complex story demands.

Some of the moral values of this novel are indeed as unequivocal as in any Sunday School tract or open apologue: for example, James implies but never states that it is always, in all circumstances, wrong to plot for the estate of a helpless dying woman by pretending to court her when you are really engaged to another woman. Merton knows it; James knows it; the readers James hopes for know it, though of course some will not catch it or will reject it when they do, perhaps deciding that it doesn't matter one way or another.[17] But what would James think of any critic who attempted to appraise the *literary* merit of *Wings* without mentioning the brilliance with which he places Kate's essential admirable qualities into moral decline? Criticism that ignores the ethical center of this aesthetic achievement is simply naive. And criticism that merely describes the conflicts, without permitting any statement of agreement or disagreement, is cowardly. Any reader who thinks Densher should have gone all the way with Kate's despicable plan should say so, up front, earning James's and my disapproval: the full aesthetic effect of the work *as intended* has been denied to any such reader, who may well reply: the novel is not as great as people say, because it touts that mistaken Puritan (or middle-class, or Victorian) virtue.

It is from such disagreements that the most productive literary criticism can emerge: when undertaken seriously neither side is likely to feel fully victorious. Both sides will have learned something overlooked, either about the work itself or about the world of ethical values in which we all live. And both sides, whether in reading the work or in discussing it, are undergoing the ethical growth that serious encounters with such conflict can produce.

Nothing I have written here can be said to prove either of my two theses, if by prove we mean "move toward the impossibility of reasonable disagreement." Our cultural moment will ensure the production of many more claims, by the purists, that ethical and political views are irrelevant to literary judgment, and by the remaining defenders of the fact/value split that whenever values intrude, genuine knowledge and true rationality fly out the window. Intellectual fashions fade much more slowly than clothing styles. But while we wait patiently for the fading, we can continue to remind the purists and value-dodgers that whenever they engage with a story, privately or publicly, they encounter evidence that refutes their dogmas.

Notes

[1]A few paragraphs that follow are slightly adapted from my recent "Of the Standard of Moral Taste: Literary Criticism as Moral Inquiry." Permission for modified quotation has been granted by the Woodrow Wilson Center.

[2]The most aggressive rejections of my most extensive work of ethical criticism, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, came from purists and "aestheticists" who objected to such offenses as my criticizing Rabelais' sexism.

[3]Have I really read King? Well, I've tried to.

[4]When the recent Random House list of 100 greatest novels in English of the twentieth century was published, most of my friends joined my annoyance about seeing this poorly written, thoughtless book on the weird list. There you see again, as in my King comment: my own judgments will emerge throughout here, some of them perhaps chargeable as biases, and only some of them, unlike this one, defended with rational argument.

[5]While working on a final revision of this essay, I stumbled on an account by Stephen Greenblatt of the story-power of prosecutor Kenneth Starr's report on the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. Starr hired two lawyers to write the section called "Narrative." One of the authors, Stephen Bates, "once studied advanced fiction writing at Harvard." The other had studied narrative theory. Starr knew the ethical powers of story. Bates and his colleague knew the ethical powers of story. Greenblatt knows those powers: his case is a strong ethical indictment, showing just how and why the narrator of the story is more and more "unreliable"—though not intended to be seen as such. Greenblatt does not, however, openly address ethics or morality. Facing ethical issues, as a "cultural critic," he chooses to dodge the language. See Greenblatt (A31).

[6]For examples that have caused endless trouble for commentators, Jews and Christians, and rich fodder for skeptics, see Judges 19-21, or Deuteronomy 21:18-21 and 22:20-22.

[7]Some critics would say that Bunyan's story has only one message: embrace his one right version of Christianity. They should read the complex story again.

[8]My engagement with critical pluralism here depends on years of living with "Chicago school" pluralists: Richard McKeon, Ronald Crane, and Elder Olsen were my mentors (see Crane's *Critics and Criticism, Ancient and Modern*); Sheldon Sacks was my colleague. His sadly neglected book, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief*, is most directly pertinent to my distinction of literary kinds.

[9]Some who have not read Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* carefully have reported it as anti- intentionalist. They should read it again.

[10]Since I have publicly mocked some authors for referring to their own works too frequently, I hereupon resist offering any reference whatever to *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, a much-neglected work that explores the issues I am describing here.

[11]See essays engaging in ethical controversy by Richard Posner, Martha Nussbaum, and myself in *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998).

[12]Inexperienced readers do sometimes still read *Gulliver's Travels* as a travelogue or adventure story, breaking Swift's heart.

[13]The only work I've met that deals adequately with the unique critical challenges presented by apologues that are called novels is David Richter's brilliant *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction.*

[14]See Altieri, p. 274 above.

[15]See my "What Does it Take to Make a New Literary Species?"

[16]A great deal of James's later revisions for his New York edition were specifically addressed to heightening the reader's awareness of moral judgments. See especially what he does to the various choices of the manipulative narrator in *The Aspern Papers.*

[17]For a full encounter with the ethical effects of reading *The Wings of the Dove*, see my "The Ethics of Forms: Taking Flight with *The Wings of the Dove*" in *Understanding Narrative.* For a further extensive discussion of this kind of "casuistical apologue"—to coin a label that she might object to and that will never catch on, see Nussbaum's discussion of James's *The Golden Bowl* in *Love's Knowledge* (125-47).

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