

Truth and the ‘Work’ of Literary Fiction

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As Lamarque agrees, to read philosophy is to read for truth, so if literary fiction non-accidentally conveys philosophical claims, Lamarque’s anti-cognitivist position on it must be flawed. Deploying Iris Murdoch’s notion of the ‘work’ an author does in a text, I try to expand what should be understood by an argument in this context, and thus address Lamarque’s argument that literary fiction cannot non-accidentally convey philosophical claims because it typically contains no arguments. The main literary example is George Eliot’s Felix Holt; special reference is made to the idea of an author’s complicity with the reader.

There are certainly truths to be learned from works of literature. This is not just because there is such a thing as literary non-fiction: the ingredients of many a dish are to be discovered from the novels of Günter Grass. But when literary fiction does ‘instruct’ or ‘convey serious theses’ (p. 4), is its doing so incidental—Grass could have said *those* things by writing a cookery book—or rather integral to its status as literature?¹ Let us call the claim that its doing so *is* integral to its status as literature ‘cognitivism’. Whether cognitivism in this sense is true is one of the principal questions addressed in Peter Lamarque’s rich and readable new book, and one to which the book gives a qualified negative answer.² Now since, as Lamarque rightly says, ‘to read philosophy is to read for truth’ (p. 253), one aspect of this question is whether literary fiction can be—and not just accidentally—philosophy. Although my aim is to comment on Lamarque’s treatment of cognitivism generally, I shall do so mostly by focusing on this narrower sub-question. What I say is an objection, but also an invitation to say more.

Before we get to detail, let me state a hunch as to why cognitivism—and not just about the particular case of philosophical theses—ought to come out right. As interpreters of works of literature, and not just of literature, we try to do many things, but one of the things we try to do is to make works we are pre-reflectively gripped by or attracted to at the very least *not* say things we find repugnant, and sometimes also say things we accept as true; and if we fail, we may come to experience the force the work exerts on us as a seduction. (Think of critics’ struggles with Wagner’s alleged anti-Semitism, or with the apparent

1 Page references in parenthesis in the text are always to *The Philosophy of Literature*.

2 Strictly speaking, my question is narrower than one Lamarque himself poses, namely whether ‘conveying serious theses’ is ‘part of the essence’ (p. 4) of literature. However, cognitivism stands a better chance of being true if it is defined my way, since if conveying such theses was part of literature’s essence, no work that didn’t would be literature, which seems incredible.

misogyny of *Così fan Tutte*.³) Of course we do not only do this: sometimes we can find a way of being comfortable with our attraction to a work while rejecting what it says. But if pre-reflective attraction to a work is not sometimes and in part *assent* (and so if there isn't something to assent to; that is, if cognitivism isn't true), the very possibility of interpretative labour of this kind is hard to make sense of.

At the centre of Lamarque's earlier treatment of this question was a distinction between two claims: the claim that a work of literary fiction has a certain content (the kind of claim advanced by a 'thematic interpretation' of the work (p. 208)), and the claim that the work advances that content as true.⁴ Thus Ibsen's plays *present* us with a moral conception of a situation, or with a view of life, and it is essential to understanding the plays that we recognize the conception or view of life being presented. But—and herein lies the rejection of cognitivism—they do not require or even invite us to *adopt* them.⁵ The main argument offered against cognitivism is this: since the conceptions (etc.) literary fiction presents are controversial, if conveying truth *were* a primary aim, one would expect to find arguments in their favour. But typically 'there are no such arguments or debate either in the literary work itself, or in literary criticism'.⁶

Both these arguments against cognitivism—no arguments in the texts, no arguments in the criticism—reappear in *The Philosophy of Literature*.⁷ I am going to set the second on one side in order to focus on the first, because what critics do presumably depends on their view of the kind of discourse literary fiction is—aiming at truth, or not?—so the prior question must be as to whether there are arguments in that discourse itself.

To make good this 'no arguments' claim, we need a clear grip on what counts as an argument in a literary text. For just because literary texts do not typically contain (say) statistical tables or natural deduction proofs, it must not be assumed that they do not contain arguments at all. As Lamarque himself says,

the truth-defender [i.e. the cognitivist] might reasonably insist [that literature] simply has different rhetorical strategies and different means of support from other truth-promoting modes of discourse; that's what's special about it. (p. 235)

Here, then, we have the beginnings of a reply by the cognitivist to the 'no arguments' claim. Lamarque does not go very far in exploring the possibility of this reply. Thus when we come to Kafka's *The Trial* and the question whether it not only has as its theme but also invites us to accept the proposition that 'human beings are victims of impersonal and indifferent forces beyond their control', the reason given for a negative answer is that *proving* the proposition would 'require arguments from philosophy and sociology' (p. 237). But that assumes the narrow conception of what counts as an argument in a literary text that the embryonic cognitivist reply calls into question. It occurred to me that the fact that this

3 For discussion of both, see Bernard Williams, *On Opera* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

4 In Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1994).

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 384–385.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 368.

7 See for the first e.g. p. 234; for the second e.g. p. 237.

reply was *not* fully explored might go together with a certain tentativeness I detected in Lamarque's rejection of cognitivism as compared to the very hard-line treatment in Lamarque and Olsen. Be that as it may, I want in the space remaining to say a little more about how the cognitivist reply might go, and to give an example which—notwithstanding the extravagant claims that have sometimes been made on behalf of the philosophical content of literary fiction—seems to support cognitivism.

Before setting out the example, I would like to introduce Iris Murdoch's idea of the 'work' an author does in a novel in explanation or justification of the moral light in which a character is presented:

The author's moral judgment is the air the reader breathes. . . . The bad writer . . . exalts some and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is, without any suitable aesthetic 'explanation'. The good writer . . . justifies his placing of his characters by some sort of *work* which he does in the book. A literary fault such as sentimentality results from idealization without work.⁸

My concern is not with sentimentality, but the idea of the author's 'work' is nonetheless important as it homes in, I think, on the same thing Lamarque has in mind when he speaks of the 'different rhetorical strategies and different means of support' deployed, according to the cognitivist reply gestured at above, by writers of literary fiction. I now turn to a case where I think we can see work of this kind both being done and failing to be done.

About three-quarters of the way through the novel, the heroine of George Eliot's *Felix Holt*, Esther, is wooed by Harold Transome, the local squire, who needs to marry her to secure his inheritance. The reader of course wants Esther to marry Felix Holt himself, but Felix is in jail charged with manslaughter, so it is essential that the influential Harold's hostility not be awakened by his coming to know that Esther loves not him, but Felix. When Esther tries to enlist Harold's help at Felix's forthcoming trial, the reader therefore feels mounting despair in the course of Esther's speech which ends with the words 'I never knew what nobleness of character really was before I knew Felix Holt!', and it seems that the writer relishes every moment. But, setting us free in one last gesture of mastery, George Eliot tells us Harold's reaction was the very reverse of what we feared: he 'felt his slight jealousy allayed rather than heightened'. And though we are here the writer's playthings, she lets us know that we are also her friends, because though it is obvious to any reader, and obvious indeed from the speech, that Esther *does* love Felix, it is not obvious to Harold: "This is not like love," he said to himself with some satisfaction.⁹ For to Harold—

8 From Bryan Magee, 'Philosophy and Literature: Dialogue with Iris Murdoch', *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 249, quoted in Matthew Kieran, 'Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism', in J. L. Bermudez and S. Gardner (eds), *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 58.

9 The quotations, from ch. 43, are at *Felix Holt*, ed. Peter Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 537.

‘whose very good nature was unsympathetic’—Esther’s attitude to Felix is merely ‘a moral enthusiasm’.¹⁰

The relation between love and moral admiration is, then, a Lamarquean ‘theme’ of the novel: we could not understand the way Harold misunderstands Esther if we did not at least grasp this. But I think this relation figures in the novel more than just thematically, and thus bears on the truth of cognitivism.

The first link to cognitivism has to do with the kind of interaction between author and reader, which is of course a common feature of literary fiction, to which I have just drawn attention. George Eliot’s play with our expectations would not be possible if she had not been able to be confident that we not only *recognized* the conception of love embodied in Esther’s love for Felix, but also shared it—that is, regarded that conception as true. For otherwise the reversal of our expectations at the end of Esther’s speech would not be the establishing of a rapport with us, and a simultaneous exclusion of Harold. It is not just a presentation of two alternative ways of looking at Esther (as a lover and as a mere moral enthusiast), but a taking of sides; and not just a taking of sides but a taking of sides *with the reader*, that is, the creation of a bond between writer and reader that rests on shared conviction (namely, about what is true).¹¹ Moreover, the shared conviction in question does not in this case rest—though in a different case it might do—on convictions the reader brings to the text already fully formed: one ground for the author’s confidence that we *will* see things her way is surely that they are convictions brought about in us at least in part by the text. That, in *Felix Holt*, is part of the ‘work’ the novel tries to do.¹²

This brings me to the second link to cognitivism. Anyone familiar with the genre of love comedy to which *Felix Holt* sprawlingly belongs will come early on to expect that Felix and Esther will grow to love each other and eventually marry. The novel’s claim to be recognized as more than ‘genre fiction’ rests on its success in presenting that conclusion as more than a clicking through the gears of the genre mechanism, that is, in presenting the conclusion as earned, or as worked for, in Iris Murdoch’s sense. But here it seems to me the novel does not quite do the work that is needed of it, and for reasons that bear on the truth of the ideas that are also its theme. For the relation between moral admiration and love is tricky: quite apart from the claim, sometimes alleged, that we can love people without admiring them, if love reduces to moral admiration, why don’t we love more people than we do? And yet it is vital that the emotion George Eliot presents Esther as having is one she will reserve for Felix alone. It is as if George Eliot is half aware of this problem when, in

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 528, 577.

11 For another example of the same general phenomenon (where the reader is given the illusion, initially, of shared belief only to have it taken away later), see Lionel Trilling’s remarks about *Northanger Abbey*: though Jane Austen invites the reader ‘into a snug conspiracy to disabuse the little heroine [that life is like a Gothic novel]’, it is we who are in the end ‘disabused of our belief that life is sane and orderly’. From ‘Mansfield Park’ in Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), p. 182.

12 Lamarque asks why, if cognitivism is true, didactic works of literary fiction are so unsatisfactory as literature (p. 253). The answer parallels Murdoch’s explanation of sentimentality: the text contains no ‘suitable “aesthetic” explanation’ for the theses it advances.

the court scene, she describes Esther as having 'for the first time . . . a feeling of pride in [Felix] on the ground simply of his appearance'.¹³ His 'bare throat', 'great Gothic head', and 'large grey eyes' are features that seem to belong more uniquely to Felix than his goodness of character, so by making Esther focus on those, the author goes some way to explaining why her attitude to him is one which could take no other as its object. But not the whole way: Esther's observation of Felix concludes with the reflection that 'he bore the outward stamp of a distinguished nature'¹⁴—the particular is after all of interest only as a sign of the general.¹⁵ Of course this observation *might* have been presented as a self-unknowning reflection on Esther's part—she is physically attracted to Felix but does not have the words for this yet; but (despite the 'bare throat', arguably a sexually meaning nakedness in a world of ties, stocks, etc.) it isn't. And perhaps one can see why not. Part of George Eliot's effort to persuade us that Felix is worthy of love, and Harold not, rests on the contrast between Felix's inner qualities and Harold's devotion to surfaces (looks, tastes). To concede an underived significance to Felix's appearance in Esther's love for him risks undermining that contrast, and so leaving Felix's superior loveworthiness unexplained. But as we have seen, the only alternative explanation the novel offers—that Felix is a man of outstanding goodness of character—is not enough. The 'work' of the novel stalls, then, on a philosophical puzzle, that of saying how love can involve, without reducing to, moral admiration. One might say that this is just a highly complex case of a literary work's being vitiated by falsity, as Lamarque could concede without giving up his opposition to cognitivism.¹⁶ But I would like to suggest, more ambitiously, that had the novel succeeded where it now fails it would have constituted an argument, deploying those 'alternative means of support' characteristic of literary fiction to which the embryonic cognitivist reply appeals, for its (now properly earned) conclusion.

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13 *Felix Holt*, p. 560.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 561.

15 It may be worth remembering that George Eliot was the translator of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. A thesis of that work is that what appears to Christians as love of God is in fact love of human nature in 'alienated' form; by the same token (unalienated) love of one human being for another is love of humanity insofar as the loved other is an instance of it.

16 And does concede in connection with Mark Rowe's case of Larkin's wave 'drop[ping] like a wall', which waves don't (p. 229).