Moral Philosophers and the Novel
A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty

Peter Johnson
Moral Philosophers and the Novel
Also by Peter Johnson

R. G. COLLINGWOOD: An Introduction
THE CORRESPONDENCE OF R. G. COLLINGWOOD: An Illustrated Guide
FRAMES OF DECEIT
THE PHILOSOPHY OF MANNERS: A Study of the ‘Little Virtues’
POLITICS, INNOCENCE AND THE LIMITS OF GOODNESS
In Memory of Liam O'Sullivan
This page intentionally left blank
Contents

Acknowledgements viii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1 The Middle Ground 16
Chapter 2 Decent Signs 31
Chapter 3 Enter the Novel 39
Chapter 4 The Novel’s Gifts 55
Chapter 5 Fiction and the Good 70
Chapter 6 The Novel and Ethical Reflection 88
Chapter 7 Goods and Powers 105
Chapter 8 Truth Drops Out 128
Chapter 9 Versions of Events 145
Chapter 10 Fictions and Freedoms 161
Conclusion 176
Notes 184
List of Works Cited 196
Acknowledgements

My first debt is to the philosophers whose work I write about in this book. In the current debate over ethics and literature their ideas are seminal. I have learned a great deal from each of them.

Thanks of a different kind are due to my wife, Sue, who has been an unfailing support throughout; to Pat, my friend and neighbour, who eased my neurotic worries over home parcel deliveries; to Jennifer Nelson of Palgrave Macmillan for efficiently seeing the project to completion; to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for a Research Leave award in 2001–2 which gave me much valued additional time; to the publisher’s anonymous reader for help and encouragement exactly when it was needed, and last, but certainly not least, to my fellow drinkers in the Crown Inn at Highfield whose determined efforts to take my mind off the book while I was writing it sometimes came perilously close to succeeding.
What should be the place of literature in moral philosophy? In many ways the question is puzzling, and, from some viewpoints, even audacious. Ethics is a branch of philosophy and philosophy’s engagement, possibly its sine qua non, is with argument. The whole rationale of philosophy is to follow the logos wherever it leads and in ethics it leads to the nature of the moral life and the manifold concepts involved in it. Imaginative literature, by contrast, does not consist in arguments, nor does it aim at general conclusions. The last page of a novel ends the story, but it is not the conclusion of an argument.

So much is obvious, indeed, so blatantly obvious, that it is hard to see why moral philosophers should take an interest in literature at all. The novel in its many forms may be entertaining, boring or mystifying. We may be attracted or angrily repelled by the characters we encounter in fictional worlds and we may or may not be caught up in the tales they tell, but they are not demonstrations or proofs of any kind.

It has, however, often been pointed out that this picture is too straightforward. Moral philosophy is expressed in language that cannot be wholly technical and abstract. Even the most formal philosophical writing incorporates allusion, metaphor and anecdote. We might think, for instance, of the evil demon in Descartes or Socrates’ appeal to the Oracle during his conversation with Crito. That philosophy can display literary qualities is, of course, true, but this fact alone cannot secure literature a philosophical role. Socrates’ attempt to understand justice by giving a definition of it is expressed by Plato in dialogue form, but the point could equally have been formulated in prose.

When we reflect on the place of literature in ethics we are not investigating style, but what are we looking for? One answer is a
novel of ideas, a philosophical novel such as Sartre’s *Nausea* or Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* in which there is already something which ethics can recognise as familiar. Since ethics follows the logos wherever it leads it must be some similar quest by the novelist which prompts the moral philosopher’s interest. What inspires ethics to turn to the novel is finding its own image reflected there. And, yet, we should be wary of taking this path. Few novels are philosophical in a form that permits their content to be summarised in philosophical terms. More importantly, even if this were possible, such summaries stand or fall as arguments. On this view, literature has a place in philosophy only if it conforms to philosophy’s expectations of it. Where these are construed exclusively as matters of argument, literature’s freedom to play a part in ethics will be correspondingly reduced.

Moral philosophers who see ethics as founding a rational moral theory will not find this conclusion unappealing. What these philosophers search for is a contemporary Olympus, a secular height from which to impart a theory of the good that is both impartial and universal. Ethics must transcend life by modelling itself on formality and generality. Without a secure foundation in a systematic and comprehensive moral theory, moral beliefs are liable to be rendered subjective and contingent. From this perspective, the interest of life to theory is as a source of evidence, a ready supply of illustration and a region of application for universal principles which aim to pattern life by filtering the permissible from the prohibited.

In this familiar picture, ethics is a matter of argument, with reason sitting as the court of final appeal. Art, however, looks to beauty and the ambiguities of the beholder’s eye. The novel is yet another distorting mirror to life and its adherents are no different from Plato’s ‘lovers of sights and sounds’, responding acutely to the powerful images which art conveys, but having little or no idea how or why they do. Rather than be seduced by the siren voices of novelists, on this view, we are better advised to go to life itself and judge the experience we find there in the steady light of reason.

Clearly, on this understanding of ethics there can be no question of negotiating a treaty with art. Rather art finds the door slammed quite violently in its face. But on at least one view of art the gesture can be rapidly returned. Defenders of art might say that art has no place for the intellect. Art is outraged if it is used as a means for communicating abstract ideas and it quickly self-destructs if an attempt is made to tie it to moral exhortation and advocacy.
This perceived and mutual antagonism goes very deep. D. H. Lawrence comments, ‘it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split ... the novel went sloppy and philosophy went abstract dry.’ Moral philosophers must somehow come to the recognition that in life contingency is not so easily disciplined. Moral dilemmas, contested instances, and areas of moral uncertainty, for example, are all indicators of life’s intractability to theory. The moral philosopher who starts by resisting life in the name of a pure theory of morality usually ends by becoming merely a connoisseur of awkward cases.

A very different sort of moral philosopher argues, by contrast, that morality is best grasped through moral particulars oscillating in the flow and flux of life. Since theory confines life within parameters that are both abstract and static, it ignores the concrete and temporal dimensions of moral life. Moral reasoning is not performed by agents presumed to be of inter-changeable moral psychology, whose over-riding interest in one another is as units of action and power in a theory of decision-making, but rather by individuals whose moral attitudes and emotions display complex varieties of disposition and character. Too often moral theory depends on a narrow focus on rules, actions and consequences at the expense of the course of a life and the circumstances that surround it. When virtues are allowed to speak in their own distinctive ways, a conceptual abundance is revealed which theory crudely blocks. Similarly, how the virtues are tested is not against a framework of understanding independently reached, but over the course of a life expressed in narratives, in which the outcomes of choices often make a difference to our evaluation of them.

To stress the particularity and indeterminacy of life is to ask how these features are best communicated to us. For Lawrence, the answer is clear: ‘the novel is the book of life ... in the novel, the characters can do nothing but live.’ What the novel most discriminatingly and comprehensively displays is that density of personality and openness of possibility that we are familiar with in life. What, then, does ethics look for when it enters the novel? Not, we can safely assume, some key-turning intellectual formula that ethics has failed to glean from metaphysics. As ‘the book of life’ the novel is an unlikely source for building moral foundations. To look to the novel in the spirit of metaphysics is to replace one idol by another, when the idolatry, as Edmund Burke remarks, remains the same. This vital reservation does not mean, of course, that when ethics explores the novel’s world, ethical independence is totally conceded. On the contrary, ethics must remain critical and self-reflexive in ways the novel can never be. If art
can bring ethics closer to life this is because ethics requires something outside itself to contemplate. In the novelist’s house, the moral philosopher observes in a spirit quite different from the literary critic’s, but what governs these perceptions? What determines the moral philosopher’s gaze?

To talk about the novel from the perspective of ethics is to talk about specific ways of reading. We might say that these set the terms of engagement between ethics and art. Moral philosophers who turn for some degree of philosophical enlightenment to what Lawrence describes as ‘the one bright book of life’ read the novel in contrasting ways, asking significantly different questions of it, and making claims for it which vary greatly in philosophical ambition and scope. Some of these claims will call for close investigation; others, for different reasons, I will set aside because they speak only indirectly to the issues I wish to address; others, again, I will treat in a more piecemeal fashion.

Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, understands the novel as a distinct form of storytelling and storytelling as a form of narrative, so appearing to offer a promising source. But MacIntyre defends narrative as a feature of a wide-ranging philosophical claim. It is understood as a key stage in the core conception of virtue developed as the solution to the problem of ethics in modernity. Narrative’s sense is, therefore, bound by the two stages: practice that precedes it and tradition that follows it. So, crucially for my purposes, it is not the novel as such that interests MacIntyre, but the support specific fictional narratives give to neo-Aristotelianism. Thus, separating out MacIntyre’s discussion of narrative is likely to distort his overall argument without suggesting any significantly compensating ways forward.

Similar reservations can be expressed about Charles Taylor’s deployment of narrative. Taylor argues that the ways individuals make sense of their lives is in terms of narrative. It is through the stories that individuals tell about their lives that we and they discover how, for example, choices are made, lived up to, abandoned or confirmed as correct. In Taylor’s writings, however, narrative is explored through its connection with moral theory. A theory of morality for Taylor, as for Aristotle, cannot be wholly remote from the way individuals live their lives. If lives are expressed necessarily as narratives then moral theory must take this into account. Equally, however, moral theory must take into account features of the ways lives are lived which are not wholly explicable as narratives, such as the goods that constitute a life and the nature of the self that contemplates and pursues them. It should be
clear, therefore, that while our concern is with how the novel, as one kind of narrative, is to be read by moral philosophy, Taylor is, like MacIntyre, operating on a much broader philosophical canvas.

The work of Stanley Cavell confronts us with ideas of a very different stamp. Understanding Cavell means dropping the thought that there is a definitive relation between philosophy and literature, at least in the sense that philosophy has automatic priority. Cavell insists that he is not using literary texts merely as illustrations of philosophical arguments derived in advance. Rather, his is a project of boundary disturbance so that a philosophical issue such as scepticism may be fruitfully read as much within a literary as a philosophical text. Such textual openness aims to break down the conventional distinction between a text as a process of argument and a text as a fictional narrative, and so readers might legitimately expect that Cavell will make an appearance in my discussion, and so he shall. But even in Cavell’s apparently highly apposite body of work his focus is not entirely the one I wish to follow. This arises because Cavell’s reading of Shakespeare – his main literary study – depends on a particular philosophical perspective, one that involves thinking of specific plays as exemplifying how scepticism about other minds might be lived out and with what consequences. Once again, it is the philosopher’s agenda that is making the running, but as a result the difference between the example and the exemplification is left open. We need to examine how literary texts might be read philosophically when they are not plays, but novels, and when the ideas in the novel do not so readily mirror the questions the philosopher wishes to ask.

Passing over general philosophical projects in which literature is given a determinate role encourages a clearer focus. Attention to certain of Iris Murdoch’s remarks – a catalyst in this respect – takes us further. For Murdoch writes as a philosopher unwilling to discard all separation between philosophy and literature. While sensitive to boundary crossings, she argues that some boundaries must remain. For her, philosophy’s business is clarification, expressed in language that is ‘abstract, discursive and direct’. By contrast, the language of the novel, although natural to us in ways that philosophy is not, is indirect, often oblique.

So when philosophers are drawn to the novel it cannot be because of the philosophical claims it contains. And, yet, for Murdoch, ‘art is the great clue to morals’. It is through the novel, in particular, that we are able to ‘rediscover a sense of the density of our lives’. The novel arms us ‘against consolation and fantasy’, including, she insists, the false
consolations of moral theory. Great novels are ‘perfect particulars’, and as such they are world creating texts whose power to attract would be lost if their detail were reduced. In Murdoch’s Plato-inspired picture, purity in philosophy demands the ‘disciplined removal of the personal voice’. But how, then, can philosophy exploit the clues that art contains? The novelist, she writes, ‘deliberately leaves a space for readers to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.’ Everything that we associate with any reading of the novel worth the name – imaginative responsiveness, emotional attachment and recoil from its characterisation and plot – seems to be prohibited to philosophy by virtue of what it is. And this suggests that Murdoch’s account of philosophy must be at odds with the kind of reading the novel requires if its conceptual resources are to be obtained. In other words, the closer Murdoch models philosophy on science the more distant it becomes from the novels she says it needs. Here Murdoch’s remarks open up the argument without resolving it because they leave us with a problem that her own ways of thinking appear unable to solve.

Cora Diamond tackles this dilemma head on. Insofar as philosophy assumes that its subject matter ‘will lie still to be investigated’ it must find the novel closed because novel reading is precisely not one that is impersonal, one in which there is no marriage between reader and text. So, in Diamond’s view, for a philosopher to read the novel philosophically ‘is itself a revolutionary act’. Literature stands to philosophy as a bearing of witness does to life. Here the honest report sheds light on life directly. It is not an example that illustrates a theory determined in advance. This means that literary texts are not to be pictured ‘as taking a view on one side or another of a philosophical controversy’. Literature, Diamond believes, is a neighbour that philosophy cannot do without.

We should notice a number of features of Diamond’s account. First, there is a striking reluctance to collapse completely the boundaries between philosophy and literature. Certain kinds of theoretical division are clearly unwelcome, but full-scale indifference to textual variety is ruled out. Even after the revolution, philosophy and literature will be related as neighbours rather than partners in a common enterprise. Second, in Diamond’s understanding, the value of the novel to philosophy is emphatically not because of the philosophy in the novel. To express this in terms of her analogy, I do not value my neighbour because my neighbour is a reflection of me. Third, what might make the novel less than helpful to philosophy is the possibility that it fails as a novel. Thus, Diamond points out rightly ‘(besides whatever views
it expresses) any piece of writing may exhibit or fail to exhibit the power of the mode of thought it exemplifies.¹⁷ For even though novels do sometimes fail as novels, in relation to the views they contain – assuming such views can be distilled – these should count for no more than the views expressed in a work of philosophy.

What Cora Diamond acutely asks us to consider is the kind of understanding involved when textual boundaries are crossed. Students of literature are often confidently familiar with inter-textuality in which texts engage with each other through different kinds of mutual reference, but philosophers are sometimes sceptical. They worry that the experience might be like reading a parish magazine which turns out not to be about your parish at all. A text comes alive to us when, as R. G. Collingwood argues, we discover and respond to the question that it is meant to answer and when we ask the appropriate questions of it ourselves. But when boundaries are overridden the dangers of divided loyalties multiply and, with them, the increased possibility of ambiguity and confusion.

The Roman poet Ovid is reported to have gone enthusiastically to the races to view, not the horses but the girls. When read by philosophers, then, novels must take their chances since, like the horses, they face being ignored should a nifty piece of argument catch the philosopher’s eye. Here Diamond is effectively challenging both Plato’s banishment of the artists and his metaphysics. But, in doing so, she raises the key question – precisely what kind of reading do philosophers have to make of the novel if their indebtedness to it is to be repaid? Diamond wants philosophical readers of the novel to approach the text without setting limits on what can be learned from it. For philosophers, it is as if quarrying the novel is solely a matter of letting it speak for itself. But letting the novel speak for itself is not what we understand novel reading to be about. Reading the novel involves much more than the passive digesting of information. Attentive readers are those who actively bring their own critical and emotional intelligence to the novel’s world in the course of becoming complicit in it.

Cora Diamond’s way of writing about philosophy and literature helps us to focus more clearly on how they might be related. Moralism is too crude a way of linking moral philosophy and life, and, in any case, in wanting its literature to be serious and mature is, as Iris Murdoch shows, when taking F. R. Leavis to task,¹⁸ more than halfway to adopting a utilitarian view of art. Even so, in Diamond’s refocusing of the issues troublesome questions remain. Is the philosophical reader
an attentive reader who also wants something more? Or simply a reader who lets the novel speak for itself?

Contemporary debate about the issues involved here ranges from moral philosophers who are interested in literary theory to literary theorists who are interested in moral philosophy. Some stress the need for unity. Richard Eldridge, for instance, argues that any lack of rapprochement between philosophy and literature diminishes both. So he claims that the novel and philosophy ‘continually call one another into question, even while requiring one another’. Literary texts and their philosophical readers occupy an arena of ethical reflection in which the reciprocal interrogation involved actually is ethics. It is in the mutual testing of different texts that, in the words of another contributor to the discussion, ‘theory becomes literary and literature becomes theoretical’.

To speak of the novel as a friend or a neighbour to philosophy is to speak metaphorically, but such language expresses a philosophical defence of literature that is extremely influential in the current debate. It is a way of instantiating what happens when boundaries are made less rigid. In this picture the novel’s role in philosophy is more emphatic than a ‘reminder’ of conceptual possibilities. So, for Anthony Cunningham, ‘when it comes to appreciating human life and forms of character’, outside philosophical argument it is in the novel that the philosopher can discover the witness to life.

Other voices in the discussion stress this point more strongly. For S. L. Goldberg moral philosophers often frame their understandings of moral thinking too narrowly. Focused on actions and conduct, they neglect the sense in which people are lives as well as agents, lives that are uniquely revelatory of character. Thus, Goldberg argues that ‘philosophy is limited when it comes to the irreducible individuality of people; it is literature that enables us to think of them as irreducible individuals as well as particular collections of universal human virtues and vices.’. This means that ethics needs to consider people as imaginative literature does – not as types, cases or examples, but by portraying ‘human beings immediately in the very activity and flow of life’. The novel’s particulars – what it reveals of individual joys, sufferings and attainments – do not simply represent an abstract universal joy, suffering or attainment. They show us what it is for a unique individual to have such experiences over the course of a whole life.

We should notice that Goldberg does not shirk the implications of his humanism. For it is now the humanist reader who acts as the model to be followed. Understanding the lives of fictional characters ‘is
in every important respect like grasping people as moral beings: it is to think of them as well as about them, and so to reach towards a fuller, intensified sense of the individual – a sense of its distinctive reality as well as of its distinctive make-up and qualities. It is the job of philosophical readers to emulate this ideal.

The stress on the empathy with the other that is at the heart of humanism is an advance, and remains so even when it takes us on to treacherous ground. There is a straightforward reason for this. Without the project of welding a philosophical reading to literary humanist assumptions we would not encounter the difficulties it raises. And dealing with these moves the argument along to ascertain what a philosophical reading does involve. So, for instance, where literary humanists see no difference between empathy for others in life and empathy for fictional characters we may wish to enter a reservation, and follow it with a more critical discussion. Also, as Charles Altieri rightly points out, there is the substantial difficulty of discovering how particular literary creations can come to possess the generality of a philosophical argument, and, indeed, the ways some fictions are structured emphatically rejects humanist assumptions. Further, a liberal humanism is commonly understood to rest on neutrality and disinterestedness towards competing human goods. Such criteria are intended to govern moral assessments. But how can they shape the judgements of literary humanist readers when their attachments to specific texts are necessarily dependent on their own individual responses to character and plot? Can a literary reader act as an impartial judge, or is this a position that must be sacrificed when readers enter the novel’s world?

For one participant in the debate such a sacrifice is well worth making. In Jane Adamson’s view, philosophy should learn from literature’s stance against tidiness. The novel is sprawling, messy, incomplete, and, yet, its very untidiness reflects life. Philosophy should take heed because literature stands as a counsel against over-tidy theoretical pictures of the moral life that rehearse only the categories of the theorist, and nothing of life. This view, it is worth noting, is also found within moral philosophy itself. Utilitarianism, for instance, is often attacked as too neat an account of the moral life.

And, yet, we should, perhaps, be wary of the sharpness of the division involved here. For literature’s capacity to express life’s contingencies, its messiness, the gaps between the rails, so to speak, comes from a skill that is anything but out of control. It is a reflection of the craft at work in conveying to readers a sense of life that does not alienate through making life more static and, hence, less believable, than it is.
In Adamson’s view, the relations between philosophy and literature constitute at best a productive antagonism. And so she advises philosophy to admit into its ways of reading the confusions and inconsistencies found in life. But of the dangers involved in bringing this about she says little beyond a disclaimer that this can be expressed as a set of rules. By contrast, at the heart of my argument is the belief that a great deal can be said about philosophy’s ways of reading texts other than its own, and that detailed consideration of how philosophers read novels can help us see what is at stake.

One of the ways we can discover the issues here is by listening carefully to each of the many voices in the debate. What we often hear is a determination to change the debate’s terms, by identifying and discarding ideas which are thought question begging or ill at ease with one another. Andrew Gibson makes this claim at the start of his defence of a post-modern ethics of reading. The pictures of the novel adopted by moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty involve assumptions about narrative, representational power and textual unity that Gibson finds naïve. This model ‘effectively facilitates if it does not determine’ the conclusions which these philosophers wish to draw. For Gibson, too, the understanding of ethics in Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s writings necessarily implies ‘a return to metaphysics’, in spite, it might be thought desirable to add, of their strenuous denials that this is the case. What we should say at this stage is that it is only through a detailed examination of what Nussbaum and Rorty actually say that we can determine what role each gives to philosophy when the novel is thought central. It is worth mentioning, however, that, (even though Gibson does not make this charge), it would be difficult to associate Peter Winch’s conception of ethics with metaphysics in any sense. Additionally, Winch says little about the novel as genre, or, indeed, about any of the examples he uses beyond what they show in the argument. This, for Winch, is the point of the example.

This brief survey of the current debate has set the scene for what follows. Much hinges on our being able to specify permissible ways of reading the novel philosophically. The best way forward, therefore, is through a close examination of those philosophers whose work exemplifies radically different ways of reading. It is this work in the current debate that makes their voices distinctive, and so there should be some profit in giving them our attention.

Different uses of literature specify different kinds of mediation between ethics and art. In the first use I investigate in this book, the
novel serves philosophy as a source of example. Here I explore the writings of, amongst others, Peter Winch, most notably his discussion of Melville’s *Billy Budd*, in which he brings out what he sees as the inadequacies of one influential account of moral judgement. Winch is attracted to Wittgenstein’s view that in philosophy literary examples act as reminders. Their purpose is to warn us of the many ways in which our intelligence can be bewitched by language. Literature’s value comes not from what it asserts or proposes, but from what it shows. And what it shows is not an account of language as such, but how language can mislead us about, say, perception, by imposing a picture upon us. Winch’s deployment of Wittgenstein’s point is distinctive. His is a voice in the debate that needs listening to. For Winch reads the novel as a sign that something is amiss in philosophy when a recognisable feature of moral experience is distorted by the way it has been understood. We are reminded that possibilities exist in life that can be obscured in ethics. It is, in other words, the rich, moral particularity conveyed in the novel that makes it such a powerful source of illumination to philosophy, such a counter-blast to abstraction. When Henry James famously remarks that ‘an ounce of example is worth a ton of generalities’, he is identifying the concentrated power of an example to convince directly by showing, as opposed to discursive reasoning. This does not mean, however, that writers like Winch set no terms of engagement for the bearing of ethics on the novel. In their reading the novel as a source of example it is not the novel as such which attracts their attention. They do not speak about the novel as a literary artefact, nor do they allow that an aesthetic response to it is essential for the moral philosopher’s argument. At issue here is the nature of a distinctively philosophical empathy with the novel – what it requires, excludes or deems irrelevant.

With moral philosophers who limit the role of the novel to a source of example, the important question to ask is what philosophical work the example is actually doing. In Martha Nussbaum’s writings – the second use of literature in ethics I wish to consider – the claims made for literature are more ambitious and set quite different terms for the engagement of ethics and art. In 1986, at the start of one of her earliest works, Nussbaum writes that ‘interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example; and even when the work has once been interpreted, it remains unexhausted, subject to reassessment, in a way that the example does not.’ Nussbaum’s remarks have an application beyond tragedy since they offer readers, in effect, a draft on her future
contributions to the debate. Nussbaum encourages us to look for the philosophical value in literature beyond its use as an example. A play such as *Antigone* or a novel such as *The Princess Cassamassima* are not each readily substitutable, and their own value to ethics is diminished if they are reduced to themes or explained schematically to serve a pre-articulated philosophical purpose. Unlike Winch, who maintains a strict separation between ethics and casuistry, Nussbaum in her later writings aims to deploy neo-Aristotelianism to life. Literature stands not solely as a servant to philosophy, but as an essential aid to life. Art is given a more emphatic place in ethics, and ethics a more emphatic place in life.

Since it is the novel as such that is thought indispensable, art aspires to enter ethics on its own terms. To read the novel exclusively as an ad hoc source of example is to miss the very qualities in the novel which make them essential to ethics. Pragmatic use of literature to develop a philosophical argument fails to do justice to the novel as a particular literary art – it does not capture the overall emotional appeal, the completeness of characterisation and the narrative drive of fiction. When we recognise that moral philosophers commonly manipulate examples to suit different sides of their arguments, we see the extreme oddity of treating a novel as an example in just the same way.

Nussbaum links the novel to ethics through the Aristotelian question: how should one/we live? The novel conveys the priority of perception in practical reasoning, so radically querying the idea that ethics can be construed as an impersonal engine for aggregating outcomes in terms of social benefit or utility. We go wrong, Nussbaum believes, if we think of ethics exclusively in terms of rules formulated in advance of practice and narrative. The flow of life cannot be completely incorporated into rules. The novel contains powerful descriptions of moral dilemmas. It brings out the ethical significance of the emotions, in the ways individuals respond to reversals in which harm results, not from accident, but from the person’s character or project. Nussbaum is certainly conscious of the conceptual differences between literature and life, but, we want to ask, if the novel is central to ethical enquiry because of its proximity to life, then why not life itself? Why draw on fictional narratives when ethics can turn to life? Nussbaum’s defence of the novel in ethics is philosophically provocative. Art both embraces and enhances life. Art both gives, and in sophisticated ways, sets examples to ethics. Without art, life is often only barely lived, as routine, habit or fantasy. The claims for the place of literature in ethics in Nussbaum’s work are powerfully stated. At one point in *Love’s*
Knowledge – one of her most famous works – she says that ‘literature can be and is philosophical: it plays a part in our search for truth and for a good life.’. This places Nussbaum’s arguments on the borderline between ethics and political philosophy. At issue here is both the place of literature in ethics and the capacity of ethics to generate a philosophically defensible liberalism.

With Nussbaum’s reference to truth and the nature of the good life we reach the third use of literature in moral philosophy. In the first use the novel is deployed as a source of example. A character, a moral decision or a narrated sequence of events is used as a way of illustrating the weakness in the ethical theory that purports to explain them. This is how Winch uses Melville’s *Billy Budd* to reveal what he takes to be the unsatisfactory nature of a specific view of moral judgement. In the second use of literature the novel so transforms and elevates its story that no moral philosophy can afford to ignore it. It is the novel itself that is indispensable to ethics. The themes of truth and the nature of the good life that epitomise Nussbaum’s concerns are taken up in the third use – that which is found in the work of Richard Rorty.

For Rorty, philosophy’s claim to be a foundational discipline, unlocking the doors to the meaning of such terms as ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and ‘goodness’ is entirely spurious. When this picture of philosophy fades, literature re-emerges. On these terms of engagement the relation between art and ethics is more like an equal footing. In the ancient antagonism between literature and philosophy it is not that literature triumphs, but rather that philosophy through hubris defaults. What makes us aware of the ethical character of our lives is not a vocabulary of technical truth, but a series of descriptions which convey our beliefs and desires, their impact on each other, and the kinds of human beings we would wish to be. Like Nussbaum, Rorty gives literature a key place in ethics, but it is an ethics almost completely disestablished from its traditional foundational role. Like Nussbaum, too, Rorty wishes to defend liberalism, but it is a liberalism that can have no basis in metaphysics. In Rorty’s writings we are confronting literature in the service of solidarity. In novels such as Dickens’ *Bleak House* and Nabokov’s *Lolita* we encounter characters like Mrs Jellyby and Humbert Humbert, whose wilful blindness to others better alerts us to the nature of cruelty than more abstract forms of enquiry. How the novel can find a persuasive role in Rorty’s sustained anti-metaphysical stance will be, in this third use of literature, a central question.

At the start of this Introduction I suggested that recommendations to moral philosophers that they study fiction often court paradox. As
Colin McGinn aptly comments, ‘fiction fails to conform to any of the philosophical paradigms at large. Yet in fiction we find ethical themes treated with a depth and resonance that is unmatched in human culture.’ The novel is neither sermon nor mere entertainment; it conveys no information, nor can we appreciate or, possibly, fully grasp its story through summary or paraphrase. And, yet, the novel’s ‘ethical themes’ are quarried extensively by moral philosophers seeking enlightenment by asking different questions of the novel from significantly differing philosophical starting-points. What each pursues is the novel’s ethical gold. Imaginative literature is seen as a source of example by those who understand ethics as the search for clarity about the moral life. It is seen as a form of art by philosophers who believe that ethics addresses how one/we should live. For those who think ethics concedes any special moral authority because of its methods of argument, the novel is one among a number of powerful descriptions of human moral experience.

In life, of course, there are familiar and, occasionally, comic risks involved in asking one thing to do the work of another, for a paintbrush to act as a hammer, for example. In philosophy, however, the contiguity of opposites often points to similarities between apparently contrasting modes of thought or ways of seeing. After remarking that the novel is ‘the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness’, Lawrence adds a warning of the dangers involved in trying too hard to pin down the novel’s content. To varying degrees, the ethical uses of the novel we are about to discuss are all forms of intervention by philosophy into art; as such, all risk not heeding Lawrence’s advice – through their readings being too distant from, or intruding too much into, the novel’s world.

The philosophers whose work we will be examining do not speak with one voice. And, yet, the ways of thinking they develop – Winch’s exploration of the novel as example, Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelianism and Rorty’s anti-foundational stress on the novel’s edifying role – are all seminal to the contemporary debate. It is criticism, of course, that moves this debate along. There is the complaint that literature has been short-changed by philosophy. The novel is understood only through the categories that interest the philosopher. Works such as Billy Budd and Lolita do not speak as themselves, but only when and how the philosopher commands. There is the concern, too, that literature, while not issuing direct injunctions to life is, nevertheless, a questionable resource if ethics aspires to embrace life. In converting literature into a branch of philosophy is not the philosopher reading
fictional characters as actual people, forgetting, not realising, or being unwilling to acknowledge that they exist not in life but only in the pages of the novels that contain them?

At issue here is the kind of reading that is appropriate when philosophy exceeds its boundaries. Is there, as Gadamer suggests, an instructive parallel between understanding the novel and understanding another person? Or is the philosopher’s reading as out of place as a civilian’s commands would be in drilling a body of troops? The picture of philosophy quarrying the novel for its ethical riches is not uncommon. To many philosophers it seems an ungenerous metaphor. In the first chapter we shall investigate why.
Philosophers who put the novel to work in ethics commonly present some picture of what they think they are doing. Invariably, this consists of claims regarding the nature of philosophy, what the novel is about and how the gap between them might be bridged. The image often sought is that of the philosopher as the experienced drill sergeant, as competent in addressing the novel as the sergeant is with command. The philosopher is not the innocent civilian placed for the first time in charge of a body of troops.

Novel-using philosophers traverse what Stuart Hampshire calls ‘the middle ground’.¹ Philosophers are pictured tracking between philosophy and art, working forwards and backwards across the terrain between the argument (or the clarity that philosophy seeks) and the novel (or those features in the novel that appear rewarding). This way of interrogating the novel is not literary criticism. It also falls well short of a systematic account of the relations between philosophy and art. What it does imply, however, is a method, a way of reaching the novel from philosophy and of returning that goes beyond, but does not lose touch with, the general life enhancing knowledge that attentive reading often provides.

One of the qualities essential to reading is the capacity of readers to put themselves in the position of the other. ‘Without this power of sympathy,’ Joyce Cary remarks,² ‘there is no revelation.’ Reading asks for open-mindedness towards the text that is a form of generosity. When the reader is ungenerous, patience in the face of the novel’s deliberate ambiguities is too easily lost, as it is with meanings that are intentionally left open or are presented as incomplete. Reading with generosity means a preparedness to embrace the novel’s world, and, indeed, novel-using philosophers have needed no encouragement to
read the novel in precisely this way. Thus, waiting on the novel means not judging it in advance. It expresses the willingness to listen to the novel’s voice, but now the central question presents itself – what is it for the novel to speak to philosophy in its own voice? Is aesthetics now being asked to do the work of ethics, or should philosophy be undemanding of the novelist’s art?

This kind of philosophical interest in the novel stems as much from concern about the aims and arguments of ethics as it does from the attractions of the novel. For Rorty, the novel is an invitation for us to think. It is a way of stirring ethics up since it is also a counter to the essentialism that Rorty finds so oppressive. Moral philosophy should learn from the novel’s distinguishing features. Grasp of detail, enthusiasm for narrative, comprehension of accident alongside purpose, surprise as well as design – all these should draw the philosopher in. And, so, for Rorty, what the philosopher should emulate is what the novelist finds most heroic, ‘not the ability to sternly reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them.’

If we were to accept Rorty’s picture, philosophy should entertain openness to new vocabularies, and of these the most pressing for us is the vocabulary appropriate to crossing from one genre to another. Within any particular genre we look to the criteria of judgement that are appropriate, but in passage between texts what criteria could there be? Where Hampshire sees the middle ground between philosophy and the novel as one of ‘inner conflict and uncertainty’ Rorty visualises freedom. Where one sees the danger of misunderstanding, possibly mutual incomprehension, the other sees a desirable mutuality, a plurality of standpoints.

We are faced, in other words, with a problem in the relations between ethics and literature that is endemic. What Rorty terms ‘the ability to move back and forth’ between genres is one that requires a voice, not simply because of the need to articulate and distinguish events, but also to provide a sense of direction. Manufacturing a voice, as one critic does by describing Dylan Thomas’s *The Map of Love* as ‘autogeography’, does little to help us. What this particular manufactured voice communicates is the amalgam of autobiography and sense of place that Thomas’s stories display. But no single manufactured voice could express or, indeed, grasp the inter-textual travelling that we wish to undertake and explain.

Could metaphor illuminate the kind of understanding at work? The moral philosopher, it might be said, stands to the novel as the miner does to the quarry. Both are concerned to develop the best possible
techniques for unearthing the material they seek. Rules for attentive reading can be formulated just as we can point to effective techniques of extraction, better or worse ways of enabling miners to get what they want. And, yet, we should be cautious. The novel is not a static resource, one that lies dormant until discovered, as we might speak of mineral wealth. The novel is an activity with a life of its own, and its resourcefulness is not exhausted when philosophers, as miners often do, transfer their explorations elsewhere. There is, in other words, reciprocity involved in working the novel philosophically that the metaphor does not explain. We might say that this metaphor is at odds with the generosity that a philosophical reading of the novel asks for.

If the quarrying metaphor involves too utilitarian a picture of the philosopher’s work then, perhaps, one that follows a different track will shed more light. Could we think of the novel as a ‘living friend’ to philosophy, a text that promises the same kind of equity and mutuality that friendship expresses in life? We should remember, however, Iris Murdoch’s comment that while ‘literature does many things, philosophy does one thing’. Novels might very well stand to their readers as in life friends do to each other, but does that identify the philosopher’s purpose precisely enough? Between the novel and its reader, as between friends, an intimacy exists that must not overwhelm. Both sets of relationships are tolerant of varying degrees of intensity. When literary texts are good of their kind readers’ judgements are expressive of pleasure as well as intellect, as friends commonly are of each other’s successes and achievements. Novel-using philosophers may freely grant these parallels. They may well be readers in the spirit of the novel’s friend, and, yet, also feel that the character of their own investigations has not been fully described. For the clarity that philosophy seeks can be obstructed in the novel, as when during the course of a novel’s narrative there is an artistic need to mystify or withhold.

Using a different metaphor it is the novel as neighbour to philosophy that is stressed. It is a picture that underplays both the efficiency and the intimacy of its predecessors, but is it more compelling? In philosophy’s neighbourhood, the metaphor tells us, we find ways of speaking which are not philosophy’s and which it also must not ignore. For Cora Diamond this is what philosophy finds significant about works such as a memoir by Primo Levi, a novel by George Orwell or a poem by Zbigniew Herbert. Such works ‘are not about truth as a property of sentences, but are people’s making sense of life, calling on words like “truth” and “lies” and “witness” and “ignorance”. These uses are people making something of truth.’ For Diamond, literature
can ‘help us to see that no philosophical confusion need underlie the idea of truth as a great good.’ Philosophy needs such neighbours because they show us graphically what others are doing when they fight untruth. It is not that philosophy through a theory of meaning gives permission for them to speak about life in the way they do. Rather, it is because of the way they speak that philosophy is in need of them.

Cora Diamond’s neighbour metaphor is hostile to hierarchy in the relation between philosophy and the novel, but without offering any presumption in favour of equality. Like the relations between neighbours in life, it is a matter of philosophy noticing what the other is up to. Neither is wholly enclosed nor is each wholly open to the other’s enquiries.

Is the neighbour metaphor too comfortable, too undemanding of the need for a philosophical authorisation of the novel’s truths to give us reliable guidance about what to read and how? Perhaps we should think of the novel-using philosopher as the reader over the novelist’s shoulder, a Kant-like figure that advises us not to listen to the novel’s voice unless it is stamped with philosophical approval. Joyce Cary speaks about the novel revealing to readers ‘new orders of meaning’ often beyond what can be found in life, but to philosophers perched on the novelist’s shoulder Cary’s phrase encourages a more structured line of approach. It suggests that philosophy’s business is with the novel’s conceptual distinctiveness. It suggests, too, that there is a determinable order of priority between the aesthetic character of the novel and ethics that must be respected if the novel’s importance to ethics is to be understood. It encourages philosophers who say that unless we know what marks the novel off from poetry or from drama, something crucial to ethics will be lost. Unless we know what defining aesthetic feature distinguishes one novel from another we will not know why one novel rather than any other merits ethical discussion. Unless we can find an aesthetic licence for the novel’s capacity to prompt in readers an ‘instinct for life instead of a theory of right and wrong’, as Lawrence asserts, then any philosophical reading will be fragile, lacking aesthetic theory’s stabilising grace.

Yet, surely, what is mistaken in this account is that it operates with exactly the wrong set of assumptions: from these assumptions it would follow that any learning from the novel by philosophy would be dependent on the theory of the novel that philosophy authorises. But then what we would be learning from is not the novel, but the theory. And this means that the novel no longer speaks in its own voice, but in
philosophy’s. In deploying the novel under these constraints, novel-using philosophers are, in effect, talking to themselves when what they wish to be doing is talking to others.

Iris Murdoch is one philosopher who is rightly alert to this danger. For her, it is not that our ordinary artistic judgements are shiftless unless legitimised by aesthetic theory. Rather it is aesthetics that must respond to those ‘great works of art which we know to be such independently’. To this she adds the highly appropriate thought that moral philosophy shares this feature: ‘if a moral philosophy does not give a satisfactory or sufficiently rich account of what we unphilosophically know to be goodness, then away with it.’

So, if we were to think of the novel as, for example, a convincing resemblance of life, a creative literary mimesis that is comprehensive of life, we would be putting the novel’s power to illuminate at risk. For we would then be forcing the novel’s imaginative reach into a mould manufactured by philosophy. Learning from the novel would then be a matter of checking the novel’s descriptions against the originals and so would become vulnerable to the standard objections to art as resemblance. Collingwood may overstate his case when he contrasts mimetic art with art proper, but he is surely right in his criticism of it. The artist proper, Collingwood writes, ‘does not want a thing of a certain kind, he wants a certain thing.’ So any philosophical working of the novel that aims at knowledge of kinds is misplaced. The novel-using philosopher who understands learning from the novel in this way is like the philosopher of mind who thinks that states of mind can be gauged from mapping bumps on the head. As Collingwood remarks, to take a novel as a depiction of ‘the feelings of women, or bus-drivers, or homosexuals’ is necessarily to misunderstand it.

Defenders of a mimetic understanding of literature may readily agree that a novel such as Melville’s *Billy Budd* is not concerned with the description of psychological stereotypes or with the accurate representation of an historical object (in this case, the French revolutionary wars). They will say, however, that the novel does point beyond itself to general aspects of human experience, like guilt, innocence and war itself, as Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* does with love and despair. They may also say that the novel’s ‘aboutness’ is a condition of our learning from it at all. Our granting significance to works of art is bound up with this. It is something which, as Iris Murdoch comments, is ‘very evident in a novel where the reader rightly expects, however odd the work may be, some kind of moral aesthetic sense of direction, some indication of how to read the relation, or apparent lack of relation, to the ordinary world.’
Here, however, we need to proceed with care. For if there are general concepts heavily at work in the novel, from which the philosophical reader learns, we should remember that it is only through the particular – through Billy or Anna – that we can acquire them. We also run the risk of deluding ourselves that it is the general idea that the novel is about. This is the danger, as S. L. Goldberg rightly points out, of giving ‘primacy to the idea, and to look to the work for the ‘correct’ views or attitudes or mental processes the work depicts for us.’

Moral philosophers who are in the grip of a favoured picture of the novel, in effect, under-employ themselves, like political philosophers who derive a list of rights and duties exclusively from the contract picture of the state. We would be wise, this suggests, to maintain a distance between the novel and philosophy. We need to block off the idea that philosophy can learn from the novel only by offering a specific description of it. Novelists, too, can be equally resistant to their art being thought of as mimetic. Wyndham Lewis, for example, creates fictional characters to convey the power of abstract ideas. Making the novel believable is, for Lewis, simply a form of reader flattery. Credibility is not his concern. The novel does not stand to philosophy as holiday reading – relaxation for philosophers when their working day is over. Novel-using philosophers, then, have more reason than most to be wary of novelists whose aim is to please. It may also be that the mimetic understanding of the novel is neglectful of romantic and expressive literary modes, but this is not the key point. Rather, it is that philosophy’s critical and discursive voice must not pre-empt what the novel has to say. For Meirlys Lewis, ‘the narrative is there, to be reflected upon. Nothing can be added and nothing can be taken away – otherwise it becomes a different story.’ The novel, in other words, operates not within philosophy’s constraints, but its own. So in Winch’s writings the utility of the novel’s examples is quite independent of any explanation of how the novel achieves its effects. Mimesis, as a theory of literature, offers an account of what the novelist has to do to draw readers in. At the very heart of mimesis is the novelist’s ability to engage readers’ attention so that they find the tale both believable and affecting. But Winch is able to learn philosophically from the novel without subscribing to this theory. Nor are Winch’s emotions worn conspicuously on his sleeve. Rorty, too, stands well clear of a single philosophical explanation of the novel’s purchase since to do so would be to privilege one description of the novel among many. From Rorty’s perspective, the novel-using philosopher who flies the mimetic flag looks like the wine expert who dares his
colleagues to show him a decent Spanish white. In both cases, the theoretical air is simply too thin for the examples to breathe.

In Nussbaum’s commentaries, the novel’s literary qualities are, of course, central. ‘Schematic philosophers’ examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction; they lack, too, good fiction’s way of making the reader a participant and a friend.’. But we should also realise that for Nussbaum no ethical reading will be compelling if it rests on these qualities alone. For her, a contemporary Aristotelian way of thinking is necessary to set the novel’s insights in relief.

To philosophers who think of the novel as a resource the mining metaphor is entirely apposite. The novel supplies what philosophy wants. Iris Murdoch, referring to our experience of beauty, gives an example of how close observation of nature can change the way a person thinks of herself. She writes, ‘I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel.’ This is a wonderful image for showing us what it is like to be transformed by beauty in nature: and Murdoch would extend it to art. So the image also tells us what it is like for a reader to experience nothing but Anna and Vronsky, and the tragic nature of their love or, in Melville’s *Billy Budd*, nothing but Billy, Vere and the dilemma he faces. The novel enriches.

Another philosopher, Gordon Graham, provides us with a subtle and delicate account of the novel’s virtues, without really disturbing the picture of it as a supplier: ‘fiction and poetry put both mind and action equally on view; characters and events can be seen entire.’. For those considering the nature of the best life, ‘novels and poems supply patterns of human relationship’. In the act of reading Melville’s *Moby Dick*, there is nothing but Ahab, what he thinks and feels and what he does. It is this experience that the novel supplies.

And, yet, it is the differences between this experience and philosophical reading that are instructive. For philosophy does not come to the novel to be supplied with anything it cannot question. Whatever the novel provides, philosophy always sets the additional test of clarification. It may be that the novel helps to purge philosophy of abstraction and self-absorption, but what it must not be allowed to diminish is philosophy’s own independent voice, its independent
utterances: these are what may be at stake when the ground between philosophy and the novel is traversed. Thinking of the philosopher as a commentator on the novel gives us a sharper focus: thus, philosophy does not simply take what the novel offers, however richly this is described. As Robert Eaglestone rightly points out ‘it is the commentary, not the literary text itself, which can be moral philosophy’.24

How can we take this further? The purpose of a commentary on the Psalms or on a poem by Wordsworth is to enable us to understand these texts better. A philosophical commentary on the novel does not wish us to understand the novel better, but differently. The novel is more than capable of standing on its own two feet in this respect. Neither is the philosophical commentary like a translation of the novel, as one might translate, say, Cervantes into English. The philosophical commentary speaks differently from the novel it commentates on, but this is not a rendering of one language into another. The philosophical commentary seeks its own kind of clarity.

What, then, marks the difference between the commentary and the text commentated on? In the course of an illuminating discussion of Kafka’s fiction and philosophy James Conant takes up this question. Even in the case of a writer like Kafka whose novels might easily be thought of as philosophical, Conant thinks that a dividing line must be drawn. He writes that Kafka’s fiction describes ‘the arc of philosophy’s first movement (which traces the path of our thought into illusion, confusion, and captivity) but never that of philosophy’s second movement (which uncovers the thread back to the safety of reflection conducted within the limits of reason, the security of faith, and the stability of those language-games in which our apparently threatened concepts find their proper homes)’.25

Kafka’s protagonists always progress deeper and deeper into the antagonisms of their situation, but never towards a philosophical resolution of them. What is involved in getting a Kafka story wrong is not picked out by any of the metaphors of philosophical reading that we have encountered so far. Conant talks about a Kafka parable as working like an oracle in the sense that how the parable answers will depend on the nature of its application to those who come to question it. Parables are not self-interpreting. This holds good for the novel, too. Question and answer is the appropriate way of speaking here, something that the mining metaphor cannot comprehend since there the text’s meaning is either found or not. As we have seen, the metaphor of the literary text as a ‘living friend’ to philosophy encourages reciprocity, as does the picture of it as a neighbour, but neither is sufficiently
fine-tuned to bring out what Conant needs. Neither permits us to distinguish the point of view of the story from the point of view of its protagonist. Getting the story wrong, for Conant, means taking the protagonist’s perspective without seeing the wider context of meaning within which the situation of the protagonist is placed. And this is crucial to seeing the difference between the philosophy that is in Kafka’s fiction and the philosophy that is not. The nature of a Kafka story, Conant writes, ‘is one in which philosophy’s first movement is represented as a preparation for its second movement, while the possibility of the second movement is represented as both necessary and impossible.’

Here, then, are novels and stories that cannot completely supply what philosophy wants. Conant remarks that Kafka shares with Wittgenstein ‘the aim of teaching us how to pass from a piece of disguised to a piece of undisguised nonsense.’ But then adds that ‘language in Kafka’s narratives seems fated never to be able to advance very far in the direction that accords with Wittgenstein’s other aim: to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.’ Conant’s ‘fated’ is a succinct description of a feature of narrative that is specific to Kafka. We should, therefore, stop well short of extending what Conant says about the dialogue between philosophy and story in Kafka to one where the interplay between the two is very different. In reflecting on moral philosophy and literature there is the ever-present danger of assuming that when philosophers turn to the novel there is one big feature of the novel that explains it.

Diversity needs to be recognised, but even so there is a clue to something more general in what Conant says about Kafka that is worth following up. Conant himself presents his engagement with Kafka as like a dialogue in which different philosophers speak along with the novelist. In this movement forwards and backwards between the philosopher’s preoccupations and Kafka’s there are degrees of similarity and difference. The three philosophers that Conant introduces – Kant, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein – all in different ways see philosophy as the attempt to distinguish the questions that we can sensibly ask from those that are simply unanswerable and which, when we do try to find answers for them, lead us into confusion. Kafka shares the diagnosis of the problem, but does not follow a route to its solution.

Now what is happening here? Isn’t what is happening something like a conversation, one in which each of the interlocutors wishes to pull in an interestingly different direction? And isn’t the ‘something general’ that Conant gives us a clue to precisely this – that the
traversing of the middle ground between philosophy and the novel follows the model of a conversation, and that as such it is neither invariable nor unconstrained?

To understand novel-using philosophers as engaged in a conversation with a subject outside philosophy suggests immediately that the traffic between them is not one way. Here the novel does not stand to philosophy as a supplier of information to a superior discipline, to be set aside when its work is done. Rather, as Plato implies in the metaphor of the cave, we should speak of the novel and philosophy as relating through, as Iris Murdoch strikingly expresses it, ‘a descending as well as an ascending dialectic’.29 While the detail that art reveals can never supplant philosophy there is for Plato a desirable interchange between them in addition to unavoidable division. There is value in this thought because it discourages us from searching too keenly for the common ground between the novelist and the philosopher. It may be, for example, that Kafka and Wittgenstein have more in common than Wittgenstein and John Stuart Mill, but it is not the common, rather the middle ground that interests us.

In the course of an essay on Gadamer,30 Charles Taylor sheds light on what is distinctive about the conversational model of human understanding. In Taylor’s view, the understanding that links conversationalists is wholly unlike the knowledge obtained of objects. In a conversation we are necessarily faced by our interlocutor’s angle on us. In reaching knowledge of an object, say, a tree, a stone or a planet, no such reciprocity is possible. Further, in reaching knowledge of an object our goal is completeness. We aim to rule out the unpredictable or the unexpected. Conversational understanding, however, excludes this finality since its course and consequences depend as much on our interlocutors as on us. Here we are faced with the possibility of surprise both from the same conversationalist and from new ones. There is, therefore, the need to adapt, modify and, sometimes, to completely remake our replies when conversations are unsettling or disturbing, as when, for example, a comment takes us aback or leaves us apparently lost for words.

Could Taylor’s account of the conversational model take in what we want to say about the philosopher’s dialogue with the novel? About its highlighting of the inapplicability of the common-sense picture of knowledge we need have no doubts. The understanding we are looking for is not one that is unvarying, necessarily uninvolved with the standpoint of the other. Quite the contrary, in fact, since the conversation model sees the novel and philosophy as attempting to reach a mutual
comprehension, as trying to avoid misunderstanding each other’s points of view. Taylor’s description of the character of hermeneutical understanding is relevant here. He writes, ‘we have to maintain a kind of openness to the text, allow ourselves to be interpellated by it, take seriously the way its formulations differ from ours; all things which a live interlocutor in a situation of equal power would force us to do.’.31

Reading a novel philosophically is an act of communication between standpoints that are distinctive both in substance and history. A philosophical conversation with the novel is not like a conversation between two scientists, or between two carpenters, since the philosopher speaks in more than one voice. Novel-using philosophers are also novel readers and so they share with the latter the need for critical attentiveness if they are to understand and appreciate the story the novel has to tell. But the language that philosophers use in this double role is not a hybrid – an amalgam of the non-philosophical readers’ responses and the more technical vocabulary of the philosopher. A hybrid language, – say, a piece of dramatised history – deliberately combines different modes of utterance to overcome the weaknesses of one. The philosopher, however, aims not at mixing voices, but at keeping the clarity that comes from each.

James Conant’s discussion of Kafka illustrates how an ordinary reading can also be important to a philosophical one. ‘Readers of a Kafka story’, Conant writes, ‘are brought to a point where they no longer understand what in the world of the story a “trial” or a “verdict” or a “criminal”, or “guilt” or “innocence” is.’.32 Philosophers will have reached this point, too, but as philosophers they will want to go further. They will want, as Conant expresses it, ‘a renewed hold’33 on these concepts, one that the story cannot completely supply. Cora Diamond’s ‘neighbour’ metaphor is here genuinely enlightening. For without the power of the ordinary reading the philosopher would have no sense of what to renew. And this is another way of saying that the novel’s world cannot be unlocked by philosophy alone.

Leaving room in a philosophical reading of the novel for an ‘ordinary reading’ is important. In Nussbaum’s writings the point becomes almost a personal signature, a deliberate statement of intent. In Winch and, to a lesser extent, in Rorty, too, we will discover that it is not a theory of the novel that counts, but our responses to it as both philosophical and ordinary readers.

The novel, as Kundera remarks, has only one raison d’etre, ‘to say what only the novel can say.’.34 So philosophical readers of the novel, as much as ordinary ones, will be familiar with the wiles of the
n.tolist's craft, its occasional audacity and wit. When they encounter the ontological proof as they do, say, in the pages of Iris Murdoch's novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*, they do not immediately become historians of philosophy checking its treatment for coherence and pedigree. Philosophical readers share with non-philosophical readers the willingness to enter the novel's world. When, for example, Georges Simenon writes himself into one his Maigret novels – perhaps as a passer by or as a customer at a bar – Maigret enthusiasts are not left mystified since they know that in some strange way the story telling conventions have not been disturbed. They do not immediately attempt to become journalists, minutely examining Simenon's description of himself to discover a residue of ascertainable fact.

The novel, then, is highly resistant to its voice being simply read off, as one might read a guidebook to a holiday resort or a recreational activity. Sartre comments that there is one respect in which moral and aesthetic imperatives are in tandem. Both bear a crucial relation to freedom. The novel, therefore, for Sartre, is 'an act of confidence'. So we might infer that readers of Simenon who take Sartre's position to heart become better readers if, along with Maigret, they try to solve the crime themselves. Our conversational model, in other words, works independently of the novelist's subject. And so Kundera's point regarding Kafka is apposite. He writes, 'even if his novels had nothing prophetic about them, they would not lose their value, because they grasp one possibility of existence and thereby make us see what we are, what we are capable of.'

Can there be better or worse ways of conducting a conversation or does the model leave us with only a series of perspectives with nothing to choose between them? It is not difficult to think of actual conversations coming quickly to a halt through wilful misunderstanding of the other's position, caricature or deliberate distortion. With these responses in play what remains is scarcely a conversation at all. So attentive novel reading must exclude these too, since they are as corrupting of the text as they are of another's voice. Novel-using philosophers have this much in common with ordinary readers since a lack of generosity to the story seems self-defeating from both points of view.

Misunderstandings by philosophers, like those of ordinary readers, do not come from only one source. Both misread when, for example, they take a passage out of context or fail to separate the author's voice from the voices of the characters. Noticing a change of tone in the other's way of speaking or a lack of confidence in their presentation are
equally important conversational abilities because they keep the show on the road. They forestall potential misunderstanding, possibly conversational drought.

Literary misreadings are among the occupational hazards of reading and they intensify when contested. So readers may, for example, fail to see whether a particular descriptive passage is to be taken at face value or is an idealised portrait of a character or a wished for event. Philosophers who use the novel have no automatic protection system against such dangers, but in the distinctiveness of the philosopher’s voice we see a potential for a quite different kind of misunderstanding.

Conversational failure here comes not from getting a voice wrong that the philosopher quite likes the sound of. Rather, it comes from the philosopher liking only the sound of his own voice, and when this becomes too overwhelming the novel is deafened. It is being required to participate in a conversation whose terms it is unable to share. So, for example, characters in a novel can find their idiosyncrasies reduced to type or its narrative made to sound too much like the philosophical description of it. In these kinds of readings we can be sure that something in the conversation has gone drastically wrong. Of course, some novel-using philosopher’s vices are vices in philosophy, too, but the point here is that by asking questions of the novel on these terms alone the philosopher is effectively restricting its capacity to reply.

And, yet, the degree of restriction varies. Consider a philosophical reader who is puzzled about the role of rights in personal life and, in search of enlightenment, interrogates Forster’s Howards End. A language of rights is certainly at work in the novel, but in an implicit, subterranean way. So the novel can come up with some sort of reply – say, an illustration of a right breached or not fully acknowledged. But how much more could the novel have said if the philosopher had asked about rights in relation to trust, a concept that is central to the novel’s stage. Our rights-based philosopher’s opening gambit by under-employing the novel risks selling his own needs short, too.

In this case the conversation has not been broken off. But sometimes the philosopher’s questions actually miss their target because the answers they want are not within the novel’s gift. So, for example, a philosopher who is a defender of animal rights is drawn into a conversation with Orwell’s Animal Farm. What interests her is the fate of Boxer, the carthorse whose strength and nobility have made the revolution at the farm possible, but who is hauled off to the knacker’s yard on the order of the pigs. Our philosopher’s conversation reflects her beliefs. To her Boxer’s importance does not come from the events that
lead him to his fate. What is important about Boxer is the status our philosopher wishes to give him as the representative of animal suffering. Clearly, our philosopher has not got Animal Farm’s voice completely wrong since in some sense it is about the rights of animals. But equally she hasn’t got it right either since Boxer’s place in the novel does not depend on the abstract arguments that animal rights defenders commonly employ.

Some philosophers, as we shall discover, present the sympathy and curiosity that go together with attentive reading as desirable features of a philosophical reading too. Thus, the emotional attachments that readers develop with fictional characters, and which reflects their concern at how fictional lives will turn out, are also attachments that novel using philosophers should deliberately cultivate. For Iris Murdoch, for example, the judgements we make about real people ‘are not totally unlike the judgements which we make upon people in literature.’ But, of course, they are not totally like them either, since, among many other reasons, in aesthetic judgements ‘it is not our own conduct that is in question’. Here the overlap between the responses of a philosophical and an ordinary reader becomes problematic. What is clear at this point is just how seriously this manoeuvre unsettles the conversation. Can philosophers intelligibly fall in love with fictional characters as they do in life? Can they argue with them? Do these kinds of interchange make sense?

For the reasons we have seen, conversation between philosophy and the novel can be productive and also precarious. No single criterion of meaning stands outside the perspective of each. What is thought of as a block on the conversation is not always open to explanation as a mistaken interpretation or a misreading. To overcome this we might postulate an ideal philosophical reader of the novel. Such a reader would share with ordinary readers their recognition of the autonomy of the novel’s world, and yet be sufficiently precise in interrogation to find the answers that philosophy wants. And, yet, it is in the detailed application of the ideal that philosophical difficulties are at their sharpest.

Philosophers who turn to the novel are, therefore, in search of a method. Unlike the poets who imitate the cavalry in their wish to cut a dash, our novelists must be cavalry, infantry and artillery in one. Moral differences are no more to be ironed out in the novel than they are in life.

What singles out Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty is that, in contrasting ways, they each offer a method of working in ethics that embraces
movement between philosophy and the novel. Winch by treating the novel as a source of example clearly does not want differences in life to be ironed out. Nussbaum sees perceptive equilibrium as a method for moving between genres that combines the scrutiny that comes from reason with the direct personal insight that arises from the emotions. Rorty deploys liberal irony as the method that suits liberals who believe that confidence in metaphysics is misplaced. Despite their differences none of these three philosophers considers that unintelligibility between the genres is a viable option. All, in other words, wish to keep the conversation going. A method, therefore, is important because it promises a way of arbitrating between ethical readings – those that search for a generality of outlook and those that focus on the novel’s grasp of detail. To discover whether Winch’s method delivers what it promises will be our first concern.
Why do moral philosophers emphasise the need for good examples in ethics? One reason is the ability of the example to reveal features of the moral life that theory obscures. The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates this very well since a major part of its significance for ethics comes from its being told as a story. Narrative replaces argument as the medium of moral communication. When a lawyer attempts to test Jesus with the question ‘who is my neighbour?’ Jesus does not give a definition of neighbourliness involving a statement of rights and duties, as the lawyer might have expected, nor does he offer criteria for neighbourly conduct applicable to human beings generally. The moral import of ‘my neighbour’ is not grasped through a set of rules derived independently of life, but from the radiant power of the example.

As a parable, the story of the Good Samaritan aims both to give and set an example: it ends with an injunction – ‘Go and do thou likewise.’ For Peter Winch, however, the moral philosopher qua moral philosopher is not an advocate. Ethics must concede moral exhortation to life and it is in life that the parable finds its natural home. Examples in ethics aim to reveal moral possibilities, but they stop well short of moral recommendation. Wittgenstein values examples as ‘decent signs’, but in ethics what do they signify?

In the work of those moral philosophers who are struck by Wittgenstein’s use of examples, ethics takes on a character wholly unlike traditional moral theory. Examples, Wittgenstein writes, ‘are decent signs, not rubbish or hocus-pocus’. In this more descriptive and contemplative guise, moral philosophy does not search for a moral theory that covers all cases, but conceptual clarity about what in life is morally possible. Thus, Winch uses the example of Mrs Solness from Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* to illustrate the moral corruption that comes
about when someone is obsessed, as Mrs Solness is, with acting for the sake of duty. In Winch’s view, Kant’s way of speaking about moral goodness prevents him from seeing what it is about Mrs Solness’s character that so disturbs us. His is a way of speaking that reveals a fault in philosophical method. Rather than examine particular examples of conduct where moral integrity is at stake, so allowing them to speak on their own terms, Kant aims to determine the good will by specifying general rules in advance of life. For Winch, however, it is from the examples themselves that illumination comes.

There is a vital point here. Clarification in ethics is reached not from an indisputable perspective held to be neutral between different moral beliefs, but rather from attending to how moral language is actually used. Since language reflects life, understanding the nature of moral concepts means entering into the form of life in which such concepts are found. Look more carefully at what we already know is the lesson Wittgenstein teaches; pay more attention to the self-understandings of moral agents whose mutual engagements take place in the context of a variety of moral practices, each of which involves distinct standards of meaning. To understand morality as a subject for theory is to risk neglecting the vitality of the particular case. Moral philosophers who search for universal answers to moral questions display a yearning for incorrigibility that it is not in the nature of ethics to give. Kant’s stark and concise statement of this aspiration brings out exactly what we find troubling in his account. ‘Nor could one give worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For, every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with the principles of morality.’

By contrast, in Winch’s view, examples are intended to strike us hard, to hit us in such a way that we cannot fail to understand the kind of moral corruption that, for example, the character of Mrs Solness represents. Once we grasp her moral nature no room exists for competing descriptions of it. Here the example’s function is not to be a stalking horse for an independently derived theory, but to show us an aspect of moral experience that would otherwise have remained hidden. In speaking for itself, the example brings transparency where argument does not. The example of Mrs Solness allows us to see the harmful role duty might have in the life of such a person.

The task of the example in ethics is to remind us of the conceptual possibilities arising in life. Unlike the moralist for whom practice is the first and only world, the moral philosopher seeks to clarify the concepts that moral practices contain. Often, of course, the examples used
to illustrate moral theories are so bizarre, fanciful, unrealistic and con-trived that they are false to life. But with theory now distant from the stage, Winch argues that a well-chosen example takes us to the heart of ethics by providing, not a different technique or additional factual information, but a possibility hitherto latent in life. Examples are ‘decent signs’ because they show that ethics cannot take the form of theory at all.

This denial has a number of important consequences. Winch does not select examples as subjects of arbitration. On the contrary, they are in themselves examples of moral judgements that are complete. The example’s positive strength, the work that it does for ethics, lies in bringing out the singularity of the judgement that the individual makes in the circumstances that face them. Winch quotes Grete Hermann to good effect: ‘If someone is indignant about a lie, then it’s about the particular lie that he heard or that was told to him. He is not indignant about the class of all possible lies.’ As Hermann points out, someone who is told a lie may respond on the basis of a set of general moral principles in which the value of honesty is highly placed, but not all who are told lies hold such principles. Nor is their indignation at being told that particular lie necessarily dependent on them. Moral difficulties – how to respond to a lie – are difficulties that face individuals. They ask individuals to reflect and to choose. Of course, such difficulties arise in social contexts, against the background of ways of life and the values they contain, but the ethical centrality of the individual judgement must remain. This is not simply because in such cases it is only the individual who could decide. Rather, it is because the ways in which each respond may be significantly different. For one, the response which the lie merits may be Christian forgiveness, for another, outright condemnation, possibly a breach that will never be healed.

It makes no sense, in other words, to attempt to find neutral ground outside the range of possible responses so as to adjudicate between them. Indeed, to think of moral difficulties as if they could be approached in such a way is to fundamentally misunderstand their nature. It is, as Rush Rhees remarks, ‘to reduce a practical problem to a theoretical one’.

Examples, then, have a unique role in conveying the kind of seriousness that moral issues involve. Moral weight is not something that is brought to experience from outside, as a skilled gardener might bring order to a patch of wild and overgrown ground; it is itself constitutive of that experience. Good examples reveal what is already at work in
life. From this point of view, examples are not servants to ethics as educational extras, but essential to the attempt to rid ourselves of the pictures that beguile us. It follows that the choice of example and the ways it is read and commented on are not secondary to clarification. They are necessary features of it. To explore possibilities that others may have missed we need examples that are serious in conveying the sense in which a moral issue matters. What turns an example of a moral issue into a piece of ‘hocus-pocus’, a sleight of hand, is its abstraction from the lived context that gives it sense. A ‘decent’ example, by contrast, shows moral reasons bound up with ways of life and the values they exhibit.

For philosophers like Winch the example offers a transparency that argument often lacks. There is a luminosity surrounding good examples that is missing when debate is urged on by principles or definitions. The example is not important to moral philosophy as merely an instance of a general rule. Examples are neither models nor precepts; nor to be gainfully employed in philosophy must they be linked to the facts, historical or otherwise. Rather, they point to knowledge of possibilities. And yet, as Wittgenstein warns, they can be deceptive. Consider Bernard Williams’ famous example of Jim and the Indians6 – itself an example of just how deceptive they can be. A visitor arrives in a South American town and finds a firing squad about to execute twenty Indians as a reprisal for anti-government activity. The captain of the squad offers the visitor a ‘guest’s privilege’ of shooting one Indian on the understanding that, if the visitor accepts, the others will be released unharmed. If the offer is turned down then all twenty will be killed. Given that the visitor is unable to alter the situation by overwhelming the officer with force, what should he do? Williams believes that for the utilitarian the solution is obvious, (even though it is certainly not obvious to Williams), namely, shoot the one Indian. If this example leaves us feeling cheated, it is not because we are unfamiliar with the dilemma it raises. On the contrary, it is hard to be unaware of circumstances – political and personal – in which moral requirements often pull in tragically conflicting directions. What the example notably lacks is any plausible account of how its dilemma might have arisen – in what compelling moral context there could be a ‘guest’s privilege’ and in what conceivable moral practice shooting the Indian could be thought of as an honour. The absence of a background allowing sense to be made of such fabricated conventions actually disables the example. Since nothing gives us a purchase on the officer’s offer, on what it might mean or how it differs from crude intimidation, the
example becomes fanciful. We see now the point of using examples to convey moral possibilities. When, as appears to be the case here, an example is flawed through ambiguity or shallowness, ask how it can be altered to bring out a way of looking at the visitor’s dilemma that does succeed in making it plausible. Roy Holland adopts precisely this strategy by adding a rider to Williams’ example. Imagine, he suggests, that the visitor is a saint, then start to think what a saint might do in those circumstances. A saint might persuade the officer to re-think his command, encourage the firing squad to disobey the order, offer to take the Indian’s place so that the others will be saved, or insist on being the first of the twenty.

What Holland effectively does in adding a rider to Williams’ example is to renew it so that we can make sense of some of the events it portrays. Certainly, the example of Jim and the Indians is difficult to describe as complete since characterisation and narrative depth are conspicuously absent. Jim has the appearance of a particular, designated individual, but is, of course, merely an abstraction. The Indians, insofar as they are in the same situation, merit a general description, possibly including an account of how they should all be treated, but they are described arithmetically, as units to be aggregated so as to achieve the least undesirable outcome. One of the great strengths of Holland’s strategy in changing the example is that such failings are, to some degree, rectified. We are now asked to think more about the moral beliefs of someone facing those circumstances. In this way, the imaginative renewal of the example is now significantly bound up with the exercise of clarifying moral possibilities. So another philosopher might manipulate the original example for different purposes again, to reveal a contrasting set of problems, those, say, concerning selection when acceptable criteria of discrimination are absent or come about from duress.

For those philosophers who eschew theory in ethics, such a drawing in of examples to the actual practice of conceptual investigation is to be applauded. Examples challenge us to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, the universal from the particular. Entering into an example by changing it implies possibilities of understanding lacking in a more theoretically entrenched attitude in philosophy. Careful and attentive comparison of one case with another is a valuable counter to the all-embracing vision of theory. As John Wisdom aptly remarks, ‘at the bar of reason, always the final appeal is to cases.’

Such ways of thinking about philosophy direct us to how examples should be used. For Winch, understanding the logical limits of moral
concepts is, then, something that is deepened through the close engagement of ethics with examples. In his discussions, no specific type of example is privileged. None are excluded in advance, except, possibly, those derived from science fiction or fantasy. Devised examples – by Winch and others, examples from life, and from art, plays, film and, most notably, the novel – all these figure in Winch’s moral philosophy. Winch is led to such examples by what puzzles him in philosophy, but this does not mean that the example is asked to test some moral position held in advance. Examples often convey moral ideas quite different from those of the philosopher who is using them. But how, exactly, does the example convey possibilities? As we have seen, for philosophers such as Winch, engagement with examples is bound up with reaching clarity in what we want to say in ethics. This means that the status of the example – the kind of example it is – now assumes much more importance, and this prompts enquiry into how differences in status affect the philosophical work the example is expected to perform. Winch tends to understand the work of examples pragmatically – if the example fulfils the task the moral philosopher expects of it then it has worked; if it does not then change it, or find a better one. And, yet, can a pragmatic user of examples afford to be dismissive about differences in kind between examples? Can he simply disregard them as irrelevant? We might point out that some kinds of example work better in specific contexts, implying that even a pragmatic use of examples must concern itself with differences. More potentially damaging is the argument that different examples require different forms of attention and engagement. Here is the nub of the problem we are addressing. For if we do not speak of the novel as we do devised examples then it is hard to see how in ethical discussion we can attach the same role to both.

Briefly consider, then, some examples of Winch’s use of examples. In the course of his discussion of the ethical character of punishment, Winch invents the example of three convicts, each of whom takes a different attitude towards their punishment, to bring out the centrality of agent judgements in ethics. The example sharpens our understanding of the convicts’ contrasting attitudes towards their offence and their future conduct. For one (convict A) the imperative is not to get caught again; for another (convict B) crime is a mug’s game, so it’s best to steer clear of it. For the third (convict C) the punishment fits the offence: it is deserved so in future the hope is to live better. Winch uses the example to reveal important differences in where the ethical emphasis is to be located – between A on the one side and B and C on
the other since A is resolved to continue as a criminal while B and C are not. Or between A and B on the one side and C on the other, since A and B are not concerned with the wrongfulness of their crime as such whereas C precisely is. An example of a very different kind is one that is not devised, but taken from life. Here Winch uses the historical case of Senator Joe McCarthy to illustrate a political manipulator, a juggler of others’ reactions, making the point that such manipulation, rather than challenging our concept of the genuine, actually presupposes it. And in yet another kind of example, this time from a novel, Winch examines the decision which faces Vere in Melville’s *Billy Budd* in order to attack a particular account of moral judgement.

My direct concern at this stage is not with the philosophical effectiveness of these examples (we shall consider Winch’s treatment of *Billy Budd* in detail in the following chapter) but with their formal differences. The example of the three convicts is designed to make a specific philosophical point. It is open to straightforward summary and amendment from any number of ethical positions. The example gives no special authority to its creator, nor does it derive any. An emotional response is not expected from readers, nor are they extensively drawn in. By obvious contrast, the McCarthy example is taken from life and must, therefore, raise questions concerning its truth to life. It is worthy of note that Bernard Williams tries to avoid this consequence in his discussion of moral luck in which he explicitly distinguishes his ‘Gauguin’ example from the historical Gauguin in an attempt to make it perfectly general, not mired in historical contingency. One emphatic way of dealing with these distinctions is to deny that the form of the example is relevant to its philosophical purpose. So we could imagine replacing Senator McCarthy with an example from the novel, say, with Kenneth Widmerpool, surely one of the great fictional monsters of manipulation, in Anthony Powell’s *Dance to the Music of Time*. The philosophical target aimed at by the example would still be hit. But would it? Are different kinds of example so readily inter-changeable?

Wittgenstein famously advises philosophers to avoid a ‘one-sided diet’ in their use of examples. Do not commit yourself always to the same kind of example, he cautions, implying that differences between examples should not be swept under the carpet, but actually taken into account in the different ways the examples are used in discussion. Examples, we should remember, are not simply artefacts that we can repeatedly plunder, indifferent to their character and origins. A devised example encourages rebuilding when gaps or ambiguities are detected in its design. It offers nothing unique, nothing that cannot be stated in
summary form. The fine-grained texture of literature, including the
close specification of a manner of living, a human context in which
personality and narrative are central, is not part of its construction.

We can leave Winch’s three convicts in their cells, therefore, safe in
the knowledge that in appearing in the example they have completed
the task ethics has set for them. Their function is to play a role in the
example, nothing more. Characters in the novel have a totally differ-
ent life, however, and, as we shall discover, pose dramatically contrast-
ing questions to philosophy. For us this means giving close attention
to the thought that what the novel offers to ethics cannot be inter-
changed with any other source. The novel is not just a more fully
worked out fictional example, nor, by the opposite token, is a devised
example just a concise fiction. Winch’s three convicts are types
invented to make a specific philosophical point. We do not respond to
them as we do, say, to the life and fate of Abel Magwitch, the starving
convict, in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. Indeed, it is surely a feature of
such works of literature that we do not normally read them as exam-
pies. Rather it is the novel as such that draws us in. In reading the
novel as an example we risk missing the storyteller’s art. Like the dog
that did not bark in the night, one of the curious features of Winch’s
use of literary examples in ethics is that it is significantly silent about
their status as art. Of course, Winch does not turn to the novel for sur-
rogate philosophy, nor does he expect to draw moral lessons for life.
Literary examples in ethics are crucial ways of revealing what cannot
be stated in the form of propositions. What we re-enact when we enter
the novel’s world is the lives of the characters as they are portrayed in
the novel, independently of any external judgement. The novel offers
a fruitful source of possibilities to ethics, but where does this leave the
novel’s uniqueness? Is the use of the novel as an example, with all the
methodological freedom this implies, a sign that a détente has been
reached between ethics and art? Or that a more covert hostility in the
conversation has begun? When Lawrence warns that ‘if you try to nail
anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets
up and walks away with the nail’¹⁰ we can be certain that it is not a
peaceful compromise that he has in mind.
3
Enter the Novel

When the novel is used as a source of example for ethics, much hinges on the kind of understanding a philosopher is looking for. Examples are effective by virtue of what they pick out. Used in such a way, the novel is intended to bring light where previously there was obscurity. The novel, however, has its own autonomy and in being quarried for what the examples can extract there is a risk that something of this original form will be lost. Since we are dealing with the terms of engagement between philosophy and art, a great deal hangs on whether or not this risk can be allayed. In part, philosophers such as Winch turn to the novel because of its directness of communication. The particularity of the moral life is conveyed unmediated by the reductive misinterpretation of life they see in ethical theory. An example selects a moral particular from the novel to make a philosophical point. Tenancy, in this way of reading, is required only of some rooms in the novel’s house. Others, possibly those of the utmost importance to the novel as a work of art, are deliberately passed by. In other words, exactly how the novel is explored is dependent on the needs of examples. Henry James points to the creative tension in the novel between purity of structure and a comprehensive embracing of particulars; the novel, he writes, appears ‘more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.’. In the face of such complexity, a moral philosopher who simply trawls the novel for examples to serve the needs of philosophy may seem possessed by an overly self-regarding, possibly miserly, attitude to art. If the moral philosopher feels justified in raiding the novel for examples, indifferent to its own independent life, then everything that gives the novel significance as art is in danger of being stripped away. The novel’s textual integrity is threatened, and ‘the artist’s prime
Moral Philosophers and the Novel

sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs’, as James expresses it, is set aside.

Both ethics and art can be seen as elucidating life through a focus on particulars. It seems appropriate to juxtapose Wittgenstein’s comment that ‘what’s ragged should be left ragged’ with Melville’s description of the novelist’s task – ‘truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges.’ And, yet, a suspicion lingers that in spite of this apparent convergence of interests it is philosophy that calls the tune. In one respect, the priority of philosophy is unavoidable. The puzzles that mark out the concerns of moral philosophy (say, the nature of moral judgement) are philosophy’s starting points. Sometimes we find such puzzles in the novel too, but they are not intrinsic to it as they are to philosophy. When ethics appropriates examples from the novel there is, therefore, a gulf to be bridged. If the construction built to cross it is hasty or ill conceived then the novel’s integrity is disturbed, so risking the loss of precisely what it is that makes the example significant to ethics. Unlike a devised example, the novel is not an artefact to be dismantled and refashioned at will. In slicing the novel into particulars for the purposes of arguments, the clarity about life sought by ethics may itself be endangered.

When Winch says that in ethics we must look and see what we do want to say about the examples before us, much depends on what brings the philosopher to that particular example. How, we might wish to ask, does characterising or re-characterising the example help to clarify the problem in hand? Examples from the novel do not arrive in the philosopher’s grasp unclothed of meaning. Unlike brains in vats, colliding trolleys, spaceships en route to distant generations and individuals counting blades of grass, literary examples do not require special pleading to establish their purchase on our imagination. The logical status of the example affects the philosophical work it is expected to do. In looking to Melville’s Billy Budd to illustrate his philosophical point Winch certainly knows what he is searching for. Not, we can be sure, a treatment of Vere’s terrible decision as a case study, a thought experiment or an instance of a moral type. Rather, he is seeking something that shows us what it would be like to be Vere, to be in the situation he faces and to have to make a decision in those particular circumstances.

The impetus that drives Winch’s interest in Melville’s novel is philosophical. At issue is the logical form of moral judgement. Winch argues that in some moral situations the requirement that judgements be subject to the principle of universalisation – that actions right for X in
Y circumstances must also be right for Z in Y circumstances – is empty. Someone who is faced with conflicting moral demands and decides one way is not thereby committed to the view that anyone else in that situation ought to make the same decision. For Winch, it is not the facts of the situation established independently of the agent that determine conduct appropriate to it. Rather the character of the agent is a key logical presence in the nature of the decision that is made. Rationality and consistency do play an important role in the intelligibility of what we say when speaking morally. Nevertheless, Winch insists, this does not mean that if one says that X is the right thing for me to do, and another in an appropriately similar situation says that X is the wrong thing for me to do, that both cannot be correct. How does Winch’s use of the example of Vere’s dilemma reinforce his argument?

In Melville’s tale, Billy Budd, a moral innocent, kills Claggart, his naval superior, who has goaded and provoked him out of evil. When Budd is charged falsely by Claggart with inciting the crew to mutiny he is rendered mute, and in frustrated moral outrage strikes Claggart dead. Vere, who as captain has responsibility for trying the offence, is faced by conflicting moral considerations – the imperatives of the military law to which he is morally committed and the demands of natural justice. On the one side, Budd has killed his naval superior; on the other, Claggart’s malignant and provocative falsehoods are directed against one so clearly innocent of the charge. It is a requirement of Winch’s reading that the conflict Vere is faced with is between two moral considerations, not between a moral consideration, duty to the naval code, and a personal inclination to be lenient. It is a choice between alternatives that seems closed to reconciliation: a moral obligation to administer the law impartially leading to the punishment that follows and a compassion for the particular case that leads to clemency. Since both courses of action are universalisable the universality principle confirms rather than removes the dilemma. Vere’s tragedy is that by fulfilling one obligation he must breach another. How, then, is the moral character of his decision – that Budd must hang – derived?

Vere’s decision does not mean that the moral claims that Budd has on him have been erased. This is clear, Winch believes, from Vere’s conduct after the trial, and from his initial determination to scrutinise the moral requirements of law in the light of private conscience. The ‘ought’ which grounds Vere’s decision lies within his character. It is not comprehensible if presented exclusively in terms of public authority and private conscience, even though this is the form the dilemma
takes for him. When Winch quotes Vere’s question – ‘But tell me whether or not, occupying the position we do, private conscience should not yield to that imperial one formulated in the code under which alone we officially proceed?’ – Winch’s point is that the ‘should’ in this passage is unintelligible if it is identified either with duty or conscience. In these moral circumstances, Winch claims, the test of universalisability is idle.

So far Melville’s tale has served Winch’s aims well. Argument and narrative are playing the same tune. When Winch quotes Vere’s way of putting his dilemma to the court – ‘Now can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature, innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so? Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that’ – we are almost convinced that between art and ethics a harmony of purpose has been reached. A strong sense of the ethical importance of first-person judgements is powerfully conveyed in Vere’s last comment – ‘I too feel that, the full force of that’. Such a man called upon to judge morally in intense and complex circumstances discovers something about who he is, rather than, as Winch says, ‘anything one can speak of as holding universally’.

Vere’s decision is, then, more akin to a process of self-discovery than an application of a given set of rules. He finds something out about himself – that no other decision was morally possible for him. Literature brings this out very well. In Melville’s narrative, the stages by which Vere works through the dilemma that faces him are minutely portrayed. Art, we might say, brings the agonising nature of his choice home to us. And yet, we do not have to wait long before art’s old quarrels with ethics re-emerge. Wittgenstein remarks that Tolstoy’s moral thought is most striking when it is left in the background of the story (he is speaking about Tolstoy’s Hadji Murad): most striking, that is, to philosophy. But when ethics turns to the novel for an example in pursuit of an argument it is often difficult to leave the moral thought latent. Examples positively demand philosophical involvement. Once they are part of the argument, it is close to impossible to leave them alone. So we should not be surprised that Winch, in treating Billy Budd as a source of example, enters the tale with the needs of his argument prominently displayed. At this point the concord between ethics and art begins to look less well founded.

We confront this most clearly during Winch’s response to the claim that his criticism of universalisability is an endorsement of relativism. It is vital to Winch’s position that if A thinks that x is the right thing to
do it is not made so by the mere fact that A thinks it. Of the utmost importance to Vere is both his doing the right thing, and, that not anything would count as the right thing to do. There may be better or worse ways of working through the dilemma. But how can Winch make this point in the context of the novel? How, in other words, can possibilities outside the novel be sensibly introduced into it? Winch offers three thoughts in resisting the imputation of relativism. First, that Vere’s dilemma is a moral one. Another captain in the same situation might be indifferent to Budd’s innocence and to Claggart’s evil intent towards him. (Vere does weigh the alternatives that lie before him.) Further, another captain in that situation might reach the same decision as Vere, but on entirely legalistic grounds, insensitive to the moral issues at stake. A different captain again might reach the same decision but for reasons of self-interest – for personal ambition, promotion or to curry favour with a superior. Second, there are cases in which it appears that someone is acting rightly, but where the criteria for deciding this are so remote from our own that it is impossible to see why the decision might count as a moral one. Third, that while someone’s decision has the semblance of rightness, they are, in fact, self-deceived or insincere. As Winch indicates, Vere’s character and state of mind exclude him from any of these possibilities. Vere does give serious consideration to, and is personally affected by, the complex issues involved in, and surrounding the dilemma. His behaviour after the execution – and his murmuring Budd’s name on his own deathbed – show that it was a decision that never left him. His disposition to give precedence to the demands of the military code shapes the moral judgement he reaches. Another captain, from an entirely different position, could reveal a different disposition from Vere and decide in favour of clemency.

The point that Winch emphasises is that differences in agent judgements do not necessarily make us doubt our moral capacities. In his commentary on the novel Winch claims that he could not have decided as Vere did – ‘I should have found it morally impossible to condemn a man “innocent before God” under such circumstances.’8 Further, he argues that in making this judgement he is drawing on exactly the same considerations as Vere while arriving at the opposite conclusion. For Winch, it is ‘the considerations connected with Billy Budd’s peculiar innocence’9 rather than military duty that constitute the overriding factor.

The account of agent judgements that Winch is proposing reflects precisely those features of Vere’s predicament that the novel portrays so well. How Vere perceives himself in making his decision raises
questions concerning the inner life essential to the moral stance that Winch wants us to consider. Relations between ethics and art are noticeably less comfortable, however, in Winch’s defence of his position against relativism. For in this argument the novel is treated not as a literary, but as a devised, example. There is an easily identifiable reason for this. To resist relativism Winch has to show, first, that someone faced by the same considerations as Vere could have decided differently and, second, that their decision constitutes a moral judgement. But in the novel no such ‘someone’ exists. In the novel there is no such person. The officers comprising the court that tries Budd’s case agree with Vere’s argument that it is with Budd’s action alone that they should be concerned. It is true that they are troubled by uncertainties and reservations about the circumstances surrounding the case, but all finally accept the directions regarding the verdict that Vere as captain quite clearly gives them. We are surely meant to see that the burden of responsibility belongs to Vere. In the novel, therefore, there is no rival to Vere’s judgement, but in order to show that the universalisability requirement is idle in such situations it is a rival view that Winch needs. He must point to someone for whom Vere’s judgement would not have been possible, so on not encountering one in the novel he points to himself. In Vere’s position, facing exactly the same circumstances, he (Winch) could not have reached that decision. What sense can be made of this?

What Winch asks us to imagine is not what Melville asks. Someone reading the novel as Melville intends might imagine what it would be like to be Vere, they might even imagine themselves as Vere, but they cannot be asked to imagine themselves as Winch in Vere’s position. That possibility can only arise after the novel has been treated as a devised example, one that may be re-devised as argument dictates. Further, to imaginatively put himself in Vere’s position Winch must erase a great deal of what he knows as a reader, since Melville makes Vere largely ignorant of the evil in Claggart and the continual scheming he devotes to tormenting Budd. In life there are circumstances in which knowledge can be set aside. However, in relation to the novel, shedding a part of what we know of its narrative is a more complex and contestable operation. To put himself in Vere’s position Winch has to place his reader’s knowledge of Claggart’s misdeeds in temporary cold storage. He must disallow what he knows if he is to face the same considerations as Vere. But Vere cannot disinvent what he knows. He simply does not know what other members of the crew, such as Dansker, do. His ignorance is a necessary feature of the tale as Melville
tells it. It is important that Vere remains in the dark about much in the affair that confronts him, since this enlarges the mystery forcing his judgement to the knife-edge.

In having to suspend what he knows in order to enter the novel Winch is, in effect, changing the example, thereby diminishing the novel’s structure and point. Re-designing a part of the novel’s story cannot but have an effect on the whole. Increased doubt is cast, therefore, on Winch’s claim that he can put himself in the same circumstances as Vere. Could Winch argue that when he imagines himself as Vere what he faces is the same moral problem, but in a different world? The dilemma, military duty versus natural justice, remains the same, but in a different context, say, a naval operation during the Second World War. However, in this manoeuvre the notion of the same circumstances now becomes impossible to grasp. Without exaggeration, Vere’s dilemma could be construed as one of political morality. One of the considerations that he stresses in reaching his decision is consequentialist. Vere rejects the proposal that Budd be convicted but the penalty mitigated, arguing that a likely effect of this is increased disobedience, possibly further mutiny among sailors already severely disaffected. He claims ‘they would think that we are afraid of them – afraid of practising a lawful rigour lest it should provoke new troubles.’.10 Understanding issues in political morality, however, invariably brings together detail of circumstance as well as moral principle and the character of those involved. It is notoriously hard, therefore, to generalise from one example to another, especially where we are dealing, as we are in Billy Budd, with a case that hinges on uniqueness of moral character.

When Winch asks us to take into account what he would have decided in Vere’s place it is in this novel that we must imagine him making his decision. But what decision would that be? The difficulty lies in establishing exactly what is licensed when Winch enters the novel in the way he proposes. In Melville’s tale Vere orders Budd’s execution; in Winch’s imaginative re-enactment he (Winch) orders acquittal. In another reading, say, mine, I do not convene a summary court-martial, rather I order that Budd be held under close arrest to await trial by the Lords of the Admiralty at the first opportunity. On one way of looking at these decisions – one fictional, the others hypothetical agent judgements – the important difference is between Vere’s (instant execution) on one side, and Winch’s (acquittal) and mine (delay) on the other. But there is a more subtle issue at stake. In Melville’s tale, Budd’s future belongs with popular memory; by
complete contrast, in Winch’s version, Budd has no future, at least, no scripted one, while in my revision his future is partially scripted since the possibility that he will be executed remains.

One of the issues here is the difference between imagining what you would do in Vere’s position, and actually being in his position. That Vere’s position is found in a fictional world compounds Winch’s problems. More than a little distance can now be shown to exist between the novel as example and the novel as such. Remembering the reasons Winch gives for acquittal, ‘the considerations connected with Billy Budd’s peculiar innocence’,11 allows us to appreciate just how wide this gap is. We can be sure that what draws Winch to describe Budd’s innocence as ‘peculiar’ is not its empirical strangeness alone. He must be concerned with moral innocence as a conceptual possibility. It is, therefore, one of the curious features of Winch’s commentary that it barely refers to the moral purity that plays so large a role in the novel. One source of ambiguity in the use of a term like ‘peculiar’ derives from whether the reference is to the thing itself or to the ways we are affected by it. The moral ‘thing itself’ is Budd’s moral innocence, a state peculiarly characterised by ‘virtues pristine and unadulterate’12 and which has on the more knowing of the crew and the more intelligent of the officers a ‘peculiar favourable effect’.13

As a state that is peculiar both in itself and in terms of its effects on others, Budd’s moral innocence makes highly distinctive demands on the imagination of those he meets. His is a moral persona rarely encountered since it lacks the accumulated experience of motive that we normally expect. If Winch is to put himself in the same circumstances as Vere, therefore, he needs not only to face the same general considerations, but also to see what Vere sees in the hearts of those who cross his path. Even though Winch is disposed to draw a quite different practical conclusion from Vere it must be from the impact of Budd’s extraordinary character that he draws it. As reader, Winch knows more of Claggart than Melville in the novel permits Vere. A film director might represent Claggart differently by making him smile the instant before he dies when Budd’s blow strikes home. The smile might be intended as a sign of satisfaction, a job well done. Budd’s fate has been sealed. Envy’s score has been settled. However, the effect is to weaken the novel by making Claggart more omnisciently evil than Melville intends, or that it is possible to believe. Winch is not representing Vere in a different medium, but putting himself in Vere’s position in the novel, and, yet, both film director and philosopher impair what Melville authorises. Melville’s Vere is initially so struck by
Budd’s willingness and ability that he considers him for promotion. He expresses ‘unfeigned astonishment’\textsuperscript{14} when Claggart first brings charges against Budd. And after the surgeon has confirmed Claggart’s death, Vere’s exclamation powerfully reveals that he now knows what Budd’s character is: ‘Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang.’\textsuperscript{15} Nothing in Vere’s later life can wash away the tragic stain of his decision, experience that is reinforced when Vere at his own death recites Budd’s name without remorse. The full nature of the choice facing Vere is only slowly made clear to him when, in Melville’s narrative, the ‘jugglery of circumstances’\textsuperscript{16} in which innocence and guilt change places reveals more complex senses of innocence at work. What Vere suddenly sees he has to address in judging Budd is not mitigation simply, not anything by way of extenuating circumstances, but taking responsibility for culling an innocent, ordering the death of someone who has grown up ignorant of the possibility that others are capable of evil towards him. By contrast, as we’ve hinted, the key phrase when Winch’s Vere decides for acquittal is ‘peculiar innocence’: ‘peculiar’ here needing to convey something more than the basic sense that Budd is innocent of the charges Claggart has contrived; needing to point to something more, again, than Budd’s speechlessness as an extenuating circumstance to conviction, but noticeably saying little about what that might be. This omission is significant since Winch, in wanting to place himself in Vere’s position, cannot disregard Budd’s innocence as Vere sees it. Budd is guilty of the act, but innocent not merely of the intention to kill Claggart, but of Claggart’s evil attempt to corrupt him. The conflict that faces Vere is not between military duty and natural justice alone. It is Budd’s moral purity that constitutes the moral problem for Vere, not simply the injustice of the charges brought against him. Budd’s innocence is a natural goodness, unselfconscious, almost too great for speech. As an experienced naval officer Vere must have encountered situations of moral conflict in which guilt or innocence before a tribunal hastily convened was difficult to prove, and where the justice of the decision reached was less than perfect. Hard decisions in the field, we might say, are the warrior’s stock in trade. Yet, Melville’s Vere responds uniquely to Billy Budd.

Philosophical commentary on the novel as example seems often to function like marginalia, consisting of ad hoc remarks on passages in the text containing insights, blunders or omissions. Qualities and weaknesses in the novel, however, are rarely straightforwardly factual or logical in character. Winch, for instance, distinguishes Vere, who
emphatically is moved by Budd’s predicament and his own involvement in it, from a ‘different sort of commander’\(^{17}\) whose judgement may have been wholly legalistic. In doing so, Winch aims to illustrate his philosophical point that in the distinction between the two commanders we find one of the available ways of limiting agent judgments to an acceptable moral scope, without falling back on the defence of universalisability. But this literal-minded commander has no existence in the novel. Who, then, is he? What is his name? On what ship does he serve? Such questions may strike the novelist as unanswerable, but for a philosopher the invention of new contrasting possibilities is precisely what embracing an example in the course of an argument involves.

We should notice that recognition of this state of affairs does little to encourage a state of peace between philosophy and art. For the further possibility the example now illustrates is no longer taken exclusively from the novel. On the other hand, neither can it enter the story from the outside, so making Winch’s new commander a total stranger to the novel’s world. There is a good reason for this. In revising an example we are bound to a certain degree by what has gone before, bound, that is, in some sense to amalgamate the improvised commander’s arrival with the novelist’s fictional setting. The effect of this is to convert the original example into a hybrid in which the lives of the novelist’s characters and the philosopher’s additions bear an uneasy relation. In this very different context, the truthfulness of Melville’s portrayal of Vere can be seen to contrast sharply with the abstraction of Winch’s new commander, about whom we know nothing, except what philosophy, quite properly by its lights, requires us to know. The new commander acts as a cipher introduced at philosophy’s bidding to exhibit a conceptual possibility.

We have seen how Winch, in using *Billy Budd* as an example, is asked to undo what he knows of Claggart’s evil so as to place himself in Vere’s position. We have considered how Winch, in defending the role of agent judgments in ethics, sets aside the distinctive impact Budd’s innocence has on Vere. Attention has been given as to how devising new conceptual possibilities to bring the original example closer to the nub of the argument sits uncomfortably with the novelist’s art. This use of the novel falls well short of embellishment, since in Winch’s hands the novel is never stretched so far that contact is completely lost with its own point and structure. Though obviously not a plunderer of examples, Winch, in his discussions sometimes reworks the novel in ways that are not always persuasive. In receipt of
this treatment the novelist might be unwilling to yield the ethical gold philosophy seeks. In return, the moral philosopher might wish to deny any aesthetic trespass. My aims, the moral philosopher might say, are strictly limited to conceptual clarification. My concern is with the argument and wherever it leads in philosophy. No invasion of art’s terrain is intended or committed. We have been concerned with altering the novel’s characterisation to make a philosophical point. Style and form, it must be acknowledged, are both more resistant to change. I crossed the novel’s boundaries myself when in wanting to illustrate the distinctiveness of Budd’s impact on Vere I asked you to imagine that Vere was experienced in facing the hard decisions that morality in a time of political conflict often involves. No such weight of experience is described in the novel. Indeed, Vere’s nickname ‘Starry’ could be taken to imply unworldliness, possibly a tendency to see life as more intellectual than it is. Entering the novel – imagining that we are in its world – is no doubt natural to the act of reading, but when the novel is read philosophically, as an example, an altogether more specialised and purposive activity takes place.

One effect of specialisation is that it qualifies the philosopher’s range of interest in the novel. By establishing a perspective, such a philosophical reading protects itself against a charge of over-ambition, of wanting, or being required, to say more about the novel than it needs. Using the novel as an example expresses a certain economy of purpose. No blurring of boundaries between ethics and art can occur since the work we want the example to do is bound to the theory it illustrates. All that is required of the example is that it mounts a relevant and effective challenge to the claim being opposed. In this way, Winch reads Vere’s predicament as an example of a possibility that is ignored by those who regard the universalisability thesis as an exhaustive account of the moral judgement. On the economy of purpose principle there is no necessity for readers of the novel as a source of example to consider the nature of the text itself. A literary engagement with the novel’s structure and form, a concern with an author’s style of writing or even their literary biography are all separate exercises. Such ways of reading are independent of the use of the novel as example and do not compete with it. For moral philosophers wanting to preserve the boundaries between ethics and art, the economy of purpose principle seems a well-found friend. But how dependable is it when the terms of engagement are raised? We might accept a contrast between philosophy and literary criticism, but is this simply false economy if pressed too far? When an example from the novel enters an argument it is not
so simple a matter to isolate it from conflicting interpretations. An example effectively cuts away a piece of the novel – say, a character’s choices, a moral dilemma or a moral judgement – to be considered for the purposes of argument. Economy of purpose supplies a method, a rule of relevance and is, hence, a close relation of Occam, but too strict an insistence on the particular role played by the example can lead to the neglect of contrasting philosophical readings and set too high a philosophical price.

Recourse to the novel as a source of philosophical example aims to defend strictly limited objectives. What is looked for in the example takes its character from the argument that instigates it. Any authority for intervention, therefore, derives from the needs of the argument and only incidentally from the novel’s depth and scope. Here the ethical particularity that Winch and others highly prize is reflected in the novel’s detail. The novel’s use to philosophy is as a quarry for examples, a source of insights which, as Bambrough rightly remarks, are gleaned more from ‘a perspective on what we can already see rather than news of what is over the hill or beyond the horizon.’. The novel, however, speaks not on its own terms, but at the example’s behest. It speaks, in other words, only if the philosophical commentary requires it. When philosophy borrows from art, the nature of perspective is vital since it is this that determines what we see. Thus, to a philosopher bent on searching for examples the novel’s landscape takes on a wholly distinctive configuration. What is foreground in the novel may in the examples’ gaze be a speck in the distance, of little or no significance to the point being made. Moral particulars, say, the states of mind, dispositions, or choices that are displaced from the novel to philosophy, are asked now to work in two different, possibly conflicting, settings. There is the novel’s world that is their created home and there is the speculative world of the examples they have become. Since the sole purpose of the example is to hit hard, any ambiguity in it, even cloudiness, risks weakening the philosophical claim it is intended to support. So when philosophers turn to the novel for detail concerning the moral life, a danger exists that their interest might not be detailed enough. Perspectives within the novel seemingly remote from philosophy’s immediate purpose ask for close scrutiny, even when the novel is the source of an example. Two instances from Winch’s reading of *Billy Budd* serve to make this point clear.

Central to Winch’s argument is the idea that Vere faces a choice between two incompatible moral imperatives, each of which has a powerful hold over his imagination. This collision between military
duty and natural justice cannot be resolved through the application of the universalisability principle, so, Winch argues forcibly, leaving logical space in such situations for agent judgements to differ. But this is only one of the perspectives on the dilemma found within the novel. It is certainly true that considerations such as pleas of mitigation and clemency, standard in discussions involving natural justice, do play a large part in the moral arguments the novel portrays. It is also true that while the demands of natural justice are often subject to a wide range of disagreement, this is not the case in the situation described in the novel. The notion of what constitutes a fair trial, even in time of war, is not far from the participants’ concerns. How could they not be, given the story that Melville wants to tell? And, yet, these are not the only aspects of this horn of the dilemma. There is a tale within a tale, one that a philosophy too assiduously in search of examples to illustrate its point may be prone to set aside, and which art, by contrast, strives to relate. In this more troubling and disturbing aspect, Budd is no ordinary prisoner. His moral condition remains one of natural virtue faced by envy, it remains innocence affronted, but in this aspect it is also a state that points provocatively towards holiness. Appearing in hints and asides, there is a religious dimension to Melville’s story whose necessity to the development of the narrative we should not doubt. After Budd’s execution, we read that to the sailors of the fleet, a chip of wood from the spar from which his body hung was ‘as a piece of the Cross’. We respond to Budd’s spiritual strangeness as an essential part of the novel itself. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that any commonplace virtue, marred by imperfection, would be sufficient to stimulate Claggart’s envy. Surely, then, Budd’s character as handsome and angelic sailor is meant to posit a level of judgement that transcends the human. Within the tale, there is, Melville implies, a way of thinking about human life in the light of which a decision such as Vere’s might be redeemed.

Should a glimpse of the transcendental disturb us? A significant part of our feeling for Melville’s novel comes from his handling religious possibilities in a living way. When they arise, they do so not from a region beyond, but in relation to the tests and uncertainties of life. In order to reflect life, Melville allows religious possibilities to grow gradually in explicitness. Thus, during Budd’s court-martial, Vere deliberately excludes discussion of the conflict between innocence and evil that forms the background to the case. He argues that ‘there is a mystery; but, to use a scriptural phrase, it is a ‘mystery of iniquity’, a matter for the psychologic theologians to discuss.’ The court that
Vere has convened is a military tribunal; its concern is to reach a decision on the basis of the law. Abstract matters of theological dispute are outside its domain. It is with Budd’s action alone that the members of the court should be concerned. Vere’s business is with life’s exigencies. And, yet, in dealing with such urgencies, religious possibilities are not bypassed, but await their time to appear. In this way, Budd’s ‘God bless Captain Vere!’ becomes as a cry ‘spiritualised now through late experiences so poignantly profound’, and so has the sharpest possible impact on those caught up in the dilemma.

A skill in keeping an aspect of the story in the background before making it explicit to the reader is no doubt vital to the novelist’s craft. Melville shows us the importance of waiting until a point in the narrative when religious possibilities can be plausibly introduced. Similarly, he is silent on the origins of Claggart’s evil. He writes, ‘what can more partake of the mysterious than an antipathy spontaneous and profound such as is evoked in certain exceptional mortals by the mere aspect of some other mortal, however harmless he may be, if not called forth by this very harmlessness itself?’ The novelist means us to find pathological evil mysterious and inexplicable. We are meant to find the nature and motivation of evil beyond the scope of reason. I termed the religious perspective in Billy Budd troubling, and it is time to see why. In this perspective, the world is so constituted that moral imperfection in the shape of Vere’s tragic decision is unavoidable. The novel explores what it is like to come to such a decision in a fallen world. As we have seen, Winch advises us in approaching the novel as a source of philosophical example to look and see just what we want to say about it. He denies that anything can determine in advance what we say. But there must be at least one thing that has an influential voice and that is the novel itself. The novel’s capacity to reveal at its author’s choosing different and possibly conflicting perspectives on life is a significant part of its power. By limiting his objectives to the needs of his argument, Winch risks confining his interest in these perspectives. For there is in the novel a sense in which good and evil have the aspect of inter-locking opposites, shaping how we think and act. Claggart’s evil is not accidentally related to the tragic nature of Vere’s decision. Likewise, the religious symbolism that Melville employs to mark Budd’s fate outlines not just an individual psychological state, but the boundaries of secular existence. In this perspective, it is the constitution of the moral world that is in the novel’s foreground, with the logic of specific types of moral judgement receding to a more technical location.
We have spoken of testing the role played by the novel in philosophical argument. A different, possibly less severe way of expressing this is to talk of learning from the novel when it is not digested whole. Our concern is not to impose a formal pattern on the relations between ethics and the novel, but to discover how extensively they can converse in their own voice. When philosophy ranges across the novel’s boundaries, how much of its territory is embraced before autonomy is conceded?

Here what confronts us is complexity. We have seen already how philosophers who devise their own examples to illustrate a point are frequently asked to re-devise them if, during the argument, the point comes to grief. When we turn to the novel for the example the same logic does not apply. Here, re-devising the example is not a safe strategy, since all it produces is a mixed example, a hybrid. An altogether more fruitful way of moving the argument along is to allow the novel to speak for itself. Set aside economy of purpose; enlarge the example by giving greater attention to the varied perspectives the novel contains. Drawing all possibilities from the novel rather than dismissing some, a fortiori, as irrelevant would seem to be a way of reading that is more responsive both to the art of the novel and to its place in philosophy. In this respect, the crucial question is how much licence exists for re-characterising the novel when used as an example? Is it, in other words, only through re-characterising the example that we can learn at all? A related complexity arises when we ask what is involved when the philosopher engages imaginatively with the novel’s world. A search for illuminating examples requires the philosopher to take a step beyond less specialised readers, but how much reflection unlicensed by philosophy does this demand? Thinking what it would be like to be Steerforth in Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, asking yourself how you might have behaved in his place, or even falling in love with him, are all possible readers’ reactions. Of a different order altogether is the philosophical exercise of changing a character, or asking a fictional character to respond to characters of your own devising.

For philosophers using the novel as example two broad routes have suggested themselves. In the first, it is the novel’s narrative strength that is exploited. What interests the philosopher is how a moral idea plays out in life. Testing moral notions is not a matter of putting them through a set of formal logical paces, but seeing how they work in people’s lives. Our interest in Steerforth, for instance, is not as a psychological type. It comes from our wanting to know what happens to a human being with Steerforth’s dispositions and character. A second
route is to see the novel as a source of ad hoc examples. Rather as an old car in a scrap-yard the novel can be cannibalised for parts to service the smooth running of philosophical arguments. What is noticeable is just how difficult it is on both these lines of approach to take the example without digesting the whole. Does it make sense to take a philosophical focus on, say, the problem of evil, solely through Claggart? Could we ask – is there such a thing as motiveless evil, such a character as the reverse of a saint? And, then, try to illustrate this exclusively through Claggart? On the view that our interest in the novel comes from how things turn out such precise targeting is, surely, self-defeating. For Claggart’s evil cannot be understood independently of Budd’s innocence. How things turn out depends on the one clashing with the other. Likewise, on the view that our interest in the novel comes from its being a source of ad hoc example the same conclusion is reached. Taking Claggart’s evil out of the novel sets aside its conflict with goodness and ignores the responses of those such as Vere who have to pick up the pieces.

In attempting to learn something for philosophy from the novel as example we are being nudged closer to the novel as such. Such gentle encouragement may not be unwelcome. One of the strengths of the novel, in the hands of, say Melville or Dickens, is the capacity it has to reveal ideas in a living way. Similarly, in reading the novel for ethical particulars we are looking to learn something of general significance. Here, as Bambrough notices, we find the philosopher’s peculiar difficulty. It lies in needing to be ‘not just reflective but reflexive’. How, in attempting to learn from the novel as example, are we drawn closer to the novel as such? It is to the notion of learning from the novel that we must now turn.
When it is free from didacticism, free from ‘the imposed surprises of literary convention and the teacher’s lesson’, the novel’s ethical appeal can be made tentatively apparent. The novel invites our collaboration. It asks that we re-enact its narrative course, that we enter its fictional world. From this achieved perspective, we glean little by way of facts or techniques for living. Rather we embrace a series of images of moral possibilities that show directly, or sometimes cautiously remind us, how life’s defeats and dilemmas can be faced. The novelist’s art does not represent life, nor is it wholly captured by the understandings the novelist wishes to express. Characters in the novel are not substitutes for life, intended to take authority away from the multiple, the concrete and the real. What they offer is a source of transfiguration, of so enhancing life that its unyielding nature can be recognised and confronted. We should not be disturbed by the suggestion that we think about reading as an act of collaboration. Here there is no betrayal, no collaboration with an enemy. On the contrary, such a construction enables us to dispense with those pictures of the artist’s role that exaggerate the element of individuality in creativity. No art could sustain itself as art if its sources of inspiration were entirely private and self-enclosed. The relation between artist and audience is better conceived as mutual, common and co-operative, rather than the act of one self-contained individual seeking the most effective means to bring about changes in the consciousness of others. This is a point that R. G. Collingwood forcibly hammers home: artists become so ‘not by some process of development from within, as they grow beards; but by living in a society where these languages are current. Like other speakers, they speak to those who understand.’
Collingwood’s stress on mutual understanding between artist and community is a valuable counter to romantic individualism, but it would seem to be of minimal help in explaining how one mode of discourse learns from another. How is it possible for ethics to learn in garnering its examples from the novel if what is taken depends on something unique, on something for which no exact alternative can be found? Certainly, the philosopher’s interest scarcely arises when artists are obsessed with representing themselves as philosophers, when, as Nietzsche remarks, they see their whole existence as one long preoccupation with philosophy, as needing to dance attendance on it. What the philosopher looks for in art is not philosophy’s own image reflected, but something it does not expect. If Bambrough is right, philosophy’s distinctiveness comes from its being constrained by the twin requirements of reflectiveness and reflexivity. It aims neither at holding positions against all-comers nor at a defensive digging-in that protects its arguments against prolonged attack, but at showing explicitly how such positions are arrived at, by what kind of intellectual journey they are reached. Bringing a process of thought to the surface or following through a hypothesis for logical inspection are both exercises typical of philosophical reflection. The appropriate metaphor for philosophy may be the confessional, since ideas serve no purpose if they are concealed. It is different with the novel, and not just because passages in the novel can be made deliberately ambiguous or meanings artfully disguised. Occasionally, novelists (think here of Dickens) make an appearance in their novels as the author. Sometimes, they daringly remind readers that the novel’s world is not the real world, so challenging them to doubly suspend their disbelief. There is something peculiar in thinking of philosophers doing this. On the confessional model there is nothing for them to appear in. No artefact exists separate from philosophy’s self-portrait in which they can paint their presence or add their signature. Consider the extreme oddity of a philosopher interjecting a note to the reader – this is the author speaking.

For some philosophers, it is not the example in the novel that should be the focus of attention, but the philosophy in the example. Where strict concentration on the philosophical deployment of the example is seen as sufficient, there is no incentive to stray into literary regions beyond argument. From this standpoint, the novel itself is relegated to the shadows. Critics of Winch’s attack on universalisability commonly make this move, even when acknowledging, as they must, the seriousness with which Winch reads the novel. For such philosophical critics, the example’s purpose is to illustrate a philosophical claim.
Its authority derives from its place in the argument. When that argument is considered independently of its illustration it is laid open to critical appraisal as any claim would be. In its own right, a philosophical position can be given a weight appropriate to it, or dangerously misunderstood as Winch’s is when it is taken as denying any role to spectator judgements in morality, or insisting that Vere’s decision to find Budd guilty is wrong. In this way of thinking, the fact that the example originates from a novel is incidental. This is even more noticeably the case when Winch’s critics interpret him correctly, but disagree with him. Indeed, in some commentaries the novel is deliberately set aside because it is too restrictive a context for philosophical discussion of Winch’s claims. Thus, in the words of one critic, ‘notwithstanding the facts of the story’, we must imagine the debate over the resolution of Vere’s dilemma continuing indefinitely until a rational consensus is reached. Others cast doubt on the genuineness of the moral conflict, as Winch portrays it, by arguing that one of the dilemma’s horns reveals a moral inclination, not an imperative. Others, again, query the sufficiency of context as a method for restricting what is to count as an intelligible moral point of view.

Such discussion is, of course, philosophy’s meat and drink; art, however, in the shape of the novel’s distinctive form and tone, might think itself somewhat misused, possibly exploited, in being treated so. Philosophy’s voice seems altogether too dismissive. After enjoying ‘its brief moment in the philosophical sun’, the example is sent back to the novel, either to linger in its pages as art or to be resurrected by the next philosopher wishing to confirm or reject its ethical gold. The image of a ‘brief moment’ under philosophy’s scrutiny captures the temporary, occasionally brilliant, often makeshift roles all examples in philosophy are asked to play. Literary examples are certainly distinctive. It would be a mistake to describe them as philosophy’s journeymen since there is no single task they are expected to perform. More importantly, their structure is not derived from whatever ideas happen to best serve the argument in hand. We are best advised, therefore, to approach examples in philosophy in a spirit of open-mindedness. They are devised, invented or chosen to do specific kinds of work and, as such, vary greatly in nature and point. ‘Particulars’, Bambrough writes, ‘are not tyrannical; they are authoritative.’ But how can their authority be discerned except by attending to their role in the argument?

We do not need to be unduly sceptical to find the claim that there can be authorities in philosophy somewhat excessive. In the case of devised examples, whatever authority they possess must come from
their role in the argument. How, then, can we learn from them? When we examine different kinds of example we are looking for legitimacy and instruction. Consider three examples, all of them involving drunks. The first two are devised; the third is from a novel. In the first, I am a builder who is owed money for work done. It is pretty certain that when I am paid I will embark on a lengthy and damaging drinking spree. My debtor, wishing me harm, is keen to pay in the hope that this is exactly what I will do. We may think such a person right to repay their debt, although we may be unwilling to call their action good since it stems from a bad motive. In other words, there is a ready distinction between the right thing to do and the motive for doing it. A good action, it might be argued, requires a combination of principle and motivation. In the second example, I am a soldier who is found drunk on duty. Drunkenness, in this case, involves a likelihood of harm to others where their rights are at stake; my condition, therefore, may be justifiably removed from the private sphere and made subject to moral or legal scrutiny. In the third example, I am Geoffrey Firmin, the alcoholic Honorary Consul in Malcolm Lowry’s novel Under the Volcano. In what sense can we be said to learn from these examples?

On initial inspection, our builder example seems to contain little in the way of instruction for standard pictures of ethics. Disguising a bad motive as a duty reflects a distinction familiarly embedded in ordinary moral usage. And, yet, the mundaneness of the distinction leaves us free to examine the way the example works, undistracted by disputes about its content. What we notice first is that learning from devised examples is closer to learning a fact or a technique than it is to learning from the novel. The individual in the first example just happens to be a builder. Neither is the exact motivation for debt repayment of any significance unless fuelling another’s addiction can be re-described as not doing that person harm. In other words, how the example is constructed is a matter of indifference so long as the general distinction is learned from it. We can acquire a set of facts – say, rates of population change in China – from a lecture, a book of government statistics, or a computer programme but, whatever it is that transmits them, our focus is aimed at grasping the facts themselves. Similarly, the builder example invites concentration on the distinction it exemplifies, not the manner of its exemplification. We do not need to be imaginatively drawn into the example to make use of it. The example, we might say, hits its target because of its lack of depth, its lack of uniqueness.

We speak somewhat differently about the drunken soldier example. As in the first example, there is no great need for amplification or
closer inspection of particularity than is already present in the examples. The point of the second example is the illustration of a general rule. We show that the rule has been grasped when we are able to distinguish the cases that fall under its jurisdiction from those that do not, or from those that are hazy. In what circumstances is social or legal interference with individual liberty justified? The example contributes to the answer by bringing a principle into play. Rights and duties, too, are clearly at work in the example, but in ways that are also intended to have a general application.

In the case of devised examples, what we learn, a distinction or a rule, say, is independent of the example itself. It offers nothing special, and if it does, it is incidental to its philosophical point. When Locke asks us to think about the soul of Heliogabalus in the body of a hog, or the puzzle of the Prince and the cobbler, he is stretching our conceptual resources by raising perfectly general possibilities. Likewise, our builder who is unable to resist a drink and our soldier who is found drunk on duty are vehicles for telling us about the logic of general moral concepts. However, a philosopher contemplating using a fictional drunk, such as Geoffrey Firmin in Lowry’s novel, faces terrain of a very different character.

When, as readers, we meet Firmin sitting at an oblique angle drinking mescal at a bar in Quauhnauhuac on the Day of the Dead, 1 November, 1939, what we encounter is a man who lives the life of an alcoholic, but who is not an example of one. He does not drink to encourage or warn, nor, as a kind of fictionalised health manual, to enable us to understand drinking better. Firmin exemplifies nothing beyond himself – nothing, that is, either in the novel or in some world outside. What is striking about Lowry’s novel is that its prose reads like a guide, a handbook to one city in Mexico on one day in its history, without the book ever being one. The novel seems, too, to be an infinitely detailed description of place, in which the two volcanoes, Popocatapetl and Ixtaccihuatl, brood over the landscape, although, in fact, in that place, at that time, no such day occurred. In other words, while Lowry packs his novel with facts and techniques that could lead us towards general possibilities, it is not from these that we learn. All these might have been expressed differently without any loss to our understanding of them, but then we would not be learning from the novel. As yet, we have not imagined philosophy showing an interest in learning from Firmin, as we have seen Winch do from Vere in *Billy Budd*. Unlike the builder and the soldier in our earlier examples, Firmin does have a life of his own. The configurations of his person are not
invented, as theirs are, solely to transmit general moral possibilities, in
the one, a moral distinction, in the other, the application of a moral
rule. If philosophy should want to learn from Firmin, then what must
it notice about his life and fate?

If it should want to bring to the novel a problem of its own for illu-
mination then what philosophy must surely do is to respect Firmin’s
fictional existence by noticing that his life cannot be extracted from
the novel as we might extract one hypothesis from an argument. A
cursory nod in the general direction of art will not be sufficient, since
Firmin’s existence is inseparably bound up with the world that Lowry’s
art and language have created for us. Once within this imagined world
we see as he wishes us to see and we feel as he wishes us to feel. The
characters’ lives are not presented to us as a report, nor is a sequence of
events related as a description, restricted by any external fact. Time is
not portrayed as if soberly linear, but deranged, its plasticity artfully
reflecting the Consul’s bewilderment and confusion. Through Lowry’s
craft, we are made to feel as the Consul feels, that nothing is solid
under our feet, that ambiguity feeds more than suspicion, and that dis-
location gives rise to no enduring sense of loss.

A substantial investment in these new terms for conversational
engagement would seem to be well worth the philosophical risk. One
early benefit is the dropping of the idea that literary examples can be
treated on a par with devised ones. Acknowledgement of the novel’s
aesthetic character immediately rules this out. Baldly summarising the
novel’s narrative before extracting what is of interest to philosophy
falls a long way short of a major commitment to art. More promis-
ingly, in accepting the novel’s claims on something like its terms,
philosophers may have much to gain by being made less prescriptive
about the kind of understanding that philosophy seeks. What seems to
be a logical muddle when analysed from a formal, logical point of view
may, in the hands of the novelist, be tellingly revealed as a contradic-
tion in a character’s state of mind. Through its narrative structure and
descriptive power the novel as such offers more by way of moral revela-
tion than philosophy can hope to grasp by following straightforwardly
categorical kinds of analysis. Indeed, in taking up the novel’s offer,
philosophy may even find its own reward, since by stepping outside
itself to reflect back on its problems, philosophy signifies the reflexivity
that is its special concern. Learning from the novel, then, under its
terms of engagement, becomes a particularly good investment when it
coincides with what philosophy wants to say. From both perspectives
learning from the novel can be described as a matter of discovering
what is internal to it. Neither is this wholly a matter of intellectual content, because the novel’s strength of expression and its author’s distinctive way of writing about human beings also play a vital role in transporting the philosopher into the novel’s world.

The mutual attentiveness of moral philosophy and the novel has not gone unnoticed by philosophers. Stress has been placed on how the novel distinctively reveals to us features of moral experience less easily apprehended if presented in propositional or empirical form. We have been tracing a possible convergence of view in which the novel’s autonomy is valued philosophically as well as artistically, but we should not be tempted to leave the discussion there. The way the novelist writes about moral experience is a major part of what draws the philosopher in. In other words, it is only on the basis of what makes the novel unique that we can be said to learn from it at all. But why should the language and shape of the novel make a difference when it is read as an example? Surely, in reading it for an example we are looking for something general, and isn’t this exactly what we expect to find when we say of someone that they have learned something?

Is it the uniqueness of the work of art or the connection between learning and generality that makes us reflect further? Certain of Rush Rhees’s remarks help us take the subject forward. He points out that both the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame are astonishing technical achievements, but Notre Dame stands for much more. Whereas the Eiffel Tower exemplifies developments in engineering technology and nothing else, Notre Dame is special. It neither illustrates nor demonstrates anything, but as an architectural expression of religious ideas it is in itself unique. So, for Rhees, ‘this is where great art differs from the Eiffel Tower. And it is why we do not say that the Eiffel Tower is creative.’.7 Similarly, a response to a literary work of art is a response to something, like Notre Dame, which could not be expressed in any other way. Rhees quotes Flaubert’s advice to Maupassant: ‘By a single word make me see wherein one cab horse differs from fifty others before and behind it.’.8 In this way, he reinforces the point that what is distinctive in writing is often a matter of finding the right word, and it is through this discovery that the writer is able to make us see things differently. But when we learn from a novel, when, for instance, we come to see moral innocence differently after reading *Billy Budd*, shouldn’t we say that something general has been acquired? We might think so, since a large part of what it means to learn something is the ability to explain and discuss it, to show how this new understanding deals with apparently contrary examples. And, yet, Rhees advises
caution. It is one thing to articulate and discuss what we have learned from reading a novel, but a very different thing to insist that we must express this knowledge in general terms – so that what we learn from *Anna Karenina* is a human trait, or behaviour we would expect from any woman caught up in that kind of situation. The mistake is a mistake about learning. There are cases where we test whether something has been learned by asking for it to be put in general terms, but this is not true of all. It is, in other words, the desire for generality in all cases that is causing the difficulty. For if you think that learning proceeds exclusively on the basis of generality then you are going to need some arguments to show either that the novel is different or that something general can be taken from it. However, to look for general themes in the novel – say, blighted innocence or adulterous love – as a way of dissolving the novel’s particularity succeeds only in making the novel bland. Likewise, breaking down the novel’s textual boundaries or asking the author to disappear are both strategies for preserving generality that would seem to involve too high a philosophical price.

Rhees wants us to see that there is not one way in which learning shows general possibilities, but several. It is open to us to quarry the novel for examples of particular moral concepts while leaving much of its content untouched. This is how we might learn something relevant to ethics from Dickens’ *Hard Times*, namely, that a utilitarian vocabulary, by concentrating on quantification and calculation, leaves moral experience restricted and diminished. Something here is expressed in general terms, but since the same elucidation could come from life, neither is there anything that compels us to look to the novel as art. If, by contrast, we do believe that learning necessarily involves the acquisition of a competence that is general, it will be impossible for us to treat the novel as art. For, then, *Hard Times* will be nothing but a collection of types, and experience classified is not art, however thorough the detail.

The connection between art and understanding defended by Rhees has not always been fully exploited. Taking examples from the novel is conditional, Rhees suggests, on an acknowledgement of the novel as a work of art. In effect, philosophers who wish to learn from the novel are being given promissory notes that they can redeem only by attending to the specific difficulties involved in reading the novel as a work of art. What, then, is the character of philosophical attention to the novel? To what extent can it embrace the novel’s status as art? The questions that interest moral philosophers are neither factual nor practical. Rather they have to do with the logical force of the
concepts at work in people’s lives. Insofar as the novel captures the densities of life it is closed to restatement in the form of an exercise in a logic textbook, or as a half-remembered tradition of behaviour. Equally important is the resourcefulness of the novel in supplying philosophy with a mine of examples from life that are serious, not contrived, shallow or artificial. The example, in other words, must plausibly represent the lived contexts of meaning from which moral concepts gain their sense. In drawing on the novel’s capacity to explore the variety and diversity of moral life we are being warned against a great temptation in ethics, making the moral landscape appear neater than it is.

Moral philosophy can sometimes be found in literature; it can even be viewed as literature but, in the eyes of philosophers such as Winch, the potential of the novel for ethics is best realised by treating it as a source of example. The novel opens our eyes to moral possibilities that theory is unable to explain. A philosophical commentary must allow the novel to run its course, so permitting us to reflect on any changes of heart the characters may exhibit uninfluenced by theory’s overarching ambitions. Thus, D. Z. Phillips, in his analysis of Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Illych*, gives the narrative of the story itself a weight equal to the philosophical points he wants to make. We do not proceed by ‘a philosophical theory determining our reading of the facts. What should be the case is that the facts should determine what is shown in the philosophical analysis.’. Likewise, Phillips calls on the moral contrasts portrayed in certain of Edith Wharton’s novels to reveal the unwarranted assumptions lying behind an abstract concept of moral reasonableness. Moral change is best understood as coming to see one’s life in a different way, as reaching a new perspective on it, rather than by assessment in a court of ethical judgement that claims independence from life.

The reference in Phillips’ writings to philosophy needing to ‘wait on the story’ is complex and merits some disentangling. In one sense, it calls on the value of patience in allowing the novel to speak independently. It asks us to consider, too, the novel’s capacity to illustrate how moral terms derive meaning in human life. The novel stands to philosophy as an embodiment of the conceptual clarification that is philosophy’s special province. Thus, Phillips argues, in relation to promise keeping, there is no conceptual essence to be revealed by a ‘baptism of meaning’, as Wittgenstein describes it. Rather, the philosopher’s concern is, for example, ‘to ask what it is to keep a promise.’. Here, ‘everything depends on how these words bear on
other features of people’s lives – on how they bear on convenience, for example.’. Thus, it is through its portrayal of a way of life that the novel’s form is seen to knit with the philosopher’s concern with conceptual clarification.

When philosophers turn to the novel, Phillips insists the issue that faces them is not agreement with any actions and decisions they find there, but whether anything intelligible is being said. The contrast between the novel as a work of art and the philosophical attention that is brought to it is essential to this way of thinking. But exactly how much non-alignment with the novel’s world can this programme tolerate? Certainly, the novel is not treated as a bag of examples to be chosen pragmatically as the argument dictates, but neither is full recognition given to it as a work of art. We should, perhaps, tread carefully here. For it is not quite right to say that Phillips leaves the novel’s aesthetic character wholly undisturbed. In the philosopher’s glass there are chinks through which glimpses can be caught of the artist’s hand at work. They are glimpses only, since what they reveal of art’s controlling skill falls well short of a full picture. Nevertheless, like Winch’s attempt at an imaginative entry into the novel’s world, they hint towards a richer philosophical use of the novel than is allowed by its treatment as a source of example. Phillips acknowledges that at least part of what draws the philosopher to the novel is the novelist’s ability to make us ‘see possibilities which otherwise we might not recognise’. We are not told what this ability is, but we can reasonably conclude that Phillips is encouraging us to enquire further. Perhaps the suggestion is that a novelist’s technique, through which we are presented with occasionally extraordinary classes of experience, need not itself be uninteresting to philosophy. Perhaps it is being put to us that the novelist’s choice of, say, particularly haunting language plays a large part in how well the story is conveyed. And this, in its turn, could be taken as implying that the philosopher must recapture some of the trust in the author that the common reader must display. The issue here is not just the acuteness of the reading of the novel by any single philosopher. It is, rather, the possibility of the novel being read philosophically when its status as art receives only passing reference. For in his acknowledgement of the role of the novelist’s ability in giving the example its philosophical force, Phillips surely implies some conception of a novelist who does not have that ability. One might think, for example, of a novelist whose characters fail to come to life because they understand one another only through the mind and attitudes of the author.
A different kind of nod in the direction of the novelist’s craft is in the recognition that the novel’s power of illumination comes from the way the novelist writes about human beings, the way they are conceived in the fiction. R. W. Beardsmore makes this point when he describes William Faulkner’s novel *Intruder in the Dust* as having the capacity in some of its writing to break the grip of utilitarian accounts of moral agency. Beardsmore’s idea seems to confirm our thought that literary and stylistic matters cannot be irrelevant to philosophy. For Beardsmore, ‘it may be that by seeing how Faulkner writes and thinks of human beings we are brought to think of them in that way ourselves, and in this way to see the artificiality of the utilitarian preoccupation with quantities.’ ¹⁴ From this standpoint, questions relating to the novel’s plausibility, such as its depth of characterisation and narrative flow, are not easily set aside by philosophy as irrelevant. For they are not only central to what draws the reader in, but they also form the dramatic hinge on which the power of the example turns. So, when Phillips reads Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* philosophically, his reading is actually dependent on two considerations. First and most obviously, that in showing us what is wrong with a commonly held view of the relation between reasons and values the novel does the philosophical work expected of it. Second and less obviously, that Edith Wharton has created *The Age of Innocence* in such a way that it discloses precisely the moral values of forbearance and self-denial that Phillips is looking to stress. The novel, in other words, is able to show us more than just a society dominated by rules of social behaviour that are stiffly conventional and routine.

In waiting on the story, the philosopher expects news that does not come from the planet Zog, from an inventiveness that is purely private, an authorial fantasy. Neither does the philosopher stand to the novel as an alchemist wanting to transmute base metal into gold, for then there would be no room for inter-action or for the uncovering of the novel’s depths. A critical inter-play with the novel cannot but make up a part of what it means to read fiction with sensitivity, but we should also notice that it is vital to a philosophical reading, too. For in addressing differences over the meaning of individual passages philosophy finds it difficult to remain within its own boundaries. Such differences may concern the novel’s capacity to bear the weight of assumption that philosophers sometimes bring to it. So, Phillips in his criticism of Ilham Dilman’s interpretation of Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilych* treats the story as one would a body of evidence to be assessed one way or another. One philosopher appeals to a passage in
the story to discover if it does indeed yield the conclusions the other wishes to defend. In this case, for Phillips, what the story shows is how a set of philosophical preconceptions about the meaning of life distorts the judgements the story portrays.

But reflection on differences in literary interpretation need not proceed in such a quasi-juridical way. Differences over ambiguities of expression, for example, must look to whether they have a meaningful role in the narrative, or are simply an oversight on the novelist’s part, possibly a sign of some degree of artistic failure. A deliberately contrived ambiguity necessitates that the story can be read in more than one way, but this is not the sense in which philosophers may conventionally read it in more than one way. Even on their own terms of engagement, then, philosophers who treat the novel as a source of example must reach beyond their own conventions to reflect on the many components of the novelist’s art. If we accept that the literary example finds its life in the context of the novel before it is picked out by philosophy, then it is only against the background of the whole text that its significance as an example can be revealed. Henry James, writing of Balzac, distinguishes between his faults of artistic execution and that more serious flaw of which he cannot be accused, ‘the absence of saturation with his idea’. While acknowledging with James that when saturation operates any failure of presentation is unlikely to be lethal, our point remains. The novel cannot simply be transported into the philosopher’s toolbox, as yet another tool to be used as the argument dictates. For, as James proceeds to explain, the saturation in his character’s lives felt by a novelist like Balzac does not render the need for singular expression redundant. If, as in Balzac’s case, the mode of expression is love, its form is its manner of execution. So James famously offers the following description of Balzac’s relation to his characters: ‘it was by loving them – as the terms of his subject and the nuggets of his mine – that he knew them; it was not by knowing them that he loved.’

Clearly, it would be superfluous if we were here to become embroiled in questions concerning the novel’s cognitive status since this is not the sense of knowing with which James is concerned. More importantly, this would be to obscure the two great points that James wishes to impress on us. First, that it is through loving his characters that Balzac shows his respect for their freedom, and, second, that it is through our coming to know, possibly to love, them too that we acknowledge his fineness as an artist. Seeing the world from the others’ point of view is one small feature of love, but a much larger
and more problematic feature of a sensitive understanding of a fictional character.

Communicating those points of view in their density and variety is one of the artist’s essential abilities, one that, as Rush Rhees rightly claims, is central to the artist’s finished work, making it unexchangeable with any other. Indeed, it is this uniqueness that makes Rhees steadily reluctant to think of learning from the novel as like learning a technique, something that could conceivably be acquired in a different way. The skill a novelist like Balzac deploys is more akin to a personal signature than transferable practical know-how. And this is reflected in Rhees’ important comment, ‘what I find in the novel makes me want to read it again – but not because I might have missed some detail or got the account wrong. What I find in it comes from the telling. And I could not find this by watching people more closely.’.¹⁷

It would be a mistake to dismiss Rhees’ expression ‘it comes from the telling’ as too bald a phrase to do justice to the writer’s skill and inventiveness. What it conveys very well, almost as a proverb does, is the willingness with which imaginative readers submit to a tale compulsively told without their knowing exactly how its effect on them has been achieved. To expect the same response from philosophy is certainly to pitch our demand too low, since philosophy prides itself on asking precisely what comes from the telling and what it is about the telling that is conducive to finding it. In being receptive to these questions, we must have already cast considerable doubt on the distinction between the novel as example and the novel as such. For under Rhees’ eye, the understanding gleaned from art cannot be wholly remote from the judgements we form in life, since, as he puts it, ‘language is fundamental to both.’.¹⁸ Here, too, the novel reflects this close relationship. For instance, the complexity of irony in Dicken’s *Great Expectations* expresses, often in contrary and unexpected ways, the affirmative view of life and the gaining of moral experience that Dickens wishes to present. Similarly, the language he uses to describe how Pip gradually and confusedly awakes to the imaginative life is, through its admixture of realism and symbolism, perfectly matched to its theme and, hence, to our gaining understanding of it. Again, with all the economy of his art, Dickens shows that against a background of injustice, skilfully woven with poetic justice, and through the painful recognition of shame and guilt, for Pip at least moral choice is possible.

What is suggested here falls well short of the claim that it is the philosophy in the novel that should interest us. Nor are we proposing that *Great Expectations* in its attentive chronicling of the development
of a mind should be read, say, as a phenomenological account of the way moral experience is acquired. Put plainly, it is that by giving greater prominence to the novel’s art that we gain a much wider field of enquiry. In achieving this, we are, in one sense, doing no more than making explicit an indebtedness that many philosophical employers of the novel as a source of example already to a limited degree recognise. We, however, are seeing the novel whole, and this rewards us with the immense advantage of being able to ask questions of it that its rather more restricted use prevents or curtails. What does it mean, for instance, to inhabit a fictional character’s world? To take two most obviously difficult and, perhaps, limiting cases: can we feel love for them or fear for their futures? Should we feel alarmed that in extending the investigation we risk submitting moral philosophy to the novelist’s fancy, to distraction from life? If the novel’s execution were to function only as a pictorial embellishment to its narrative it would be difficult to explain why philosophy should be concerned with it at all. There would be little value to ethics in turning to the novel if style and tone served only to persuade or excite. For it is not the ability to portray the conceptually fanciful that draws the philosopher’s attention, but the illumination shed by the novel on those features of our lives that give concepts their sense. Taking the novel seriously is, as R. W. Beardsmore writes, ‘more a matter of knowing what we are supposed to be imagining, being able to respond to the characters and see their problems as real ones.’.19 And here, we might insist, the way the novelist expresses the story is crucial.

Aesthetic considerations can be made supreme, and, as we shall discover, ethics asked to play second feature to the sublime, a territory of which Nabokov is, of course, master. He writes of reading Dickens’ *Bleak House* that ‘although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art and pure science. Let us worship the spine and its tingle.’.20 Nabokov’s writing strikes a nerve, for, although we are not yet ready at this point to explore all the implications of his remark, amongst many things, it reminds us of the affection we feel for a favourite poem or literary passage. We ‘worship the spine and its tingle’ because we are familiar with the emotional responses literature frequently generates. Much loved literature has an individuality that a philosophical example lacks. The novel, too, has its own personality, and so makes more demands of us both in terms of engagement and detachment than its use as an example can possibly explain or accept.
To mention the individuality of the work of art is to advance the argument. For it points to the need for a re-definition of the terms of the debate so that the novel’s artistic qualities receive sharper recognition. When ethics is set an agenda that aspires to bring it closer to life, as it is in Martha Nussbaum’s writings, then the moral philosopher’s engagement with art and life begins to dominate the stage.
Fiction and the Good

Philosophers such as Rhees who emphasise the importance of serious examples in ethics do not speak about them as moral theory does. A philosophical commentary on the novel must allow moral questions to speak for themselves. The novel is not a description of moral life, nor does it merely raise issues for debate, one reader, say, taking the side of a fictional character’s decision, another against. Indeed, the apparent oddity of this way of speaking reveals the philosophical difficulty. To abstract the issues from the characters and the characters from their lives in the novel is to look, for instance, at Vere’s dilemma in Melville’s *Billy Budd*, from the outside, not as he looks at it himself. But, if abstraction is closed to us, what language of reading is appropriate? Not one, in Rhees’ view, that permits free entry into the novel’s world by allowing endings to be changed or the lives of characters rewritten. Whatever language it is, it is not that of the devised example. The Anna Karenina to whose fate we might respond with tears cannot be altered at will, even by philosophers reflecting on the logic of such a response. For art contains a purposeful inventiveness which is lacking in life and from which we learn. Thus, it is always possible in life to be surprised by people we think we know. It is always possible to come across features in another’s life that force us to recognise that we were mistaken about them, or to see that how they live is not as we once thought. But what discovery of this kind could we make about Anna that we are not told about in the novel?

The distinction between art and life is at work here, and it arises, for Rhees, because ‘the intelligibility which the dramatist or novelist achieves is an intelligibility of construction.’¹ The story of Anna is a literary construction and, like all stories, how the human life it portrays turns out has everything to do with that form’s authorship, with
the aesthetic opportunities and constraints the form implies. There are
beginnings and tragic endings in life as well as art: stories, however, are
not lived, but told. In stories as much as in life, it is only in retrospect
that hopes are fulfilled or left unrealised, but stories are shaped by a
contrived form in which, in the author’s hands, dramatic tensions are
increased or relaxed and crises manufactured or erased. Hence, Anna
cannot surprise us in the same way we might be surprised in life.

We do not, then, enter the novel by changing it, nor is there any-
thing in the novel that corresponds exactly to the discoveries that
enable us to be surprised in life. But can we put ourselves in the place
of fictional characters? Is it possible to ask what we would decide
seeing the same difficulties as they see, facing the same circumstances
that face them? Such questions seem to make realisable demands on
readers, since we are not looking for anything outside the novel, but
rather following its lead as a common reader would. Further, we should
remember that these are precisely the queries raised by Winch in his
discussion of Vere’s decision to sentence Budd to hang. So they are
central to philosophical argument, not simply features of a noticeably
sensitive reading.

When, however, we turn to Rhees’ discussion of the dilemma that
faces Sue Bridehead in Hardy’s Jude the Obscure, we find him unwilling
to concede sense to these questions. In the novel, Sue has to choose
between staying with Jude and returning to the husband she does not
love. In Rhees’ view, it is ‘nonsense’ for readers to ask what they
would do in her place. This suggests that some trespass has occurred,
that in seeking such a response we are straying beyond an imaginative
understanding of Sue’s choice into altogether more troublesome and
disturbing regions. Rhees implies a boundary between sense and non-
sense in the way the novel is read. But, then, if this is so, does empathy
for Sue have to be excluded, since empathy requires that we imagine
Sue having those feelings and that we actively share them? Could
there be an ‘imaginative understanding’ which was not expressive of
some degree of empathy? Or is it rather that her decision cannot be
hypothesised?

One possible answer has to do with the gap Rhees draws between art
and life. Art offers a space for reflection, from the horrors portrayed in
King Lear, for instance, from which, as Rhees writes, ‘I must have
turned away if I were there.’ A different answer, again, reflects his
view that it is ‘generally idle’ to ask what one might do in the position
of another, since in moral life there is simply no standard position for
all to be in. The decision that Sue faces is not one that can be
addressed on the basis of any kind of general moral expertise. Her dilemma is not the result of her failure to find an answer that could be reached by other more qualified individuals. If Sue were searching for a method to help her decide, we could think of someone with a secure grasp of ethical method asking what they would have done, or even advising her what she should do: yet this is not how Sue’s problem appears important to her. For, as Rhees comments, Sue is not looking for a method or an ideal advisor, but ‘is deciding something about herself.’\textsuperscript{5} Thus, even if we do grasp that Sue’s choice is a tragic one, ‘another person may never fully understand why nothing else is possible partly because it is connected with the story as she has been through it from the beginning.’\textsuperscript{6}

We should not assume, however, that Rhees wants philosophers to read a novel by always treating it on its own terms. Sometimes what is learned is best achieved through the introduction of something from outside. This is the method at the heart of Rhees’ discussion of Mann’s \textit{Mario and the Magician}. In this he is concerned to stress the important distinction between a reluctance to talk about an experience from shame or guilt and an unwillingness to speak about a particular feeling when no shame or guilt is present. In Mann’s story, Cipolla, the ugly magician, hypnotises Mario, who is ordinary kindness personified, into publicly confessing his love for Sylvestra, a love that hitherto he had kept deeply concealed. As Rhees remarks, we discover what makes this kind of manipulation of another so terrible in the nature of the secret and its manner of surrender. To bring this point out, Rhees asks us to imagine someone who deliberately exposes an incident in a friend’s past of which the friend is fearfully ashamed and urgently wishes to hide. We might judge such an exposure severely, but the action does not degrade as Mario is degraded, for his secret is not a reason for shame. Further suppose, Rhees suggests, that it is not Mario but another who makes Mario’s sequestered adoration public. The result in such a case may have been severe embarrassment, possibly bitterness, but not utter degradation. For what puts Mario’s loss of dignity so far beyond retrieval is not that he is hypnotised dramatically to believe that the hideous Cipolla is his adored Sylvestra, but that he is made to expose his love himself. In the scene that Mann paints, Mario is made more than a figure of fun. Mann wants us to become uncomfortably aware that an experience we know to be natural and understandable is being cruelly distorted. When love is so deliberately and perversely traduced, an essential decency is lost.
Moral philosophy, in Rhees’ view, has to do with the revelation of possibilities. It is through the provision of differences that the range and variety of moral experience is grasped. Mann’s novel shows us what it is like to degrade and be degraded. It shows us what it is like to be in the position of victim, and to be a member of the audience. But philosophy’s interest is in conceptual possibility, and this means that it must to some degree stand apart. It must retain its freedom to step away from the novel to look for contrasts if that is what the clarification of a specific use of moral language requires. So Rhees’ discussion focuses on differences in meaning when the surface behaviour appears the same. His is a commentary with a precise aim and in this sense we might say that conceptual clarification comes about in collaboration with the novel’s depiction of Mario’s fate.

We can, of course, understand Mann’s novel more reflexively than Rhees’ particular reading either contains or needs. For of the many reasons for its power there is one that draws our attention directly to the status of storytellers themselves. What the story alarmingly asks us to consider is the thought that storyteller and magician are one and the same. The contrast we like to assume between the language of art and the tricks and illusions of the hypnotist’s trade is itself a sleight of hand. Both have the capacity to delight or to hit the spot – to find, as Nabokov puts it, ‘the spine and its tingle’. Both can make anything appear desirable, however repulsive it is, and whoever wishes to resist it. As readers, then, we suddenly discover that as Mario stands to Cipolla so we stand to the novelist. Art does not enlighten or instruct. It craftily places our innermost secrets on public display for entertainment, satire and ridicule. Against the artist’s perlocutionary will liberal intelligence offers a puny defence. A power to rationally assess what faces us is reduced, as it is in the case of the intellectual gentleman from Rome in Cipolla’s audience, first to simpering appeasement and then raucous complicity.

If we were to resist such knowingness, what would be required? Shakespeare pinpoints the insider’s view as the sceptic’s creed – ‘the lunatic, the lover and the poet, Are of imagination all compact’ – defying us, as we might understand it, to formulate a rapprochement between philosophy and literature that willingly embraces the novel’s spell and, yet, is sensitive to philosophy’s independence. One way forward is to follow the route explored by Martha Nussbaum in her project to rehabilitate the links between art, philosophy and life. By taking this step we are committing ourselves to an examination of a radical transformation in how the novel is to be perceived: nothing
here, however, necessitates either that the novel be turned into a work of philosophy or that all novels have a philosophical bearing. Of course, the exact nature of philosophy’s independence remains to be specified, but we can be sure that in its engagement with the novel it will not, as Nussbaum firmly expresses it, ‘stop with the enumeration of differences’.  

In Nussbaum’s writings, then, we encounter claims regarding the ethical significance of the novel that in comprehensiveness and ambition range well beyond the views examined so far. The paramount concern of ethics is no longer exclusively with the clarification of moral concepts found in life, but with the Aristotelian question: how should I/we live? No simple divide exists between theory and practice. Ethics can find an appropriate theoretical standpoint from which its central question can be answered. So it is not ethical theory as such that deforms life, but only those versions of it that are unresponsive to experience or too unyielding in their premises or in their search for abstraction. In this picture, ethics is not displaced by literature, but is enlarged by its inclusion. For if there are some features of ethical life that can be expressed only in the novel then its study must be of interest to ethics. And, yet, such an enlargement is not purchased at the cost of theory. Ethics requires a degree of argumentation in its procedures, and generality in its conclusions, that the novel is unable to supply.

In this portrait, ethics exhibits a dual relationship with its subject matter. For just as it needs the novel to complete itself through careful attention to its salient qualities so the novel depends on ethics examining and testing moral intuitions and judgements in the light of its own evolving theories of justice and the human good. Moral philosophers should be both detached and involved. Neither so detached from life that they are led to a betrayal of life through adopting the guise of independent spectator, nor so immersed in it that they are unable to see beyond the language of opinion and interest. Not so detached from the novel’s representations of life that they are tempted to use a vocabulary of universal moral reason, nor so immersed in a concrete way of living that they are silent about the general capacities of human beings and the values that go with them. Hence, the appropriate model for ethics to follow is not exclusively that of the detective looking for evidence in a neutral, unattached way. Nor is it exclusively that of a friend seeing the novel as another self to be perpetually and truthfully explored. The clearest model, in Nussbaum’s view, is that of a partnership in which moral philosophy seeks ‘overall, the best fit
between our considered moral and political judgements and the insights offered by our reading.  

We shall explore this notion of a ‘best fit’ at a later stage, but it is worth noticing here that it is not part of Nussbaum’s project to use the novel straightforwardly as ammunition against standard utilitarian or Kantian ethical positions. That is too simple a method of testing both our experience of reading and the soundness of alternative moral theories. If the categories they employ exclude too much in the moral life that is of concern to ethics, the way to point this out is not through a single literary insight, but by a comparison of rival ethical conceptions which proceeds reflexively in fairness to all positions, including their own. It should be clear that, in this pursuit of the novel’s ethical role, we are being taken well beyond its use as an example. The pragmatic deployment of the novel as the argument dictates is hardly demanding of the novel’s qualities, except, perhaps, to rule out the wholesale riding of its author’s hobbyhorse. Such a use has little need for the novel’s distinctive appeal to its reader’s emotions. It does not hinge on the engrossing character of the novel’s narrative development, nor its grasp of ethical particulars and its portrayal of moral diversity, including the often unpredictable turns taken in the course of a life. In the pragmatic use, the moral philosopher stands to the novel as the car mechanic does to the old wrecks he wishes to cannibalise. They have an interest only so long as they promise the parts that fit the bill. By stark contrast, in Nussbaum’s view, it is the way of a good novel to make its reader ‘a participant and a friend’, as we shall discover, so considerably raising the philosophical stakes concerning how the novel can be read.

Ad hoc examples from literature distance us further from the novel’s personal signature because they are invariably driven by the logic of the theories they are supposed to attack or defend. To read examples on these terms is to risk begging too many ethical questions since our responses to the example are likely to be heavily freighted by the theory that licenses its use. Alternatively, the novel in its wholeness and complexity brings ethics closer to life because it is able to reflect the openness and variety of life, so drawing its readers into its world, inviting them to participate in the ethical quests it portrays.

Examples illuminate and, on occasion, devastate philosophical claims. If we think of the novel in terms of these functions we diminish it, and, yet, it cannot be read as philosophy itself. Indeed, for Nussbaum, the novel’s importance for ethics comes from precisely the qualities that make it so unlike a formal ethical treatise. Similarly, the
qualities that make an attentive philosophical reader are those that will be lacking in philosophers whose methods are exclusively analytical and abstract. To pursue ethics along a single axis such as the notion of rule or by concentrating on an individual choice or the choice's consequences is to ignore much that is vital to the moral life. What remains in the shadows in these perspectives is, in Nussbaum's view, powerfully illuminated by an Aristotelian ethical stance – its stress on the end of human flourishing and the conception of practical reason appropriate to it, is, she believes, reflected in the form and content of the novel. Specific works of literature show moral actions and relationships evolving or breaking down over the course of a whole life. They show virtues and vices in close proximity to the passions, so drawing attention to the tests that practical reason must face if it is to moderate between conflicting ends and modify our passions when they threaten to overwhelm.

As Nussbaum recognises, the qualities in the novel that the Aristotelian theorist values need not be exclusive to any one ethical tradition, but they come to a natural convergence in their sense of life and the moral features specific to it. They share the view that human goods are heterogeneous, involving multiple valuations and attachments that it is not possible to measure along a single scale of value without a qualitative loss. Practical reason performs the vital task of deliberating between goods that are plural, sometimes colliding, always potentially out of harmony with one another. Deliberation between competing goods and virtues is not in the Aristotelian picture a coldly impersonal exercise, but one which depends on a perceptiveness to another's point of view and a capacity to pick out the morally relevant features of the situations that face them.

The modern Aristotelian respects, too, the novel's recognition that the passions – for example, anger and love – are not cognitive free agents, wholly divorced from rational scrutiny, but rooted in human contexts of living and valuing. Not anything can be termed a sensible object of anger, not anything a sensible recipient of love. The novel also displays very well those changes in the circumstances of life that test an agent's moral resourcefulness. So an unexpected misfortune finds its sense from the flow of life as the novel portrays it. Moral rules certainly have a place, but too exclusive a focus on them tends to understate the ethical importance of individual disposition and choice, at work often in contexts of great moral strain and complexity.

A question can be raised at this point that may prove troublesome to a neo-Aristotelian position. Ethics, we might agree, requires a subject,
something outside itself that is open to reform, analysis, clarification or contemplation according to the given tradition of enquiry, but why should this be anything other than life? Why turn particularly to literature for enlightenment about morality when its established home is life itself? To fully paid up Aristotelians the question is worrying, because they are already committed to a specific view of life in which notions such as natural teleology loom large. Whatever it is that literature adds we can safely assume that it will not take the form of a set of normative or explanatory propositions. It makes little sense to think of the novel as a test of this socio-biological account of life or, even more oddly, as being tested by it.

In fact, this is not how Nussbaum proceeds. In raising this question against herself, as she must, she denies that there is any conflict between an Aristotelian’s general theory of life and the novel’s exhibition of particularity. For her, Aristotle, in commending poetry as more philosophical than history, is not setting his general conception aside, but ‘he is writing a chapter in that conception.’.\(^{11}\) Our attention to particulars is, it might be said, of a kind that only a being possessed of certain general attributes could give. But this simply returns us to our original question since we still wait to hear what gives the moral particularity in the novel priority over the particulars in life. We would expect an Aristotelian answer to point to the need for particular kinds of consideration – empirical, conceptual, poetic – to deal with different kinds of question as the argument demands, but Nussbaum speaks more directly of specific deficiencies in life and the qualities specific to art. Life, she avers, is often shallow and parochial. Lacking art’s intricate perceptiveness, life is often too much dulled by habit, routine, inattention and partiality to catch the significant point. The novelist’s art enables us to see ourselves more clearly. In so doing art extends and enhances life.

But exactly how is life enhanced? Not by furthering the fond belief that character in art is automatically a trustworthy reflection of life, for sometimes in art characters live, or are killed off, solely for the sake of the action. William H. Gass remarks that in fiction he has ‘known many who have passed through their stories without noses or heads to hold them; others have lacked bodies altogether, exercised no natural functions, possessed some thoughts, a few emotions, but no psychologies, and apparently made love without the necessary organs.’.\(^{12}\) Nor should we readily assume that art enhances life by providing some degree of atonement for life’s all too obvious miseries. In art’s narratives we find stories with endings and no beginnings, birth without
any sign of parentage and, as Lichtenberg remarks, ‘fatal illnesses that
in ordinary life are never fatal, and conversely in ordinary life fatal ill-
nesses that are never fatal in novels.’. The differences in the ways we
respond to art and life are, in other words, ubiquitous and necessary,
both conceptually and morally. We do not grieve at the fate of Billy
Budd in the way that we do for a close friend. Our engagement in life
is both more urgent and more practical than it is with art since in large
measure we are defined by how we behave. In life, we deliberate about
what to do, sometimes in conflict with rival courses of action and
often in the forceful presence of emotions that can as readily sway us
one way as another.

Learning from the novel cannot be a substitute for learning in life,
but there is, Nussbaum argues, in the act of reading something that is
both exemplary and of great importance to ethics. For the reader’s
attentiveness is a specialised form of the moral attentiveness found in
the novel’s portrayal of its characters and their choices. In such a
reading, ‘we actively care for their particularity, and we strain to be
people on whom none of their subtleties are lost, in intellect and
feeling.’. Since we do not respond to the novel as we do to life, we are
in a better position to learn both from the novel and for life. For in this
place we find ‘love without possessiveness, attention without bias,
involvement without panic.’.

The debate about life’s enhancement through art is not fully settled
by pointing either to life’s occasional obtuseness about itself or to the
special insights coming from art. Nor is it much furthered by counter-
ing the rival claim that works of literary art are reports on experience,
albeit of a logically unusual kind, to be assessed as we would reports on
life. Where enhancement has a role is in the differences between our
responses to fiction and to life. Thus, in reading a work by, say,
Thomas Mann, we do so in ways that are structured by conventions
that are shared. We can no more say literally anything about Mario and
the Magician than we can feel literally anything about Cipolla’s treat-
ment of Mario. More importantly, in saying what we can say about the
thoughts of fictional characters, it is Nussbaum’s view that, ‘we have
no sense of transgression or violation.’. For in life, what may be a
cruel intrusion into another’s self is, in art, a permanent reminder of
the inner life and why it is valued. In acknowledging this boundary
between the novel as a constructed form and life we reinforce a
contrast between the private and the permissibly public that we are
morally familiar with in life. The novel, then, as Nussbaum puts it,
‘in its very form, emphasises this idea of the person as a deep and
manifold inner world that it would be transgressive for any gesture but that of love to invade.’.17

The picture of the reader in love that Nussbaum wishes to present is made more explicit in the ways she speaks about love’s fictional occasions. Sometimes love is expressed in the attitude a reader takes up towards the lives of fictional characters – the depth of understanding and sympathy displayed about a character’s circumstances and state of mind. At others, it is the novel itself that attracts love through, possibly, the erotic power of the tale it tells and its style of telling. On other occasions again, love can be drawn from the reader by a single character. As it was drawn apparently from Nussbaum herself, when, according to her report, on the beach at Yarmouth reading Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, she encountered the fascinating and brilliant James Steerforth. And, whilst enthusiastically turning the pages and experiencing ‘the power of Steerforth’s presence, I felt my heart suddenly take off, rushing happily from the firmness of judgement into the eager volatility of desire.’.18

In asking what we are to make of this, we should first notice that Nussbaum herself helpfully describes it as love. ‘The love of a fictional character’, she writes, ‘can be love’.19 What kind of love could this be? If it is love as a metaphor for the considerate attention that a careful reader brings to the text then we might accept it. If it were love as make-believe then it would be the kind of love that allows us to switch from art to life, from imagining what it would be like to love Steerforth at one moment to remembering what our own loves were like at another. We might agree with this, too, because in both these explanations the contrast between art and life is hard at work. But Nussbaum does not leave it there. In love with Steerforth, she feels that ‘in this relation, the mysterious and ineffable charm of interaction with a powerful presence can be experienced in much the way it is in life.’.20

Our interest in this question springs directly from the heightened role that is given to the novel in Nussbaum’s conception of ethics. For she argues that a literary work read neutrally and dispassionately will not yield the gold that ethics seeks. Emotions, such as pity and fear, are exactly the responses we should have if, as in the case of tragic fates like that of Antigone, we are to see clearly what is before us in the play. Thus, Nussbaum aims to dispel much of the self-consciousness that can sometimes surround art when it is faced by a philosophy set upon a clinically analytic course. In order to appreciate fully what the novel can teach, it is beneficial to re-examine such distinctions as those between fact and value, reason and emotion, art and life, distinctions
that in some philosopher’s hands have become set in their ways. In Nussbaum’s hands, by contrast, philosophy ‘must be more literary, more closely allied to stories, and more respectful of mystery and open-endedness than it frequently is.’\textsuperscript{21} It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find Nussbaum asserting that there is ‘no neutral posture of reflection from which one can survey and catalogue the intuitions of one’s heart on the subject of love – no activity of philosophising that does not stand in some determinate relation to love.’\textsuperscript{22}

Now suppose that I, too, wish to record an experience similar to Nussbaum’s. While investigating the logical connections between trust and love I read a novel by Zola, and in the course of that reading I fall in love with Thérèse Raquin. As with love in life, I would be hard pressed to identify one moment when this occurred. It was not as if I turned a page one morning and there it was. Nevertheless, page-turning certainly has something to do with my feelings, for when she does not make an appearance I am lost, anxious to discover what has happened to her. What sense can I make of this experience? Is this love? My first thought is that I have confused love with infatuation, but I soon realise that this cannot be since the future I care about is not mine but hers in the novel. I am concerned about whether she can survive her grotesque marriage to Camille, and about whether she will be able to recover the youthful high spirits that first attracted me to her. Nor should my love be confused with fleeting desire, or mistakenly thought a passing mood, a piece of fancy, make-believe. My love does not disappear as a desire does once it is satisfied, for I return to her fictional presence over and over again. I read and re-read her story so as to discover everything about her, because I know that it is only through the story that I can find out more. Nor am I faithless in love, for I shun fictional rivals, giving her my whole imaginative attention.

Nussbaum speaks of love for a fictional character as lacking the possessiveness and jealousy that in life are often found in close proximity to love, but these are misrepresentations of love and I want my love to be as pure as it is humanly possible to be. I realise, of course, that the reason I cannot behave possessively towards Thérèse is because her freedom is quite independent of anything I think or say. This pleases me as it would anyone genuinely in love. Similarly, my jealousy of her lover, Laurent, must remain permanently mute since, in never knowing of it, she cannot show my fears justified or reassure me that she is always mine. I find the charge of jealousy especially audacious, as I know of other readers who share my love and I am no more jealous
of them than they are of me. To state an obvious fact, the Thérèse who
is loved by some of these readers is the Thérèse of vulgar adaptations of
the novel, but I ignore this kind of love, finding it inauthentic, too
malleable of the original to rival my own. I ask how I am to express my
love – is she to know of it or am I to remain forever silent, as Mario so
keenly wanted to keep silent about his feelings for Sylvestra? I do feel a
degree of frustration in being kept from her and, yet, I do not wonder
whether my love has to be unspoken, necessarily unrequited. Since
Thérèse must remain forever unmindful of my existence, I see little
point in these reflections. Indeed, I find in this a curious sort of hope
since, in speaking of her as unmindful of my love, I seem in an odd
sort of way to bring her to life.

It is Zola’s novel, I readily acknowledge, that has brought me the gift
of being able to love Thérèse, but this, I rather worryingly have to
point out, is double-edged. Realistic though the novel’s descriptions are
of her character, suppleness and all too human disposition and tem-
perament, it is not through those descriptions that I love her. The
woman I love is the one who comes alive in the novel. I love Thérèse,
not the clone. My love individuates, as all true love must do, and so
separates the prose from the poetry, allowing her distinctive personal-
ity to live.

In having fallen in love with a fictional character I am often thought
a little peculiar, but I insist that I am not mad, as I might be thought to
be if I had fallen in love with a creature from another planet or a
mythological being, perhaps a god. For I know what all attentive
readers of the novel know, that in her weaknesses and passions Thérèse
is made all too recognisably human, and this consoles me with the
thought that my love is at least understandable. Some critics do accept
that my reports of the feelings I experience are genuine, but I am made
uncomfortably aware of their refusal to recognise them as love. My
feeling, they say, are akin to the affection of a child. My tears if
Thérèse should be harmed are like a child’s at the loss of its favourite
toy bear, but I reply, what tears does the child shed except real ones?
Of course, I realise that the bear the child loves is not physically
remote from its world, but can be touched, caressed and, occasionally,
treated badly. By contrast, every time I pick up Zola’s book I cannot
help being impressed by the fact that the individual I love has no phys-
ical existence at all. In the novel’s pages she springs vigorously to
life, as she does in my imagination, but I know that I will never cross
the road to meet her or arrange an assignation in a Paris bar. I am cer-
tainly not one of Stanley Cavell’s yokels,23 who takes his imaginative
confrontation with Othello to be real and tries to do – what? What would he do if what the play portrays was in fact happening? Reason with Othello, threaten him, call the police, tell him the truth?

Does this ‘gap’ make me less loving, less tender, less passionate towards Thérèse? Perhaps I could cleverly attempt to find someone in my world to act as a surrogate for her, someone who closely resembles her in features and temperament. I could pay someone to impersonate Thérèse, someone with special skills who could convincingly dress as she does, fly into passionate rages as she does, display all the nervousness and repressed natural energy that I find so attractive. Perhaps I could attempt some psychological version of the same game by, in my mind’s eye, making love to a real-life substitute for Thérèse. Then, I quickly realise that I could never find this satisfying, for I would always know that the fictional Thérèse was more desirable than the factual or psychological dissimulation could ever be.

I ask myself whether my love for Thérèse will stand the test of time. Sometimes in life love fails, at others it is of its nature to be of the moment, rapidly burnt out; it is of great concern to me to discover what kind of love mine is. Sceptics scoff at these investigations. In art, as in life, they acknowledge the presence of narrative development, but in my relation with Thérèse, the time, they say, must always be now. So it appears that my love for a fictional character is incapable of change or decay. A love that is closed to time is closed to the tests of love and is, therefore, barely worth the name. Should I accept this argument?

I know that in the novel’s world some fictional characters die, others, either deliberately or through the novelist’s oversight, simply fade inexplicably away. But as Zola’s narrative evolves, and as my love for Thérèse strengthens, my fears for her safety increase. It can be so with love in life. We see someone loved in life becoming embroiled in deep and troubled waters, as I see Thérèse doing in her fictional world when during her love affair with Laurent they plot the murder of Camille. These parallels reassure me, for it is made apparent that in loving Thérèse I love a mortal human being not a time-traveller from beyond the grave, say, Greta Garbo, who has in some fashion I am unable to comprehend come into my world from her past. I accept, in other words, that my love for a fictional character requires a temporal location if it is to have sense, but why should this remind me of love in life? When in the novel Thérèse dies in the dreadful suicide pact with Laurent I am left, as we are sometimes left in life, with only the memory of what it was like to love her. A keepsake, a photograph of a
long dead love kept in an old tin box under the bed, serves in life as the novel serves in restoring my feelings for Thérèse after her death. Naturally, sceptics are quick to alert me to the obvious fact that the photograph I cannot bear to destroy shows that there once was such a person. This, they say, marks a boundary between art and life that I would be unwise to neglect. But they do not convince me. I reply: better a permanent now in which Thérèse lives forever in my imagination than an irretrievable then.

There is another temporal feature of my love for a fictional character that my critics are keen to bring to my attention. How do I know that I would love Thérèse if, by some wholly unexpected and terrifying possibility, I were transported into her fictional world? I respond by saying that my critics are confused. When I read a novel such as Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* I might ask myself if I would have run away as the young soldier does at his first taste of battle. Faced by what seem to be overwhelming odds, would I drop my rifle and run, only to discover, as the young soldier does, that my comrades who courageously stood their ground have successfully stemmed the enemy’s advance? How can I know what I would do? In a stubborn, death or glory frame of mind I might dig in and fight with the rest, but in another mood a not unhealthy sense of self-preservation might prove decisive. With my love for Thérèse it is very different. For it is not a matter of predicting what I would feel if I were there, but knowing what I feel now. It is not a matter of hoping that my love would survive the journey into fiction, but knowing that I love her now. I have everything that I need to love her. That is the gift that Zola’s novel brings.

My critics, however, are far from finished with me. If my love for Thérèse is the gift I take from the novel then, they will argue, this shows only how insecure is my grasp of imaginative truth. Loving Thérèse is a flight from reality, a clear demonstration of my failure to understand and appreciate the aesthetically coded nature of the novel’s world. I accept that in loving Thérèse I may be thought a little unsophisticated, but I point out merely that, like those who sob unstoppably at the death of Little Nell, I am just responding to what confronts me in the fiction. I know that Thérèse does not exist. I know also that at least a part of what I feel for her derives from the way Zola portrays her. Am I a fantasist because of this? Nussbaum describes love for a fictional character as stemming from an almost unstinting sense of fantasy because the feelings that she has for Steerforth she shares with those who love him in the novel. I am unwilling to go so far since, in Zola’s novel, the passion that Laurent has for Thérèse contains
a self-destructive element that my love wishes to resist. Roger Scruton defines fantasy as ‘a real desire which, through prohibition, seeks an unreal, but realised, object.’ If we were to grant the truth of this, a critic ill-disposed to call my feelings love would surely have to stop well short of dismissing them as fantasy. Unlike fantasists whose desires alone manufacture their objects, I respond to a Thérèse who has a life of her own. So far am I from fantasising her to satisfy my desires that I realise I can love her only by accepting her freedom and independence. It is not, in other words, a self-imposed prohibition of a real desire that makes me want her. For if I attempt to love her as a substitute for a real desire then I know that I will lose her. To fantasise about Thérèse would make her a servant of my will. Rather than carefully watching their desires to ensure that the desires of others are taken into account, fantasists offer merely a parody of love. By contrast, my feelings are not bound up exclusively with self-gratification. For I know that to love her I must acknowledge the novel’s world as separate from my world. I must notice something independent of my feelings. I must notice what the novel contains.

In denying that my love for Thérèse is a fantasy, am I being tempted into forging art closer to life than is warranted? For giving my trust to Thérèse in the novel involves considerations wholly different from trusting someone loved in life. In love in life my desire is to understand and please someone who has an existence independent of my desires. The novel gives Thérèse an existence apart from my love for her, but this is not the apartness that is found in life. Some of my critics have concluded from this that, since Thérèse exists only in the pages of the novel, my desire for her cannot be real. In life, they say, love requires a desire to please and assuage, as fear does the desire to avoid, or pity the mitigation of suffering. We might formalise the point by saying that loving a fictional character lacks a desire that in life is essential to love, but what follows from this? For my critics what follows is that, as a species of desire, my love for Thérèse is no love at all since I cannot act on it and it can never be mutual. Without the author’s intervention, it makes no sense for me to enter the novel’s cast – say, as Camille’s long lost friend, arriving just in time to snatch Thérèse away from Laurent’s cunning grasp. Nor am I able by a sheer act of will to make Thérèse laugh and cry with me, as I do with her. But do these gaps conceptually disable my love? Occurring in life they would not do so, since in life we find both unrequited love and love single-mindedly pursued. I laugh with and at Mr Pickwick without expecting laughter in return, and so it sometimes is in life.
Such an absence of reciprocity is, my critics insist, an essential feature of relationships in which art and life are mixed. I can love Thérèse, but she cannot love me nor can she know about my love for her. Absence of reciprocity, they claim, is a rule of understanding that must be grasped if we are to know what art is. Further, a lack of mutuality is often thought to be a part of what the novel shows us to be true, a part of what makes its mode of representation distinct both from life and from fantasy. Should I now weep at the loss of my love or fight to defend it? I decide to fight. Only accountants of the spirit, I say, value reciprocity. I agree with Nietzsche’s cry against John Stuart Mill: ‘reciprocity is a piece of gross vulgarity; precisely that something I do may not and could not be done by another. That no balance is possible, that in a deeper sense one never gives back, because one is something unique and does only unique things.’

‘No balance is possible,’ Nietzsche writes, quietly hinting that my relation to Thérèse is not one of equals. Does Thérèse, then, stand to me as Londoners, say, are related to their distant successors, able to benefit or harm them, but closed to anything in return? Time in flowing one way makes it impossible to conceive of reciprocity between generations distant in history, but what equivalent gap separates me from Thérèse? The novel’s gift in inspiring my love for her comes from its author. So it is the artist who has brought me to this state. The emotions I feel, at times almost uncontrollably, in reading Zola’s text are somehow in tune with the story his imagination has produced. I mean nothing pejorative by saying this. I make no allegations of sorcery against the artist for what I am promised is not the sight of fairies at the bottom of my garden, but a familiar form of human love. Cipolla’s ghost is firmly laid, then, but I remain anxious. Perhaps, what troubles me is the thought that it is only through the power of suggested truth that my love comes into being. For I know that, as the least suggestible of men, it must be the text itself that draws me in. Something about the story of Thérèse, and not simply her as an individual, makes her irresistible to me. But Thérèse is, like Steerforth, a desirable transgressor, easily capable of murder, and of selfishly and willingly violating the trust of the Raquin family, as Steerforth cruelly does to the Peggotty household.

As an outsider to the novel, in whom can I trust? Not Thérèse, of course, for unlike Camille and Laurent I am not a character in her story, nor could I be. Zola, as the author of this tale and the instigator of my troubles, would seem to be an artist eminently worthy of trust. For his stories are told realistically, readers feel the ground is solid
under their feet and no philosophical assumptions prejudice his char-
acters' voices or force them into manners of speaking that are false to
the ways they live. But is art mirroring life or playing a spiteful trick on
me? In talking about giving or withholding trust in life we commonly
distinguish between one who is trustworthy, but not honest, and
another whose honesty guarantees trust. Trusting individuals whose
honesty is constrained is a matter of negotiating conditions of trust.
Aesthetic trust shares these features. For readers trust the author to say
what is important, to give the relevant information and, sometimes, to
tell us as readers things that the characters themselves do not know.
The author’s freedom of narration is also an object of trust since, in
building the character’s personalities, at times by small increments, at
others by large leaps, the author permits us as readers to see behind the
appearances, to discover motives that in the novel are kept hidden. My
emotional engagement with a fictional character is not so structured,
however. Unlike Nancy, in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, who is in love with
and, hence, trusts the brutal Bill Sikes, my trust is not first hand. In
wishing to avoid too literal a response to Zola’s novel, I must trust his
art. It is not from a photograph of Thérèse that my love for her springs.
I must, therefore, trust that Zola is not, Oberon-like, casting a spell
over me, making me desire in the fiction what in life disgusts me.
Plato’s wariness of the artist’s gifts is one of the issues here. For what
endows Thérèse Raquin or James Steerforth with their attractiveness, so
stimulating a reader’s emotions, is not an idea of them, a form of
seductive evil, waiting to be freed, but their actual presence in our
imaginative lives. As Nabokov remarks of his personal narrator,
Humbert Humbert, in *Lolita*, ‘how magically his singing violin can
conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us
entranced with the book while abhorring its author.’.26 Could a differ-
ent philosopher fall in love with Thérèse while defending an account
of trust remote from mine? I do not believe it. For surely no contract
theorist would chance the emotional upheaval (although Thérèse, for
her part, would never let risk deter her). Of course, philosophical
readers walk a tightrope here as Nabokov’s ‘singing violin’ beguiles and
misleads, often as much as it sharpens and enriches. And this, for
Nussbaum, is one of the reasons why the enhancement that is art’s
special offering to life should not be accepted on its own terms alone.
Ethics may need literature to complete itself, but literature is certainly
unable to perform the ethical task without help. Thus, Nussbaum com-
ments, ‘sometimes the human heart needs reflection as an ally. Some-
times we need explicit philosophy to return us to the truths of
the heart and to permit us to trust that multiplicity, that bewildering indeﬁniteness.’.27

That, of course, is the Nussbaum who seeks, as Cora Diamond puts it well, ‘texts as novels, texts engaged in the shaping of the language of particularity.’.28 But there is another Nussbaum who, in a different guise, realises acutely that the novel cannot stand to ethics as a sacred text, or as romantic poetry feeds the starving soul. In this different frame of mind, Nussbaum defends the concerns of ethics as unavoidably general, so she writes, ‘any adequate conception of social justice must rest on some general conception of the human being and human need.’.29 Ethics must, of course, proﬁt from the richness of the novel’s descriptions just as it derives great beneﬁt from the novel’s portrayal of virtues and vices as constitutive of human beings and the circumstances in which they ﬁnd themselves. But Nussbaum’s Aristotelian ethical stance implies a concern for generality that requires her to go further. The portrayal of a passion that cannot be lived, such as Zola’s study of the life of Thérèse Raquin, asks for a judgement from the outside and, in doing so, presents ethics with work to do independently of the novel. Similarly, it is difﬁcult for Nussbaum to confess her love for Steerforth without asking ethics to reﬂect on the status of imagined emotions.

All the philosophers so far examined have to some degree made entry into the novel’s world. Winch, for instance, wonders what he would have decided in Vere’s place. Does this license me to ask more expansively what I, loving Thérèse, would have done in her fictional lover’s place? Whereas Winch does not speak of his feelings in reading of Vere’s terrible decision I am unable to remain silent. There is, in other words, in the philosophical engagement with novels, a slipperiness that threatens to cloud their use as decent signs. Nussbaum is committed to the idea of a partnership between literature and ethics in which the novel is in need of ethical theory almost as much as life, and yet, these terms do not speak in a single voice. The question of ethics’ independent role in relation to the novel must now be addressed.
When Donne compares parted lovers to a pair of compasses he shows with singular clarity what separation in love is like. Love’s symmetry is conveyed by an idea transferred from science. We are led to think of the image as operating almost as a demonstration. And yet there is nothing miraculous in this, for the response it evokes is dependent on our having grasped the metaphor’s detailed logic. So, Donne’s concluding lines, ‘Thy firmness draws my circle just, And makes me end, where I begunne’, reveal the certitude of love, the absolute confidence in the other that transcends time and distance. Donne’s metaphor also tells us something of the limits of love. For the movements of the arms of the compass imply balance and proportion, a harmony of purpose which in the hands of love strongly suggest a power of endurance and likeness of perception that reach well beyond familiarity or the mere toleration of differences. ‘If they be two, they are two so/As stiffe twin compasses are two.’. Donne’s formulation asks us to believe that the hallmark of love is not just the presence of parallel feelings, but their mutual implanting. Where unison is absent, love is deficient, falsely imagined, or stillborn.

Is my love for Thérèse Raquin disqualified as love through lack of unison? We might think so for she cannot ‘draw my circle just’, no more than I can hers. As readers, we respond to metaphor precisely because it extends and deepens our moral vocabulary. By comparing parted lovers to a pair of compasses Donne shows us a feature of the unity of love. But the metaphor also shows love for a fictional character to be the least compass-like of love because it concerns, not a pair so matching that it is impossible to conceive of one without the other, but unlikeness, possibly even unrelatedness.
In the company of novelists such as Conrad or Tolstoy we soon realise that seeing one thing in terms of another is a fictional device they frequently employ to draw us in. A. E. Denham rightly points to Tolstoy’s likening in *Anna Karenina* ‘of Anna and Vronsky to a sailor who realises that he has drifted off course and is heading in the wrong direction, but is powerless to stop his progress.’ Both Donne’s compass and Tolstoy’s sailing metaphor are distinctive ways of making particular moral experience intelligible. One helps us to recognise love when lovers are separated for what it is, the other, hypocrisy and self-deception for what they are.

Essential to reading is the ability to enter into a standpoint that is not ours without losing the capacity to assess it from without. But what kind of assessment is this when the perspective on the novel is not that of a reader as lover or friend, but that of moral philosopher? In raising this question, we seem to be warning further against the blurring of boundaries, against the suspension of difference. It is a warning that Nussbaum takes very much to heart because in asking moral philosophy to take a theoretical view of life she is inviting answers that involve propositions and argument. Such views she regards as indispensable when the question that confronts ethics is how should I/we live? However, alongside this reinstatement of modal boundaries there returns the problem of how they can be persuasively crossed. One way of philosophical contact with the novel is via ad hoc example, such that ethics and the novel are related, not as mutual friends, but rather as dice in a game. Each is rolled independently of the other in the hope of turning up a maximum score. The moral philosopher gambles that the truths ethical theory seeks will match the gold the novel discloses.

We need to step back a little. In theoretical understanding, it can confidently be assumed, we pursue conclusions of a general kind. Fiction, by contrast, individuates. In portraits of the moral life in miniature we are shown what in life we may all too easily have missed. Indeed, of the many bad reasons for attending to the novel philosophically it is this feature that explains why looking to the novel for solutions to moral problems is arguably the worst. Neither Anna in Tolstoy’s novel nor Sue in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* offer solutions that have a general appeal, that might be taken up by any woman who in life is torn between her love and a loveless marriage. If there is a satisfactory way of theorising the novel’s moral particularity then generalising from literary instances is unlikely to be it.

The Wittgensteinian response to this problem points towards leaving moral experience undisturbed: ‘what’s ragged should be left ragged.’. It
is equally clear, however, that Nussbaum is looking for something very much more. A literary portrayal of moral conceptions might enable a new understanding of the kind of significance these conceptions have for us. But in itself this falls well short of independent moral advice, or of tackling moral philosophy in terms of the general questions that Nussbaum postulates as its sine qua non. We know that Nussbaum does not intend ethical theory’s heightened role to be at the novel’s expense. Specific novels reflect the moral particularity that her reshaped liberal ethical theory most keenly wishes to include. The novel, in other words, requires detailed commentary, and this in its turn requires a theoretical guiding hand if its philosophical import is to be scrutinised and released. Liberal ethical and political thinking aspires to such guidance, but not at the cost of its close proximity to life. The liberal searches for an impartial standpoint, an Archimedean position from which life’s imperfections can be identified and alleviated. In relation to the novel, Nussbaum’s problem, then, is how to maintain the neutrality that is essential to the founding of liberal principles of justice while recognising, and in some way incorporating, the plenitude the novel contains. What balance can be found between the reflective detachment that the liberal so much values and the close subjective involvement with literary texts that ethics requires for its completion?

The notion that the novel can reinforce liberal principles through a forceful illustration of entrenched injustices is not unfamiliar. Indeed, Nussbaum’s lengthy discussions of Dickens’ *Hard Times* make precisely that point. What this does not show, however, is a connection between the principles and the novel that is straightforward or direct. For the utilitarian moral theories that Dickens’ novel holds up to biting social criticism are those often prominently involved in liberalism’s philosophical defence. Nor is utilitarianism open to unsophisticated attack since it has been adapted and revised exactly to deal with the type of difficulty the novel so graphically displays. Nor should we assume that the deep-lying pictures of human agency, action and choice at work in utilitarian accounts of moral reasoning are wholly absent from liberal derivations of the rules of justice. It is a commonly made complaint against such modern ethical theories that they depend on accounts of moral principle that are entirely abstract and on accounts of moral agents as beings of uniform psychology, interchangeable one with another.

Separating the intrinsic defensibility of a moral theory from its weaknesses and failures as these are portrayed in the novel would seem to
be a significant part of what it might mean for a liberal to get the balance right between ethics and art. Any indulgence towards philosophy should be matched by an equal nod in the direction of art, even though it might be hard for a liberal without irony and on aesthetic grounds alone to honour Humbert Humbert in Nabokov’s *Lolita* as an idealist. In a minimal sense the questions at issue are methodological ones. For if the liberal insists on a safety net of ethical theory to catch those who stray from sanctioned literary paths, then we wish to know what philosophical work the novel is doing outside the theory. We might expect, for instance, to be told about features of life that the theory neglects or occludes. We might even expect to discover something that is from the standpoint of theory alien or shocking. Otherwise the novel is working solely on the instruction of theory, which is another way of saying that it is doing no philosophical work at all.

The notion of a conversational partnership between ethical theory and the novel goes very deep in Nussbaum’s thought, reflecting to a degree its Aristotelian roots. In this way of thinking, human capacities and functions ask for examination at a level of generality and through a kind of reasoning that plainly parts company with the novel. Liberalism pursues this generality in a more obviously moral and political form by means of the arguments it conducts about the nature and limits of rights, duties and freedoms in a just society. Like all constructed partnerships, however, the one proposed by Nussbaum can never be completely at rest. For on occasion ethics and the novel do not stand to each other as partners working for their mutual good, but more as a pair of excitable and quarrelsome terriers, snapping competitively at their owner’s heels during an early morning walk. Art in, say, the shape of the modern novel, permanently the younger and more exuberant of the two, is always prone to recklessness, always more expressive of its instincts than ethics could ever allow. In this metaphor there is an owner who can bring the rivals to heel, but in Nussbaum’s picture it appears that the partners have nothing to fall back on except their commitments and also their quarrels. Indeed, not even life itself can discipline them, since life for Nussbaum is urgently and continually in need of the enhancement that art and ethical theory in very different ways provide. Often dulled by fantasy and routine, we never live enough to set ourselves free from art, nor, it seems, do we always see our own moral lives sufficiently clearly to set ethical theory confidently aside. When we reflect on this account of life is it any wonder that we are tempted to conclude that Nussbaum’s
natural intellectual home is not amongst life’s contemplators, but with liberal theorists who visualise life primarily as a subject for reflection and reform?

For Nussbaum, then, few special benefits accrue from living the unexamined life. A moral theory will aim to give recommendations to life. It will seek progress in the solution of ethical problems. A moral theory will look to test the moral beliefs found in life either by direct reference to the theory’s own independently derived principles or indirectly by examining the principles in the light of judgements made in life. Moral theory will render moral experience systematic. It will attempt to bring rational order to experience that is commonly multiple and diverse, and in this pursuit it will not fear abstractness, recognising that no moral theory will be content to report on particularity alone. Finally, a moral theory will aspire to be universalisable in the sense of bearing on human agency as such, in this respect, hoping to promote explicitness by making its guidance open to the scrutiny and instruction of all.

We should surely be in no doubt that this familiar liberal framework is intended to give theory primacy over life. Indeed, the whole point of the liberal speaking in this way is to filter out illiberal beliefs and proposals. It is to defeat accounts of the moral life that are disguises for prejudice, partiality and special pleading and to make liberal principles more prominent by publicly announcing and, presumably, enforcing them more explicitly. A commitment to this position does not, however, leave the novel’s role in ethics untouched. The ethical theorist, in Nussbaum’s view, will give priority to reason and argument. For her, the main consideration is that ‘ethical theory does not ask us to trust the person at all. It asks us to listen to an argument and then to trust ourselves.’. The main concern of ethics is with the establishment of sound moral structures in which intelligent liberals can put their faith. But in this picture, it is worth pointing out, it is not the novel that is indispensable to ethics, but a distinctive set of ethical beliefs that is essential to the novel. It is not enough, Nussbaum believes, to say that a theoretical perspective sometimes improves practice. For her, without such a perspective there could be no improvement at all. We see this clearly in the way she talks of Kant’s theory of international law. If Kant, she writes, had ‘sought to convey nuance, particularity and mystery, rather than to give his writings the abstractly systematic character they actually have, he would not have had the formative influence he did on international law and the conduct of the world community.’.
In life, however, mystery and nuance are often not so readily displaced. A lawyer might feel justified in employing a reasonable degree of delay and obfuscation if these tactics should prove necessary for a client’s proper defence and, possibly, acquittal. It is not unknown for politicians to be economical with the truth or to sup with the devil if these are the only ways of resisting an illiberal opponent. Similarly, a novelist might deliberately sow half-truths about a fictional character, or keep readers guessing about their state of mind, to make the tale’s conclusion more realistic and aesthetically satisfying. Conrad achieves this effect in *The Secret Agent* through his descriptions of Winnie Verloc, for example. At issue in these morally ambiguous cases is the nature of trust in the motivation of others when they knowingly act less than well to achieve some moral, political or aesthetic good. By concentrating on the abstract and the schematic, ethical theory risks neglecting such complexities to the degree where it is false to life. One effect of this is to tilt the balance against the novel, for it is precisely in the mix of directness and nuance that the novel speaks most effectively to ethics. From the standpoint of theory, however, the novel’s mysteries are merely pieces of mystification. But, if this were true, there would be little basis for turning to them for security and trust, as Nussbaum most emphatically wishes us to do with regard to the rationally grounded frameworks of liberal moral principle.

Perhaps nothing in life baffles the liberal theorist more than the hard moral choices that a novel such as Melville’s *Billy Budd* so movingly understands. While recognising, as they must, the existence and desirability of plural goods, the liberal theorist is often highly unwilling to think of these as incompatible in principle. But what is at issue in a moral dilemma of the kind faced by Vere is not the contingent circumstances surrounding it, but whether Vere’s decision can count as a moral judgement at all. No doubt some dilemmas arise not from any intrinsic incompatibility of goods, but from the context in which they are pursued. It may also be the case that altering the social circumstances that create them can dissolve some hard choices. But what we must not do is confuse dilemmas that are contingent in origin with those such as Vere’s that are absolute. Ethical theory may possibly make some advance in the resolution of the former, but when confronted by moral dilemmas that are tragic, its speculative tone of voice is out of place.

In Nussbaum’s account, ethical theory and the novel are not related as separate photographs of an intimately known single face, each revealing different aspects of its expression. Rather their relationship is
conceived altogether more holistically, since both address the nature of the good life and how it should be lived. Moreover, each aims to remedy the defects of the other. Ethical theory, by fulfilling the role of the critical friend, warns us against the novel when through simplification or fantasy it is a source of moral distortion. Similarly, when the novel loses sight of general arguments concerning, say, the nature of justice or personal identity, then ethical theory is justified in amending the partnership in its favour. Likewise, if as readers we find that our emotional involvement in the novel’s world is tempting us away from life then the reflective voice seeks to call us back to our actual existence and to the nature of our actual responsibilities for others. However, unity of operation between ethical theory and the novel does not spring spontaneously into life. By the same token, we cannot safely assume that it proceeds as argument does or as literary criticism. The liberal aspirations of Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelian ethics may not fit comfortably with the moral diversity the novel displays. An ethical theory is expected to deliver conclusions that are stable and universal by grounding them in agreement, but the moral beliefs and practices found in the novel may be neither. It may be an entirely open question as to which ethical theory best fits a reader’s response to a particular novel. Conflict between ethical theories requires argument for its resolution, but, as Nussbaum herself recognises, ‘novel-reading all by itself will not supply those arguments.’. Theoretical arguments can lead us to qualify or reject our responses to the novel as much as the novel can with regard to the arguments. It should be clear then, that if ethical theory and the novel are to complement one another, Nussbaum needs a procedure on the basis of which a best fit between the two can be obtained. The method she proposes is that of perceptive equilibrium, adapted from the method of reflective equilibrium heavily at work in normative thinking and noticeably apparent in Rawls’ constructivist account of the generation of principles of justice. The question arises, therefore, as to whether a method designed for justification in moral and political argument is wholly suited to the resolution of boundary disputes between contrary modes of thinking and writing.

In *Love’s Knowledge* Nussbaum speaks of what this method involves. The idea is, she writes, ‘that we work through the major alternative views about the good life, holding them up, in each case, against our own experience and our intuitions.’ Arguments in defence of specific moral theories are examined in the light of our moral intuitions to discover how those intuitions both test the theories and are tested by them. The aim is to achieve consistency and coherence in the moral
outlook as a whole. It is to reach a shared and shareable moral position. Nussbaum agrees with Rawls that reflective equilibrium in moral philosophy asks that we be presented with ‘all possible descriptions to which one might plausibly conform one’s judgements together with all relevant philosophical arguments for them.’. However, the constraints that Rawls builds into his account of moral theory Nussbaum believes require supplementing. Generality of form, universality of application, publicity, ordering and finality are characteristics of reflective judgement that do not quite capture the sharpness of vision and emotional perception that we value morally and often depend on. There is, therefore, a ‘perceptive equilibrium’, as she puts it, ‘in which concrete perceptions “hang beautifully together”, both with one another and with the agent’s general principles; an equilibrium that is always ready to reconstitute itself in response to the new.’.

We frequently find Nussbaum arguing that moral philosophy involves a detailed delineation and scrutiny of all the main traditions of ethical enquiry with the aim of contrasting and comparing them with moral experience, both of ourselves and others. No one theory or single text is automatically ruled in, none excluded in advance. In itself this picture seems unexceptionable, but what does it mean when it is philosophy and the novel that are contrasted and compared? As originally conceived, reflective equilibrium is the outcome of a process of mutual adjustment between general principles and particular judgements in which none of the scrutinised judgements, principles or theories is privileged. None is closed to revision. Literature, Nussbaum tells us, is indispensable to ethics. A procedure essential to ethics is reflective equilibrium. As a result of the application of this method, therefore, we should expect a high degree of intellectual harmony, but what we actually find is a marriage of convenience that quickly leads to divorce.

Reflective equilibrium aims to supply a reasonable warranty to principles and intuitive beliefs that neither possessed when considered in isolation or at earlier stages of adjustment between them. We should notice that Rawls’ use of this method steers him clear of pure ethical rationalism since its concern is not with the rational justification of moral principles alone but, in close conjunction, with our considered judgements. In other words, Rawls accepts that the conditions assumed by ethical theorising cannot be so remote from actual human circumstances and judgements that any set of assumptions would do. The way ethical theory proceeds, then, must bear some resemblance to the kind of creatures we are and the kind of surroundings in which we live.
It is the method itself, therefore, that rules out appeal to circumstances or motivational suppositions that are extreme, alien or privileged. If ethical theory were to rule such considerations in then doubts would quickly and rightfully be raised about the conclusions it reached.

What role might the novel play in an ethical theory proceeding in accordance with the method of reflective equilibrium? In Rawls, the search for the best fit between principles and intuitive beliefs requires an initial situation from which the process of adjustment can begin. This original position is, as Sandel correctly remarks, ‘the fulcrum of reflective equilibrium’, but it is a defining feature of the original position that agents in it are assumed to be of a uniform moral psychology. Ethical theorising is pictured as a movement between this original position and our intuitive beliefs. And, yet, doesn’t the novel’s portrayal of moral experience as rich, dense and diverse render it ill suited to contribute to the hub of abstraction on which ethical argument turns? Could the novel become a subject of theory in some other way?

We might treat imaginative literature as a source of those moral intuitions that test theory and are subject to testing by it. Notice, again, that the whole point of the method of reflective equilibrium is that it excludes nothing in advance. No intuitive belief, whether conventional, habitual or inspired by religious faith, is closed to examination and, possibly, revision. By the same token, nothing is privileged in advance. Ethical authority is not intrinsic, but constructed through a debate in which all voices are heard. We under-privilege the novel, however, if, for the purposes of theory, we regard it solely as a report on considered experience. Similarly, by seeing it as a chronicle of our intuitive beliefs we reduce and flatten it. In fact, if we were to think of the novel as a safe description of moral intuitions there is surely little doubt that it would fall rapidly into theoretical disuse. The reason for this is that the understanding the novel gives is not general. It makes little sense, therefore, to construe it as equivalent to the empirical information possessed by agents in the original position. The novel can inspire emotional involvement through the human situations it creates and the fictional characters it portrays, but its contribution to ethics is not tested by treating it as a piece of evidence to be considered impartially along with other indicators of our moral beliefs.

Reflective equilibrium requires that no one belief and no one text is seen as more advantaged than any other, but the novel, as Nussbaum promotes it, is privileged not just in one way, but in several. It is distinguished by virtue of its unique enhancement of life. To live without art is to be singularly deprived. The novel enriches moral philosophy
in ways that are not true of any other source. Through its stress on the non-commensurable plurality of human goods, its emphasis on the priority of perceptions and the ethical value of the emotions, the novel brings home to philosophy the moral importance of features of life that are easily neglected or overlooked. In attentive examination philosophical readers reproduce from the novel a reflective sensitivity that is better able than more analytic methods to grasp the nuances of the moral life.

Defenders of Nussbaum will reply that movement back and forth from argument to fictional narrative, from Winch, say, to Melville, from Melville’s text to Winch, is exactly what we look for when ethics and the novel converse. Further, they will say that reflective equilibrium is an effective method in ethics precisely because it stabilises a conversation that can easily become ill disciplined and slip out of cognitive control. Critics of the method will remain sceptical, pointing out that its success in generating convincing ethical conclusions is heavily dependent on the assumptions from which it starts. Dropping its psychological premises or challenging the range of intuitive beliefs on which it builds is likely to paralyse the theory. For our purposes especially, it can be argued that the novel’s privileges represent more of a challenge to reflective equilibrium than its defenders allow. One reason for this is that the moral intuitions on which ethical theory relies are from the novel’s perspective open to dramatic re-description. Ethical theory aims at bringing our principles and particular judgements to an intellectual place of rest, but the novel’s interests are often the opposite, embracing restlessness, disquietude and contradiction. Where ethical theory looks for normality and balances, the contract the novel has with life encompasses states of abnormality and disequilibrium. Thus, in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, we find Marlow, the tale’s narrator, doubting the very possibility of understanding: ‘Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream.’. 12 How can his readers follow the moral and conceptual displacement that his tale conveys when their own sense of reality is so closely tied to their European home? So Conrad’s startling account of a European warship opening fire off the coast of Africa is less a direct report of a colonial military engagement than an ironic re-description of it: ‘In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent.’. 13

Is this too pessimistic a view of the novel’s theoretical role? Surely, one of the reasons for turning to a novel is that it charts the fixed points in our moral intuitions with sensitivity and discrimination. As
these are the qualities that ethical theory most urgently needs, the novel’s congruence with ethics can only be beneficial. The notion that fixed ethical points can be distilled from the intuitive welter is one that merits a little more attention. Rawls speaks of certain judgements as ‘fixed points: ones we never expect to withdraw, as when Lincoln says: “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong.”’. A similar firmness regarding our considered beliefs about punishment is revealed by Vere (to take an example from *Billy Budd*) when, during Budd’s court-martial, he asks his fellow officers how they can tolerate the thought that Budd should die. Here – in only one aspect of Vere’s dilemma – we encounter the full force of our considered judgement that punishment presupposes guilt. How philosophy deals with this belief is itself a philosophical problem. Is the innocent individual punished wrongfully or pained mentally and physically, but not punished at all? Defenders of reflective equilibrium will argue that the need for philosophical work additional to the belief does not upset the method. For the method is designed specifically to move between beliefs and arguments, correcting and revising where necessary. Rawls thinks of fixed points as consisting of judgements that are made in favourable circumstances and where temptation is absent. We may reasonably object that this assumption swings the method too far in the direction of the principles he supports, but in the novel’s portrayal of those beliefs we encounter a more intransigent difficulty. For it is clear that against the background of the story, far from being fixed, beliefs about guilt and innocence are mired in complexity and ambiguity. So Melville writes, ‘In the jugglery of circumstances preceding and attending the event on board the Indomitable, and in the light of that martial code whereby it was formally to be judged, innocence and guilt personified in Claggart and Budd in effect changed places.’

The project of revitalising ethical theory by means of the novel runs into further difficulties of a kind raised by D. Z. Phillips. Reflective equilibrium, Phillips argues, offers a promising suggestion of universality, but one which, if pursued, turns out to be false. Nussbaum regards reflective equilibrium as a way of bringing order to moral beliefs from without. It is a method of harmonisation. But Phillips points out that different moral perspectives are not incomplete, dependent on more systematic articulation for their expression. Rather, as Winch’s discussion of Vere’s dilemma shows very well, the reasons Vere gives for his decision are for him the final reasons. Far from making the most out of the novel’s gifts, reflective equilibrium actually undermines them. Literary examples are not to be understood as
contributions to a picture of ethics arrived at in advance. Certainly, they invite philosophical commentary, but not the imposition of a moral unity. Thus, Phillips asks pertinently, in what sense can literary examples test theories if it is the theories that lead the philosopher to the examples in the first place? For Phillips, as moral considerations reveal part of the sense that individuals make of their lives they merit the moral philosopher’s attention. For Nussbaum, by contrast, it is the nature of the philosopher’s attention that determines the sense that can be found.

It should be apparent that Nussbaum is not the kind of liberal who values the novel as a route to private bliss. Nor does she defend it as a didactic instrument, a training manual for life. Rather, she writes explicitly of elevating the novel’s gifts and privileges to politics, a mode of action that may be thought too hard and unforgiving to connect with the novel’s finely differentiated world. To defend this transition in philosophical terms Nussbaum needs to draw from the novel more than the moral particularity it undoubtedly contains. She needs to elicit a contribution to ethics close to the universality that is central to liberal thinking. In speaking about a substantive flourishing as the end of human life Nussbaum is not shy of universality. We should expect, therefore, a tight connection between the novel and liberal values, and that is precisely what we find. For in writing about James’ novel *The Princess Casamassima* Nussbaum imputes to James a ‘liberal-perfectionist aspiration’.17 She means by this, ‘a concern for securing to all citizens the intellectual and spiritual nourishment, through public education and public provision of the arts, that would be necessary in order to bring about a true class-leveling revolution.’.18

Liberal optimism about the success of this agenda does not turn on the question of the novelist’s intentions or even his political ideals and hopes. Nor does it hinge securely on a persuasive interpretation of the novel, for it would be hard to deny that the ends and means of political justification constitute one of its first concerns. An enduring pattern in the novel’s complex narrative is the inter-penetration of public and private, the unyielding nature of political imperatives and the morality of personal character. The fundamental question is whether universal claims can be drawn from the novel at all. In *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum talks with qualified enthusiasm about this possibility: ‘the universalizing tendency of the moral imagination is encouraged by the very activity of novel-reading itself.’.19 I say ‘qualified’ because Nussbaum is suspicious of the idea that we learn from the novel by forming generalisations from it. In this she is surely
right. We would wholly misunderstand Maggie Verver’s hard won sen-
sitivity towards her father, in Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*, if we were
to think of it in terms of a precept, a laying down of a rule to be fol-
lowed by all similar Maggies in similar circumstances. As Nussbaum
further remarks, it is curious to think of moral specifics, such as
Maggie’s tenderness towards her father, as providing ‘the sort of fixity,
uniformity, and before-the-fact guidance that defenders of the univer-
sal have usually sought.’ With even more persuasiveness, Nussbaum
points out that some forms of human attachment defy the aspiration
of universality. In love, for example, we are faced by the thought that
‘some love is the love of something that is essentially, ineliminably,
and rationally seen as unique.’

Such common sense reservations do not deter Nussbaum from the
inclusive harmony that she takes to be central to method in ethical
enquiry. Indeed, when it is the defence of liberalism that occupies her
attention she is unwilling to discard the theoretical point of view. One
of the ways liberalism displays the universality that is its sine qua non
is in the idea that there are rights of resistance to oppression, exploita-
tion and injury to which all can lay claim. Of course, within liberal
tory such rights are defended through a process of argument, but
how, then, can Nussbaum speak of a novel, like James’ *The Princess
Casamassima*, revealing a ‘liberal-perfectionist aspiration’? What con-
nection is there between the argument and the novel?

We should notice immediately that Nussbaum is not averse to treat-
ing the novel as a vehicle for liberal ideas. In writing about Dickens’
*Hard Times*, she says that the Golden Rule, Sissy Jupe’s first principle,
‘is not merely represented in this novel; it is built into the novel’s
entire structure as its guiding principle.’ In reaching the novel’s con-
clusion, Nussbaum’s asserts that we will naturally wish ‘to do unto
ordinary men and women as to ourselves, viewing the poorest as one
who might be, and seeing in the most ordinary and even squalid cir-
cumstances a place where we have made in fancy our dwelling.’

What philosophical licence is there for this claim? How does the inter-
pretation of the novel stand up as argument? In order to link the
concerned reader with the conscientious liberal, who is rationally per-
suaded of their beliefs, Nussbaum draws an explicit parallel with Rawls.
She writes, ‘the novel constructs in its imagined reader, an ideal moral
judge who bears a close resemblance to the parties in John Rawls’s
Original Position.’

Cross currents of meaning now begin to swirl around Nussbaum’s
original claim that the novel is indispensable to ethics. Unnoticed
ambiguities start to appear. Is a novel such as *Hard Times* important as an echo of liberal theory or because it has its own independent voice? From the liberal theorist’s perspective, it is clearly desirable to close the gap between these alternatives. They might argue that there is no reason in principle why the novel cannot function as an imaginary example, testing the robustness of the proposed theory against exaggeration and implausibility. Liberal theory, they will say, abstracts from the hustle of the everyday to construct principles of justice that all can accept. Examples are necessary in this process because it is through them that the theory is tested against our considered judgements. Strong exclusion clauses need to be drawn, therefore, around examples that are bizarre, wildly and improbably strange, lacking any meaningful human dimension. We should note, however, that the models of life theories commonly deploy do not have to match actual usage in all respects. Rawls’ description of the original position does not rest on an appeal to imagination, as the novel does, or intuition. It uses the familiar idea of a contract as a hypothetical device to produce agreement about principles of justice. These are the principles that individuals would choose if they were ignorant of certain facts about themselves. There is nothing in this idea that requires the artificial contract to behave entirely and in all particulars like a contract in life. Rather, its philosophical purpose is to employ the notion of a contract to illuminate general assumptions regarding the character of moral reasoning. This does not depend on the actual, specific uses of contract that we are familiar with in practical life – say, between buyers and sellers, or insurers and insured. Of course, contract theories of justice are often stretched in ways that we do find counter-intuitive. Rawls’ attempt to treat inter-generational justice as proceeding on the same basis as justice between individuals can be taken as an instance of this.

Sometimes in scrutinising moral theories we accept a simple lack of realism in order for the philosophical point to be made. Thus, we do not think that actual people are behind Rawls’ ‘veil of ignorance’ as his hypothetical individuals are. Nor does it matter, since the aim of the argument is to show how certain ethical principles could emerge from a specifically defined situation. The complaint against an account of inter-generational justice constructed on the same model arises from our understanding of how generations are linked in time. In this case our considered judgements warn us against seeing justice between generations exactly as the model requires. The novel’s distinctiveness from this display of abstraction and generality is there for all to see. Cora Diamond describes a novelist like James as perceiving with the
painter’s eye. She speaks of James’ interest in life as bound up with his great capacity for appreciation. ‘To appreciate,’ she writes, ‘is to avoid as far as possible all simplification (simplification which would be in place if one’s concern were action and practical application).’ To appreciate within literary art is to express detailed and sympathetic knowledge of the given case. There is, in other words, a vital difference between ‘the given case’ and the case as given to theory. Learning from the novel involves attention to those detailed features of moral conduct that the novel clarifies. Taking the novel as an example enables us to see the moral particular ‘as a whole’, not as a practice ground for a philosophical liberalism whose premises in contract theory are established in advance. Diamond’s modest reservations about this philosophical use of the novel are surely, therefore, well taken, but in relation to Nussbaum’s liberal project more intractable problems exist.

We are asked to believe that James’ novel The Princess Casamassima is an example of ‘liberal-perfectionist aspiration’. But the novel, we might argue, is never a straightforward example of anything. Far from presenting ethics with a single, unambiguous claim, the novel is manifold, so protean in its range that we could easily be drawn to Oscar Wilde’s remark that it has no subject-matter whatsoever. Certainly, it is difficult to think of the novel as a structure of propositions to be argued with, or as a literary artefact governed by an overall purpose. The novelist, as V. S. Pritchett comments, ‘is usually ruined by his philosophy of life.’ Find the philosophy in the novel and you find what falsifies both art and life. And, yet, we notice Nussbaum writing of Dickens’ Hard Times that it ‘inspires the passion for justice.’ She thinks of the novel as such as an example of liberal aspiration, but how can it be when, as Diamond rightly remarks, James in The Princess Casamassima says nothing directly about the human good? We miss the target, in other words, if we too readily assume that the object of James’ subtle description is something like an Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia.

In its search for simplification, theory wishes the novel to serve one philosophical purpose. The reality, however, is quite different. The novel might be better considered as a collection of mini-examples, each a reward to moral philosophers for the prizes that they individually seek. Thus, Melville’s Billy Budd is read by one philosopher as a way of weakening the grip of universality in ethics, by another as showing the political impact of compassion and pity and by another, again, as containing a profound description of moral innocence at
loose in the world. Not one of these approaches is framed by liberal assumptions and yet each finds in the novel a decent sign. Surely, the lesson here is that the novel does not point in a single ethical direction. There is no overriding form or idea that establishes its philosophical identity and purpose.

When Nussbaum talks of a novel inspiring a feeling for justice, we are led to wonder how much this flows from the novel’s acclaimed liberal-perfectionism. For, surely, no liberal could find inspiration in justice independently of the arguments mounted for its defence. In any case, the split between faith and reason suggests a conceptual division of labour that is too neat for the way Nussbaum speaks. Similarly, the notion of a judicious spectator standing impartially to both art and life is suggestive of a degree of rational detachment from life that few novelists would find satisfying. From this reflective point of view, the spectator’s business is not solely to act as a magistrate to the emotions, but to produce arguments that all can accept. However, we should not be surprised in contemplating the liberal Olympus to discover what a congested and contested place it is. Competing views on the nature of justice crowd its summit. It may be for this reason that the account of justice Nussbaum distils from the novel’s pages is so non-specific. Reading a novel like *Hard Times*, she avers, ‘makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own.’

The issue here is not simply the existence of philosophical readings of the novel from non-liberal perspectives. Obviously, philosophers who are drawn to the novel as a source of example need not be liberals or liberal theorists. Some may regard liberalism as irrelevant to the philosophical point they wish to make; others may see it as an intrusion, possibly a distortion of their text. The question concerns the force of the example when disagreement within liberalism makes it an equivocal sign. What one theorist of justice sees as a crystal clear example of a rational plan of life – say, someone counting blades of grass – another will see as hopelessly abstract. Similarly, when Nussbaum reads *The Princess Casamassima* as a compelling complement to a theory of justice, another will demand a more radical view. The ameliorative political gradualism that Nussbaum draws from the novel may be seen as inconsistent with the demands of justice as the novel portrays them. Curiously, then, it would seem that Nussbaum’s scheme
to mine general truths from the novel leaves both art and ethical theory dissatisfied.

In her emphasis on the close connection between justice and equality, Nussbaum hits the mark, but what justice demands in terms of the redistribution of social goods and resources is an intransigent question, for both political theory and practice. In this conversation between ethics and life the novel’s voice speaks to both, but pacifies neither. Through the novel, in Zola’s *Germinal*, say, we are alerted more to the world as it is than to the world as it might be. We might even suggest that in its abundance of virtues and vices life may even have been specially designed for art. For art expresses gulfs of inequality not as thin descriptions or abstract concepts such as deprivation and exploitation, but most effectively as a look, a gesture or a manner of behaving.

By contrast, ethical theory lacks deep subjectivity. What Rawls’ veil of ignorance covers is not lives inexplicably and cruelly cut short, or even outstaying their welcome, but individuals passively surveying their limited psychological resources for the purposes of constructing principles of justice. Theory’s urge towards ethical generality is precisely what we should expect from it, but in recognising this we are forced to ask whether a novel such as *The Princess Casamassima* completes a liberal theory of justice or plays an altogether more subversive role. To obtain a detailed purchase on this question we will in the next chapter focus on James’ novel.
When in June 1885 Henry James sent the opening chapters of his novel *The Princess Casamassima* to America for the customary serial publication it is doubtful if he paid much attention to the appearance in that year of the first volume of T. H. Green’s *Collected Works*. Contiguity between James’ most political of novels and the three-volume monument to English liberalism that is Green’s philosophical legacy is not usually remarked on. Green’s defence of an ethics of self-realisation informed by metaphysics has little room for the psychological dilemmas of the revolutionary consciousness. Nor does he speak explicitly about beauty as a social good or the power of art to transfigure and fulfil. Similarly, James’ novel falls well short of a systematic liberal political philosophy. And, yet, it is not mere coincidence that these texts are so closely tied. Both ponder the conditions of social and cultural hope, the one from the perspective of art, the other from the standpoint of philosophy. James writes as if with nothing to fall back on, except his own observations and impressions. He disclaims knowledge of his political subject. Neither empirical information nor conceptual enquiry funds his researches. His writing, as he says himself in the Preface to the novel, is that of the ‘preoccupied painter, the pedestrian prowler’ who ‘armed with the sense of life and the penetrating imagination’ is not ‘without resource, even before mysteries abysmal.’ Green, by contrast, with his distinctive understanding of the philosopher’s purpose, writes to render individual fulfilment compatible with social life and the state’s authority.

With a confidence inspired by idealist metaphysics to support him, Green aims to show the universe as a systematically related whole. There is a rational plot to human life that philosophy can disentangle. Since its goal is comprehensive, no philosophy can shrug off the
demands of practice. Political rights and freedoms are to be so understood that we reach an account of the common good based on reason, one compelling to philosophers and citizens alike. Green’s liberal project does not assume an ideal state remote from the world to which its reforms are handed down. But it is sufficiently imbued with enlightenment principles to believe that, as reason dispels obscurity, so the moral will overcomes desire and self-regard. In James, however, life is pictured as more stubbornly resistant to philosophy’s re-ordering ambitions. Neither novelist nor reader, he warns, can afford to be ‘too interpretative of the muddle of fate.’. 3 ‘Intelligence’, James writes, ‘endangers not perhaps the slasher himself, but the very slashing, the subject-matter of any self-respecting story.’. 4 To be true to the story James has in mind, there must be ‘plenty of bewilderment’, for his subjects are not ‘all-knowing immortals’, 5 neither is his method one of simplification, of concept, of scheme or action. Rather, the novelist must avoid equally the sharp distinction and the all-embracing generalisation to find a way of writing that sets aside any logic but intensity, any formulation other than ‘the quality of bewilderment characteristic of one’s creature, the quality involved in the given case.’. 6

After attending to these differences it is hard to step aside from the notion that relations between James and Green, between the artist and the philosopher, are far from settled. What, then, should we make of Nussbaum’s assertion that James, by defending in The Princess Casamassima a ‘liberal-perfectionism’, is ‘on the track of Green.’. 7 When Nussbaum speaks of James’ The Golden Bowl as itself a highly developed moral activity, she is alerting us to how the style and content of a literary work reveals virtues of perception and imagination. Even if we were to allow this claim, the question remains as to how a novel such as The Princess Casamassima is so unambiguously tied to liberal principles and sensitivities. Unlike Winch, who argues that ethical significance shows itself in the ways people talk, Nussbaum proposes a theory to guide her. Liberal theories of justice concern both the principles of justice and their manner of derivation, but Nussbaum speaks of James’ novel as offering more. Behind the novel’s ‘slashing out in the bewilderment’ 8 we are asked to discern a ‘political programme’, 9 one in which liberals find exactly what they are looking for. In a liberal political theory, such as Rawls’, the detail of political arrangements is revealed progressively as the substance of the principles of justice is agreed and the veil of ignorance lifted. The image that conveys the novel’s narrative, however, is not one of a civil condition arising from a secure foundation, but a single, pivotal character,
Hyacinth Robinson, whose state of mind on public issues is contrived to be ‘poisoned at source’. A pertinent question for liberals, then, is how they should be grateful to the novel while avoiding the presumptuous impression that its ethical gifts were precisely the ones they expected to receive.

This difficulty is compounded if uncertainty exists regarding the ethical work the novel is being asked to carry out. It is one thing to speak of moral philosophy as needing selected novels for its completion, but talk of a literary reading as complementing an Aristotelian ethical stance raises quite different expectations. In both ways of speaking, the novel’s distinctive moral qualities are assured, but how it is thought to bear on ethics is different in each case. A willing acknowledgement of the qualifications and restrictions that Nussbaum builds into her claims does not remove the particular problem I wish to raise. For there is a difference between the novel completing ethics and complementing it that is more than a matter of shading.

As Anthony Kenny helpfully comments, ‘music while you work is a poor substitute for enjoying your job.’. We are, in other words, better chess players if we enjoy the game than if we find it irritating. By the same token, listening to music that gives us pleasure while playing the game will not improve our chess. Or, drawing on Zola’s novel Thérèse Raquin, we can say that the affair between Thérèse and Laurent is completed by their sexual passion. It is not that sexual passion complements the affair. Thus, more reflexively, if the novel is construed as an example, we can take it as complementing a liberal ethics. It does not complete a liberal ethics. By contrast, if the novel in its form or content is taken as showing something unique then it completes ethics, but does not complement it. We have, in other words, weak and strong views regarding the connection between different modes of understanding. But there is more, for these connections can easily be confused. So, if we were to think, falsely, that music while you work completes your enjoyment of the job then we would have a false understanding of what the job involves. Similarly, if we were to think, falsely, that sexual passion complements the affair portrayed by Zola then we would have misunderstood the nature of sexual love. Getting the dependency relations wrong risks our permitting one state or mode of understanding to drive out what the other achieves. Thus, if we think that music does complete the work by making it more enjoyable we may be so distracted that the work is actually defeated by the music. Confusing what completes with what complements succeeds only in producing a refined kind of incompleteness. So what the novel
is taken as showing uniquely to liberalism may be a gift to its opponents, a fruitful way of illustrating its weaknesses.

How are these difficulties apparent in Nussbaum’s treatment of *The Princess Casamassima*? James in the *Notebooks* calls the subject of his novel, ‘magnificent’, a description that Nussbaum amplifies by finding in the work ideas that are exemplary for life. Or again, she says that we can rely on Hyacinth Robinson for he is the book’s moral hinge. In taking seriously this notion of a fictional character as a moral guide we may seem to be privileging both the novel and the liberalism that Nussbaum sees in it. For some philosophers will claim that Nussbaum’s political thought is simply too eclectic to provide the seamless argumentation that liberalism requires for its defence. Aristotle’s account of human flourishing, Rawls’ idea of the dignity of the person and T. H. Green’s theory of the common good all find a place in her reflections without their pointing in a single philosophical direction. Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelianism contains an explicit global reach, since it relies on a universalist account of human functioning to support political liberalism. She acknowledges, too, a large debt to Rawls, in her defence of an overlapping consensus between individuals who value different goods. At issue in these familiar proposals is the strength of liberalism’s rewards, but it should be clear that for Nussbaum their promise comes as much from theoretical argument as from her commentary on *The Princess Casamassima*. Thus, to anyone unconvinced by Nussbaum’s liberalism a reading of the novel alone will not be persuasive. A similar economy of criticism needs to be practised with regard to the novel. Both *The Princess Casamassima* and Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* are suggestive of liberal uncertainties in the face of injustice. Both are prescient with regard to future political horror, but neither are predictions. The political novel stands at a remove from the actual flow of life, so establishing an imaginative range that, as in the case of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, has a hold over us even though its immediate descriptive point has passed.

*The Princess Casamassima* is, as Trilling rightly remarks, a work that yields ‘a kind of social and political knowledge that is hard to come by.’ In part, this is because it is a story of individuals who are not case histories, or merely subjects of theoretical or ideological scrutiny. In Hyacinth Robinson, James creates a ‘beautiful soul’ caught up in revolutionary politics. With great delicacy, themes are placed before us that have come to encapsulate liberal self-reflection and anxiety. The idea that, as Walter Benjamin observes ‘there is no document of
civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism'\textsuperscript{14} is anticipated in Hyacinth Robinson’s painful insight that civilisation always involves a degree of loss. With Marxist sophistication, Benjamin quotes Flaubert, ‘few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.’\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, Hyacinth’s transparent sincerity in pondering the use of violence for the sake of justice is suggestive of contrasting understandings of political morality that come close to defining the modern ethical consciousness. In one view, individuals are of absolute value, to be treated as sovereign, while in the other they are units of collective calculation to be treated consequentially in the interests of the overall good. Societies are fields of application for theories of social justice determined in advance. Of course, twentieth century politics has given us a standpoint that James could not have possessed. For we respond to the political ideas he traces in the knowledge that their application has determined the fates of millions. So by confronting, for example, the philosophical issues raised by Arthur Koestler in \textit{Darkness at Noon} we are able to look back on \textit{The Princess Casamassima} with a clear grasp of the sacrifice a state may force one generation to make for the benefit of its successors. We have experienced an experiment in justice that is unrestricted by other political values. And we are not unfamiliar with the moral dilemmas of political instrumentalism.

It is a feature of James’ genius as a writer that he makes Hyacinth a bearer of conflicting ideals. Wishing fervently to devote his life to the promotion of justice in the world Hyacinth finds that his released aesthetic sense is at odds with the political demands the revolutionary cause orders him to meet. In art he discovers ‘a vast vague dazzling presence, an irradiation of light from objects undefined’\textsuperscript{16} that the revolution will destroy. A politics grounded in compassion and gentleness is placed at odds with a justification of violence that is abstract and manipulative. Nussbaum reads James’ novel as an exercise in ‘the civic use of the imagination.’\textsuperscript{17} Hyacinth Robinson’s sensitivity to suffering is genuine. When faced by the pain experienced by the down trodden and the exploited his is a heart that misses a beat. Rightly, Nussbaum resists the aristocratic implications that have sometimes been drawn from the novel. For the issues it raises transcend questions concerning political arrangements, reaching instead to the character of the values they espouse.

When liberal philosophers investigate justice they imply that no society can be deemed just as it stands and that rectification can be sought through philosophy. One way is to justify actual inequalities
indirectly by thinking of them as a price to be paid for political values such as freedom, and economic and social goods such as wealth and security. A very different route involves the construction of an Archimedean point from which the world’s arbitrariness can be identified and constrained. In neither approach, however, does life bear witness to philosophy as a novel such as *The Princess Casamassima* does. If moral philosophy studies experience that can only be lived then the novel stands apart from theory. Thus, Nussbaum’s ‘liberal-perfectionism’ neatly picks out notions of human flourishing from the novel’s pages without exhausting its truth to life. To this degree, Nussbaum finds in the novel what her Aristotelianism leads her to expect – human beings lacking a reasonable standard of sustenance and education will not be fully alive. Life requires the exercise of practical reason. If this skill is damaged through work that is alienating or demeaning, then the flourishing that constitutes the end of human life will be correspondingly impaired.

*The Princess Casamassima* is also a novel concerning political transformation. Its moral centre, Hyacinth Robinson, is both delicate and ordinary. He is, therefore, uniquely placed to identify what human beings lack in an unjust society and to give us insight into the nature and costs of improving it. For liberals, theoretical reflection on justice is one way of evaluating life by relating it to an ideal, but evaluation would be diminished without practical proposals for change. Is moral philosophy drawn into the battleground by such recognition? A theory of justice of the kind defended by Rawls aims to give liberals ideals to fight for, but in political action when the circumstances of battle are ambiguous a gap between principle and practice often remains. Explicitly drawing on the ideas of the young Marx, Nussbaum comments that their aim is at one with James’ novel in attempting to measure precisely the gap between practice and hope. In escaping from his background, how then does Hyacinth Robinson offer a model of political action? His life is given dignity and shape by the love and affection that form his upbringing. Even if his work as a craftsman makes him a facilitator rather than an inventor it allows him to identify with what he produces. A finely bound volume of Tennyson reflects the work of the imagination within and acts as a spur to cultural advancement. Hyacinth is, therefore, an observer and a reader and, as such, aspires to a capacity for judgement that is discriminating and perceptive.

But how does this hard won possession of taste and insight generate a programme for political reform? Or, to put the question in terms
derived from T. H. Green, how can one realised self act as a moral exemplar for all? Nussbaum is in no doubt that she has uncovered a compelling example. For us, as readers, she advises that Hyacinth is ‘the projected hero of a new literature for humanity.’.18 ‘Projected’ Hyacinth Robinson certainly is, for it is the novelist’s art that has created him. For James has not taken this ‘beautiful soul’ from life or even constructed his nature to be a representation of a character found in life. Rather he has moulded and adapted to make the given case true to life. Thus, the willing idealism that informs Hyacinth’s character is not of the kind that is drawn from intellectual contemplation, but is contrived to be active in circumstances where the young Hyacinth does not yet know who he is. Letting these complexities of sentiment in an early education twist our hearts is a sign that we have caught the novel’s instructions. But when treated by Nussbaum as a hero in humanity’s cause, Hyacinth finds himself transported into the realm of abstract political speculation. For in her reading of him as a moral exemplar Hyacinth is represented as performing a distinct ethical task. To see injustice through Hyacinth’s eyes is to see the world as his reported experience of it is enlarged and his high ideals are made more intricate and difficult to live up to. By contrast, to see injustice from the standpoint of a moral exemplar is to see how far our world falls short. It is to assess its degree of imperfection, to imagine how it can be made less unjust than it is.

In Nussbaum’s reading of Hyacinth’s political vision, therefore, what an unjust society lacks is what liberalism exhaustively defines. No society can be just unless it includes an equal provision of basic human needs and a set of political arrangements that takes a liberal belief in freedom of thought and expression as one of its guiding principles. It will further possess a cultural life that values the literary imagination as a source of attachment, one that does not preclude diversity or rule out the radical or the new. The novel, then, is a decent sign to ethics because it reflects the kind of ideals liberal humanists believe in. However, as a looking glass for liberals the novel often shows more than liberals are willing to see. As a method for defending liberal ideals the novel is a poor substitute for argument. Indeed, a reminder that the literary example complements, but does not complete is invaluable from philosophy’s point of view. In this respect, the distance between ethics and the novel is not unfamiliar. For the novel’s voice speaks through particulars, but the ideals valued by liberals are general, designed to reach beyond oddities of upbringing and eccentricities of character.
The response Nussbaum makes to these reservations is robust. She suggests that the standard liberal contrast between public and private virtue is not unconditional. In the politics of the heart there is a role for sympathy and discrimination in judgement that is vital to civil decency. For Nussbaum, Hyacinth’s heightened sense of ethical value is not disqualified from politics because it is personal. Sensitivity to the existence of others is not exclusively the province of friends. By placing such feelings in the public realm, Nussbaum challenges the view often found in liberalism that the world of politics is bounded wholly by rule and principle. But more than liberal rationalism is undermined by Hyacinth’s example. For one of the lessons that Nussbaum learns from the novel is that the political morality of Hyacinth’s fellow revolutionaries, too, is deeply flawed. In contrast to their simplifying pictures of politics Hyacinth refuses to take the mysteries from life. His acute ear detects mystery in the anxieties of others, in the complexity of his commitments to them. Most noticeably, his tenderness in politics reveals his lack of ruthlessness. He lacks the single-minded dedication to pursue any deed at all that might be required for the success of the cause.

Behind the novel’s fictional revolutionaries lie historical events. The Paris Commune of 1871 is not a metaphor for revolution, but expressive of political ideals held in life. The myths came afterwards. As a magnet for revolutionaries the Commune was the subject of intense debate. Marx and Bakunin were locked in acrimonious disagreement over its political significance. Democratic socialists who supported gradual reform vied with anarchists who believed in propaganda by deed. At issue in these conflicting standpoints is the strategy of the radical movement. Revolutionary struggle takes place in the context of history. If capitalism’s internal dynamic needs to be fully played out before socialism can succeed, then the revolution must wait on history. If, by contrast, social and economic processes are less determined, then there is political space for agitation, protest and assassination.

There is also, of course, scope for conspiracy, which means the drawing into the struggle of many who, in the social complexities of nineteenth century society, are not obviously members of the proletariat. Thus, the cause in the Commune, as in James’ novel, attracts a moral ragbag of supporters – the idealistic, the disaffected, the spoiled and the miserable of soul. In short, the barricades are manned by the lumpenproletariat – déclassé intellectuals, faded aristocrats, robbers, vagabonds, and students. What draws Hyacinth to conspire against injustice is his innocent idealism. For such individuals the cause that
holds so much social promise all too easily becomes a trap. So when Hyacinth pledges to assassinate a member of the aristocracy at the order of the revolutionary cell the trap is sprung.

Political engagement is made so morally treacherous for Hyacinth not just because of his natural distaste at the thought of committing an act of violence against another human being, even when that human being is a symbol of privilege. Principled idealism is unyielding in the face of the temptation to lie to remove lying, to exploit to remove exploitation or to kill for the sake of a better world. It is not simply that Hyacinth possesses too much decency to act, or is lacking the nerve, but rather that it is not possible for him to fully escape the world he desires to change. Revolutionary commitment looks to the future. History is the revolutionary’s only source of absolution. But in personally specific and unusual ways Hyacinth is too deeply implicated in his own society to see an act of assassination as anything other than a poisoned chalice. For James has contrived Hyacinth to be born both illegitimate and an orphan. The child of an aristocratic father, who was murdered by Hyacinth’s mother, he is throughout his life beguiled by images of superiority and rank. In undertaking to kill the Duke as a step towards the destruction of privilege, Hyacinth, as Trilling rightly remarks, is ‘in effect plotting the murder of his own father.’. So, one powerful reason for his revulsion at the political deed he has pledged to perform is his belief that ‘by repeating poor Florentine’s action, he will be bringing his mother to life in all her pitiful shame.’

To speak of Hyacinth’s moral decency as an obstacle to effectiveness in politics is to miss the severity of the life portrait that James has painted. Obstacles can sometimes be negotiated, but moral decency is built into the fabric of Hyacinth’s character. His trust in those to whom he commits himself is absolute. He is open, and thus is made acutely vulnerable to condescension and personal betrayal. Similarly, to speak of Hyacinth’s attachment to the parents he never knew as a weakness would be to understate the honesty of spirit with which Hyacinth acknowledges his past. If, for instance, we were to presume in favour of a certain degree of psychological toughness in politics, then the full tragic force of James’ story would pass us by.

If any doubts were to remain regarding Hyacinth’s political paralysis, James quickly puts them to rest. For we soon discover that Hyacinth’s sense of bewilderment in the face of what to do is multiplied by his attachment to art. Everything that draws him to art takes him away from revolution. Art points to the need to conserve, not to erase and overthrow. Through the capacity to enchant, art creates imagined
worlds that prompt love and attentiveness. Art points to care for the particular, not to the standard measure or the overall good. Moreover, Hyacinth comes to believe that in great art and architecture the human spirit is most completely expressed. Like Ruskin, Hyacinth is captured by the thought that in fine art ‘the hand, the head and the heart go together’, but this forces him to take another step away from politics, so sharpening his dilemma. For he sees that art’s value depends on the skill and discrimination of the critic. Unlike social goods that can be distributed equally among discerning and undiscerning alike, the goods of art cannot be split so that each has one share, and not more than one. Hence, Hyacinth’s horror at the possibility that the revolutionaries would ‘cut the ceilings of the Veronese into strips, so that every one might have a little piece.’ It is here, of course, that we encounter the full weight of Hyacinth’s tragedy. The revolution will destroy the society that has excluded him, but in doing so it will also destroy the art he loves most. He cannot betray his political commitments and, yet, he cannot go through with them either. Faced by this conflict and feeling abandoned by those he thought his comrades, Hyacinth turns the gun upon himself. Emancipation is stillborn.

It is Nussbaum’s view that an ‘appeal to aesthetic detachment is not innocent of politics’, since an engagement with a novel such as The Princess Casamassima opens our eyes to a human betterment that may be obscure both in theory and in life. Thus, she writes that reading Dickens in her childhood gave ‘a joyful sense of escape, from a world in which rich people ignored the claims of the poor, into a world where those claims were acknowledged.’ It is difficult to share Nussbaum’s joy without feeling dizzy at the thought of so great a degree of imaginative freedom. And, yet, liberals should, perhaps, calm themselves a little. They should remember that Hyacinth has not escaped, neither has an unjust society been transformed. If there are lessons the novel teaches then they will have to be indirect. Good liberal Aristotelians learn by intimation as well as precept. They read between the lines. An Aristotelian notion of human flourishing can, therefore, redeem Hyacinth’s dilemma and show us a way out, but only if the novel’s tragic conclusion can be made to serve liberal purposes. Thus, Nussbaum rejects the claim that there is a necessary conflict between a rich imaginative life and life’s material conditions. For her, the choice is not between a world starved of art and a world starved of food. Both are essential to the fulfilment that Aristotelians take to be the human telos. Similarly, Hyacinth’s love of art is not understood as a barrier to political emancipation, but is elevated by
Nussbaum into politics as patient realism. Social justice is created neither from the imposition of the abstract revolutionary will nor from abdication of judgement in the face of hard cases. For Nussbaum, *The Princess Casamassima* is a reminder of the limits of politics. The dilemma that captures Hyacinth does not weaken or destroy his commitments. Rather it heightens them, so stimulating liberals to seek another more responsive political way. Here great art is made to stand in the closest possible conjunction with politics for ‘it moderates the ferocious hopefulness that simply marches over the complicated delicacies of the human heart.’

Rightly, Nussbaum does not take the view that Hyacinth is too weak and vacillating for the rigours of political action. His failure to escape reflects neither his vision nor his personal courage, but his social background. Conflict between art and social justice is not part of the fabric of the universe. In Hyacinth’s life it comes about because the images of class domination have entered his soul. Thus, Hyacinth’s failure is, for Nussbaum, a failure of consciousness. Although his aesthetic and moral commitments remain, he is unable to transcend his tragedy. He lacks a practical point of awareness for social emancipation.

Nussbaum speaks of Hyacinth’s abilities. Choice in liberal political philosophy is the measure of freedom, and the ability to make choices is, therefore, neither incidental nor predetermined. But what kind of ability would Hyacinth need? And what sense can we make of him using it to avoid the impasse in which he finds himself? Surely, it is all too evident that the moral lesson Nussbaum wants to draw comes from the understanding that Hyacinth could do no other. It is when we grasp the nature of the tragic dilemma that the novel’s insight into the world’s imperfections is brought home to us. But liberal attentiveness to the novel clearly wishes to hear more. It urgently wishes to know whether such imperfections are alterable or whether they belong to the nature of things. Is Hyacinth’s dilemma falsely thought natural, closed to resolution, as slavery was once thought to be? Or is it artificial, an accident of character or circumstance that could have been foreseen and avoided? When we look to the novel for progress with these questions, the first and most obvious fact we notice is that Hyacinth’s bewilderment arises in life. His is a practical, not a theoretical problem. But his life is as the novelist has portrayed it, and we know from James’ Preface that his focus is to be ‘a dingy little London bookbinder whose sensibility should have been poisoned at the source.’ For some critics this remark shows how far James aims to stack the odds in favour of tragedy, but we should be cautious of this view. More significant, both
to the novel’s course and to philosophy, is the impossibility of our understanding Hyacinth as an impartial decision-maker whose choices give him his values. Rather, we are brought to see Hyacinth as someone whose commitments determine his choices. Thus, while James makes him an orphan he also ensures that memory of his mother’s fate never leaves him. Similarly, his upbringing is made to shape his character, and this in turn is made to reinforce the conflict between ideals that so confuses him.

In life, of course, Hyacinth’s dilemma is often approached more robustly. Patience in the face of overwhelming injustice may not be a virtue if it perpetuates injustice or widens the scope of the suffering it causes. Thus, a ruthless political party caught up in circumstances of great intensity may not hold back from sacrificing art if this is the only way of bringing about justice. Like the assassination of the Tsar and his family, the forcible repression of art and artists might be seen as a demonstration that there was no going back. Thus, Lenin infamously remarks to Gorky of Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata’, ‘I can’t listen to music too often. It affects your nerves; you want to say nice, stupid things and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell.’. It may be too predictable to note that Nussbaum is wholly at one with Lenin in identifying the power of art to stimulate our emotions, while drawing exactly the opposite conclusion for politics. For Lenin, art is a distraction. Where in life there is pain, art soothes and by soothing compensates, so quietening the spirit and obstructing change. For Nussbaum, by contrast, where political transformation is gradual, democratic and piecemeal there is no incompatibility between art and social justice. Indeed, where equality between citizens is governed by mutually agreed principles of justice then ‘public provision of the arts’ is necessary, as she puts it, to achieve ‘a true class-leveling revolution’. Can this be the art that, in Nietzsche’s conception, refuses to ‘leave everything as it is’, or does liberalism render art benign?

Art’s stubborn protection of its own autonomy is a challenge to liberals looking to construct principles of justice that are neutral between differing conceptions of the good. A willingness to treat art on a par with primary goods seems to reduce both its practice and enjoyment to bloodless affairs. By contrast, drawing a defensive line around art smacks too obviously of privilege in terms of the mysteries of its practice and the standards employed in its criticism and appreciation. Nussbaum’s solution to this problem is to develop a theory of the good that is fuller and more responsive to a wider range of human capacities.
than Rawls, so allowing her to make a claim for the arts as a feature of a comprehensive conception of the good. It may well be the case that a teleological account of human flourishing is better able to explain why liberals value art than contractarianism. For in the stricter contractual picture of liberalism that Rawls derives, we are being encouraged to notice that equality of moral personality in relation to the principles of justice does not imply equality of excellence in relation to activities and accomplishments. What entitles individuals to be considered, as the principles of justice require, is a separate matter from the judgement of excellence. To think otherwise is, Rawls writes, ‘to conflate the notion of moral personality with the various perfections that fall under the concept of value.’

We have encountered Nussbaum’s view that selected novels enhance life. Minimally, she means that such novels do not stand to life as scientific reports do to experience. Neither are they tracts calling life to order. Enhancement, however, is not an unambiguous term. In one sense, we can say that a novel enhances life by enabling us to see it more clearly. In the novel’s image of life we see the original with greater determination and intensity than is permitted by life itself. Amongst the many aspects that are so magnified are life’s imperfections. Thus, we see in The Princess Casamassima how much loved goods, like art and justice, do not sit comfortably alongside each other, but rather stimulate conflict and antagonism. What the novel leads us to conclude is that goods are not just heterogeneous, but incompatible. But enhancement has another sense, one that Nussbaum finds more encouraging to ethical theory. To say that a novel enhances life is to say that it improves life by pointing us as readers in a specific ethical direction. Liberal perfectionists, therefore, will find in a novel such as The Princess Casamassima signs of human betterment that are promising from a theoretical point of view. Nussbaum certainly wishes to keep hold of those features of the novel’s form that give it a distinctive ethical value, since she believes rightly that these are not open to paraphrase in a non-literary form. Of these complexity and indeterminacy are notably significant.

At this point, the ambiguities in the notion of enhancement begin to close in on Nussbaum’s argument. For of the many aspects of life that The Princess Casamassima is claimed to enhance, one concerns our grasp of revolutionary thinking where the relation between art and moral ideals is at stake. James leaves us in no doubt that Hyacinth is pulled in conflicting directions. He writes, ‘a thousand times yes, he was with the people and every possible vengeance of the people, but all
the same he was happy to feel he had blood in his veins that would account for the finest sensibilities.’. What should be clear is that this state does not exhaust the moral possibilities available. We have already noticed that a more ruthless revolutionary might decide that artistic values must be set aside. But there is more, for yet another possibility is that artists themselves can see their work as entirely consistent with radical and all-embracing political change. In a revolutionary climate a sense of a new dawn is not uncommon. Experimentation in art is often thought to go hand in hand with political upheaval. Thus, as Isaiah Berlin comments, such a renaissance in ideas about artistic expression and social justice marks the early years of the Russian Revolution, until its course changed and political repression took hold. Writers like Gorky, Mayakovsky, Pasternak and Akhmatova all demonstrate through their creative work and political involvement that the aim of social justice does not spell the end of art.

Most obviously, we notice that Nussbaum need not deny these possibilities. Neither need she diminish the ethical significance of Hyacinth’s individual character and motivation, as she might by disregarding his love of art as a fantasy springing from false consciousness. However, in describing James as an ally of Aristotle, Nussbaum is making a philosophical investment in the novel that looks for a substantial return. For one of the great features of James’ technique in The Princess Casamassima is reticence. The skill at holding back, at knowing when to make a theme explicit and when to hint, at knowing when to let the whole speak through a part or to leave the parts free to accumulate their meanings are all devices of literary art, but how do they reward philosophy? Nussbaum’s answer is that over his novel’s course James exploits the blighted shape of Hyacinth Robinson to contrive a powerful will to self-realisation, one that is strong enough to point to the unity and system that liberalism seeks. In these ways, a reading of The Princess Casamassima is a philosophically liberating experience. Taking James seriously does not mean setting aside his literary craftsmanship, nor does it require liberals to concede the task of theoretical understanding in politics. What it asks is that we ‘recognise that in patient lucidity and non-violent slow effort are more strength altogether than in bristling bayonets, a courage to and for humanity rather than a flight from it into the sublime air.’

In letting go, to a degree, the contrast between the novel and philosophical argument Nussbaum is insisting that the novel has its own kind of explicitness. Unlike T. H. Green whose liberalism is grounded ultimately in the idea of the Eternal Consciousness, Nussbaum opposes
transcendence, proposing instead that ethical possibilities are to be judged by the method of reflective equilibrium. By way of contrast, Nietzsche remarks that art is ‘an enhancement of the feeling of life, a stimulant to it’, so deliberately leaving ethical theory adrift, as lacking the authority to pronounce on possibilities found in art and life. Reflective equilibrium is thought by its supporters to provide such an authority. It is, however, heavily dependent on the assumptions which guide its use, and these lead it into difficulty when it attempts to modify argument with intuitions, especially if those are derived from the novel. As Bernard Williams cogently comments in relation to Rawls, reflective equilibrium ‘not only sets out from the assumption that those involved aspire to be in some kind of ethical world, it also brings to its task aspirations for one kind of ethical world rather than others.’

Frequently in her writings Nussbaum denies that a philosophical commentary on the novel must be expressed as argument. Clarification about life comes from a variety of philosophical sources of which formal argument is only one. In any event, construing philosophy so narrowly is likely to push its relationship with the novel to extremes, with each desperately attempting to hypnotise the other into a way of speaking that is not its own. The novel’s distinctive character does not need reshaping by philosophy. Rather it points to the limitations of ethics when expressed in the form of abstraction, in coded moral systems divorced from life. At other times, however, Nussbaum’s liberalism cannot resist the theoretical voice. The novel is not the complete philosophical cure.

At issue here is the relation between the novel and its commentary. We notice that a commentary on a theoretical argument must keep in line if it wishes to avoid irrelevance and anachronism. Even theoretical counter-examples need to follow the claim’s logical purchase if they are to have the desired effect. Where its conversation is with a novel, however, a philosophical commentary will find its boundaries shifting. For Nussbaum, neither philosophy nor the novel is wholly self-enclosed. Some features of the novel – say, its grasp of detail – make theoretical restatement difficult, while some features of ethics – its systematic concern with the nature of the good life – work independently of the novel’s voice. Clearly, such a commentary will not be like a prose version of a poem, a summary of a complex argument or a report on experience. It will be a commentary that retains a respect for differences, but of what kind? Nabokov alerts us to the problems we encounter in crossing this terrain, reminding us that ‘in reading, one
should notice and fondle details.’. The novel’s detail, he announces, will never surprise if it is approached in terms of a generalisation. Nor should we expect anything but ‘moonshine’ if a generalisation is all we look to learn. Thus, a reluctance to follow Nussbaum’s thought that Hyacinth Robinson is morally exemplary for a liberal politics might stem from doubts concerning the nature of his ‘beautiful soul’. For it can be argued that the ‘beautiful soul’ is disqualified not just from politics in a liberal state, but from any activity of governing. Imagine what it would be like to be governed by Hyacinth Robinson. Does he possess the skill to rule? Further, it can be argued that the ‘beautiful soul’ disqualifies itself from politics because it is disqualified from life. This is a moral persona constituted by virtue against morality. Hegel, of course, is its greatest analyst. Of it he writes, ‘it lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence.’. In being unable to overcome the opposition between its inner purity and the need to express its life in action in the world, the ‘beautiful soul’ is lost in contradiction. Since it is conscious of this contradiction, it is a moral persona ‘disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption.’.

Disputing Nussbaum’s commentary in this way does not depend on imagining ourselves as this character in the novel rather than that. It is not a question of my putting myself in, say, Paul Muniment’s position to discover what Hyacinth’s problem looks like from a more realistic revolutionary point of view. Nor does it involve a part or single episode in the novel rather than the whole. Likewise, with Hegel we are not considering a type or instance from which moral generalisations might be derived. It is not with the ‘beautiful soul’ as a symbol of a specifically eighteenth century dilemma that we are concerned, but as a conceptual possibility. In revealing explicitly what we already know, philosophy becomes more apparent, so inviting the novel to reply in kind.

Understanding the exchanges between philosophy and the novel as a conversation is enlightening because the image is tolerant of differences. While maintaining its focus, a conversation does not always look for, or need, a definitive resting-place to be rewarding. The method of reflective equilibrium, however, is more demanding, since it does assume reciprocity of purpose and has as its intellectual goal some kind of fit between its different components. Batting competing philosophical interpretations of a novel backwards and forwards might seem to illustrate very well what the method is meant to achieve, but we should stand back a little.
One area of reflective equilibrium where there is a potential difficulty is in its publicity requirement. In ethics, on this basis, principles of justice are conditional on public criteria of justification. Prospective principles must be rendered explicit to rational agents who could be subject to them so that their choice is not unbalanced by ignorance, misunderstanding or falsehood. To ask the novel for equivalent transparency in the sense that it should not deliberately mislead readers as to its character’s motives is a minimal requirement. More ambitiously, to ask the novel for complete explicitness would come close to making novel writing impossible. In this respect, total openness is no more aesthetically desirable in the novel than it is ethically in life. Saying what you mean does not always require that you mean what you say. As Bernard Williams comments of personal relations, ‘to hope that they do not rest on deceit and error is merely decent, but to think that their basis can be made totally explicit is idiocy.’

Cavell’s ‘yokel’ who rushes on stage to warn Desdemona might be described as having a degree of method in his madness, but it is not the method that Nussbaum wants. Liberal philosophers who court neatness in ethical systems do require a firm method to exploit the energy the novel contains. Such a method is necessary, they argue, so that the novel’s abundant riches can be squared with the reasoned arguments about justice, say, that a liberal philosophy normally advocates. Moving between philosophy and the novel, however, is not like channel hopping whilst watching television. Contexts and commitments bind each differently, which means that permission is necessary when their boundaries are crossed.

Whereas Winch aims to protect the novel against the fog of theory, Nussbaum seeks a close fit between a novel such as The Princess Casamassima and the liberalism she espouses. Some may think it curious for a liberal philosopher who prizes system and consistency to turn to the novel where systematic argument and intellectual tidiness are most obviously lacking. But novels of a particular quality have a distinct kind of transparency and order. Is reflective equilibrium the best method for releasing the novel’s distinctive energy? And what kind of fit could possibly be produced with liberal principles by the use of such a method?

In the uneasy truce between novelist and reader there is an underlying understanding that the novel’s vigour is an invention, one that involves not straightforward representation, but literary craft. Unlike the intuitions and theories that reflective equilibrium seeks to modify, one against the other, the novel is necessarily a creature of its literary
means. Further, unlike intuitions and theories whose content may be expressed in various ways, such means are not incidental to the novel’s communicative power. So, irony in expression and narrative is often the best way of driving a point home. Irony makes it strikingly clear to readers just how large is the incongruity between what we expect to happen and what actually does. Irony thrives on duality of meaning, but its literary power derives more from its being used without fanfare. To be effective it must be deployed by stealth. It would seem a failure of artistic nerve for liberals to confront irony by thinking it an uncomplicated expression of our intuitions, since its point is often to subvert them. Similarly, irony commonly falls well short of the sense and logical structure we associate with a formal theory. The attempt to test irony against our intuitions in effect allows its distinctive purchase to slip away. For instance, we may safely understand the title of Graham Greene’s novel *The Quiet American* as ironic. But we do not grasp its import by looking for Americans who are justifiably noisy, nor can we be sure we are on solid ground if we show convincingly that large numbers of Americans all behave with the reticence of a T. S. Eliot. We might even suggest that we weigh the credibility of *The Quiet American* against our considered knowledge of American foreign policy, but this may be to admit too great a degree of artistic confidence failure.

For irony has no single point. Sometimes an ironic stance makes a dismal experience bearable. At others, irony bursts on the understanding like a flash of light, defying explanation or exegesis. Irony is often of the moment, where it can be a method for wryly knocking the point home. We see it also used to reinforce nemesis or recognition by laying the reasons for it well in advance of the event, waiting like a timed explosive device for the exact moment to detonate. Thus, James’ strategy in *The Princess Casamassima* is to make the incongruities of Hyacinth Robinson’s life believable through the agile ironies that mark its course. Indeed, there is more, for, as Trilling rightly observes, irony permeates the texture of the novel’s political investigations because it is both brought into existence by the nature of modern political morality, and may well be the best way of explaining it. The morally ambiguous life of modern politics becomes itself, as Trilling notes, ‘the source of characteristically modern ironies, such as the liberal exhausting the scrupulosity which made him deprecate all power and becoming extravagantly tolerant of what he had once denounced, or the idealist who takes licence from his ideals for the unrestrained exercise of power.’
The point of reflective equilibrium as a method of ethical enquiry is to give appropriate weight to intuitions and theories so as to achieve the best fit between them. In relation to ethics, the method is not uncomplicated and, where its subject is the novel, the problems of application multiply. Dismantling irony so that its constituent meanings can be independently weighed is simply a way of dissolving it. By contrast, treating ironic truth as literal is merely a rather leaden way of ignoring the cleverness that makes it what it is. Whichever course is taken it would seem that reflective equilibrium as a method for moving between philosophy and the novel is radically incomplete.

In one of his *Journal* entries Kierkegaard asks us to think about how one thing helps us to understand another: ‘Imagine it quite dark and then one point of light appears; you would be quite unable to place it, since no spatial relation can be made out in the dark. Only when one more light appears can you fix the place of the first, in relation to it.’ Relations between the novel and ethics may not be spatial, but Kierkegaard’s idea that the place of one thing can be fixed only in relation to another is persuasive. In Nussbaum’s view, the novel’s intricate particularity combines with first person narrative to show us how moral beliefs inform life. It reveals why specific beliefs matter, what it would be like if they were to be changed or if they were lost, or if we were to be forced to live without them. When ethics falters in its attempt to make sense of moral notions, literature’s compass shows what is possible in life. Either through the enhancement of life, or a surrogate for it, literature provides the illumination that ethics needs. Literature is Kierkegaard’s second light. Without it ethics cannot be placed in relation to life.

This does not mean that Nussbaum must think of the novel as a novel of philosophical ideas. Quite the contrary, in fact, for the novel’s power to clarify lies in its capacity to make us see the force moral concepts have in life. To construe the novel as a sophisticated vehicle for moral propositions is to misunderstand the guidance that it gives. In this way, we can see that placing ethics by means of literature necessitates literature’s autonomy. Kierkegaard’s second light could not locate the first if it overlapped with it or stood too much in its shadow. Thus, literature’s value to ethics applies only if its distinctive character is fully appreciated. Showing respect to the novel is a matter of seeing how moral possibilities play out in given narrative contexts. Respect comes, too, from attending to the aesthetic qualities displayed in the novel’s language, to the novelist’s skill in finding just the right words to convey the meaning of a glance, a look or a gesture. Readers stand
in partnership with the novelist. As readers we are encouraged to imagine what it would be like to be in the situations of the characters the novelist creates, to ask what we ourselves would have thought and done. Kierkegaard’s second light allows us to locate the first only if the authority of its own perspective is accepted. Thus, for the novel’s relationship with philosophy to be complete it cannot be pursued simply as an example. The novel’s beginnings and endings cannot be rewritten at will to suit an argument, or to defeat one. Nor can we enter the novel imagining ourselves to be one character only, so neglecting the other characters’ points of view.

One suspects that Nussbaum would wish to make a little more of Kierkegaard’s image, since she is likely to be dissatisfied with its implication that communication between the novel and ethics goes only one way. Deference to the grammar of our responses to the novel – the impossibility of our belonging to its character’s world, to our redeeming or denying a fictional figure’s presence – is vital, but it is only a starting point in understanding what can be learned. As Cavell remarks of our watching a performance of Lear, in the play ‘everything which can be done is being done. The present in which action is alone possible is fully occupied. I have no space in which I can move.’. In fact, Nussbaum’s version of liberal Aristotelianism aims to play as powerful a beacon on the novel as the novel can for ethics. As the systematic enquiry into the conditions of human flourishing, ethics, in Nussbaum’s view, both feeds the novel and is fed by it.

What is at issue here is not crude moralism, where a novel is condemned if it fails to conform to some set of predetermined moral standards. Nor is it the possibility of hoping that we as readers would have acted differently, that we would have resisted temptation if we had been in the fictional character’s position. Nor, again, is it a question of our refusing a fictional character’s standpoint as a model for life. Rather it is the morality of being a novelist that is at stake. Fictions can spread error if the author is mistaken or if we are being led to contemplate possibilities that could never exist. But where art imposes responsibilities on itself, something more than moralism or the artist’s forgetfulness is involved. Writing to exorcise personal demons, for instance, when readers have no clue that this is the motive, turns the novel from the pursuit of truth into a means of private therapy. Similarly, a writer who inserts into the novel unfavourable portraits of actual people for purposes of personal spite is effectively not paying testimony to art, but taking revenge on it. These figures are like Nietzsche’s scholars who follow the path of learning from vanity or the need to bolster self-esteem.43
That art has responsibilities to itself may be seen as part of the mutual illumination between art and ethics. Such interdependence is not, therefore, an idea that we should be completely happy to lose. But it is hard to escape the impression that Nussbaum wishes to go further. For her, interdependence is not just a single possibility, something that works in the grammar of one kind of ethical criticism of the novel, but rather a defining feature of the novel’s conversation with ethics.

It must be stressed that the issue here does not concern the comprehensiveness found in Nussbaum’s conception of ethics. We can accept that nothing requires Nussbaum to stick exclusively to an ethics of the virtues as opposed, say, to an ethics of policy. The moral particularity offered by the novel can be seen as valuable for both. Indeed, the liberal Aristotelian might not be over-enthusiastic about the claim that there are two conceptions of ethics rather than one. The liberal Aristotelian might be highly resistant to the notion that there is one ethics that focuses on the complexity of living the moral life, its dilemmas and uncertainties, and another that focuses on liberal moral principles to be derived impartially between different pictures of the good. No more is the liberal Aristotelian willing to accept a sharp distinction between fact and value, between the general empirical conditions of well being and the moral diversity the novel displays. And, yet, all these assumptions we can allow, for they do not directly concern the point in hand – that in wanting the novel to illuminate and be illuminated by ethics, Nussbaum obscures a number of contrasts that are vital to both.

In his comments on Nussbaum’s view of the place of literature in ethics, D. Z. Phillips remarks that ‘philosophical reflection does not underwrite any specific form of moral appropriation.’ So moral philosophers might agree about the novel’s ethical riches, but disagree over which ethical direction, if any, they indicate. Thus, Iris Murdoch refers to the ‘moral challenge involved in art: in the self-discipline of the artist, expelling fantasy and really looking at things other than himself.’ She speaks about literature enabling us to see the human person portrayed as ‘substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable and valuable’. It is not difficult to imagine this coming from a work by Nussbaum, but there is a significant difference. For where Nussbaum takes these qualities to be signs that liberalism must recognise, Murdoch sees them as indicators of liberalism’s shallowness. Where Nussbaum asks for life and literature to be checked against liberal moral theory, Murdoch sees a false completeness. Thus, the picture of the individual that Nussbaum adopts as a liberal is exactly
the one from which Murdoch wishes to escape. Far from being creatures of free rational will, eminently educable and capable of self-knowledge, as liberal theory requires us to believe, we are, Murdoch avers, ‘sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy.’ From Murdoch’s perspective, Nussbaum wants to have the relation between the novel and ethics both ways. She wants the novel’s qualities to confirm liberal methods and beliefs when they most dramatically cast doubt on them. Seen from Murdoch’s standpoint, reflective equilibrium is not a solution to the anxieties that scar liberalism, but a part of its problem. By contrast, literature, Murdoch writes, ‘can give us a truer picture of freedom.’

Recognising that there is a difference between philosophical reflection on the novel and appropriating it for one moral point of view is another way of saying that moral philosophers cannot have it both ways. But if strict interdependence between ethics and the novel does not compel then we seem to be faced with radical discontinuity. When the novel’s friends (as Nussbaum and Murdoch clearly are) cannot agree, the result is indeterminacy in the novel’s ethical purchase.

In moving in this sceptical direction it is not the use of the novel as example per se which gives rise to doubt. Nor is it the novel’s own distinctive life. Rather it is the liberal commentary that provokes reflection. This reservation is erased in a different perspective, one that draws on the idea of practice. Wittgenstein’s extensive deployment of examples that range from buying groceries to builder’s commands gives us a powerful indication of the importance of practice. He intends to discourage us from looking for general accounts of moral concepts, implying that these are useful only to the extent that they reflect practice. So Wittgenstein writes, ‘But what does a game look like that is everywhere bounded by rules? Whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the cracks where it might?’ The liberal commentary on the novel, however, does not want the novel to speak entirely for itself. The liberal wishes to travel well beyond the novel’s power to illustrate a particular way of life. Liberals ask how practices can justify themselves. They wish to ‘stop up all the cracks’ by providing elaborate accounts of the methods such justification involves. It worries liberals that liberal practices may be insufficiently defined to persuade non-liberals. At issue here is both the novel’s capacity to educate beyond its immediate revelations and the resourcefulness of a liberal notion of truth. In following these sceptical hints we will be entering Rorty country.
Nussbaum’s liberal commentary has as its focus novels that manifest a particular attentiveness to the moral life. What they lack in ideological adventure they make up for in sensitivity to nuance and moral susceptibility. Not all novelists share this view of the relation between the novelist’s art and moral philosophy. Most notably, there is Nabokov, who believes that the novel as art is a fortress that ethics will never storm. The major novelist is for Nabokov, ‘storyteller, teacher, enchanter’, but it is as enchanter that the novelist’s power comes. William Gass writes of Lowry’s novel, Under the Volcano, ‘I live in a suburb of Cincinnati, yet the Consul’s bottled Mexican journey is so skilfully constructed that its image fits me, the whole fantastic dangerous country, the tale in its totality.’ How, then, can the novel have a bearing on ethics when it is so dependent on literary contrivance, so keen to prevent its morality from becoming explicit? Stories are not lived, but told. So, if the artist is to be both magician and liberal magus it looks as if the transition must come about indirectly, must be made by stealth.

A. E. Dyson remarks that in irony ‘the sting is that a topsy-turvy picture is nearer to being true than we normally admit.’ It is a remark we should take seriously. In doing so we are pushed further to follow Rorty’s sceptical trail. In Rorty’s work, what alerts us to the character of our lives is not a technical vocabulary of theoretical truth, but a series of descriptions which convey our beliefs and desires, the impact they have on each other, and the kinds of human beings we would wish to be. How the novel finds a role within Rorty’s sustained anti-metaphysical stance we consider next.
Philosophers are fond of creating make-believe disasters. Richard Rorty conjures one of his own by asking us to imagine the West obliterated in a thermonuclear war. Some texts have been preserved and, if there were a choice, which of these, Rorty asks, would best communicate to non-Westerners the collection of attitudes that made the West what it was? If the non-Westerners were philosophers, Rorty wonders why should they want any text other than a work of philosophy to survive? As philosophers, they would want to discover the West’s essence, the idea that was fundamental to it, the notion that could not be erased without losing the existence of the West itself. They might even look for a theory of Western life and the ideals that animated it. If they were fortunate enough to chance upon a text by Heidegger that had escaped the disaster, they might argue about how the West had exhausted its sense of being, how it had become played out.

For his philosophical descendants, Rorty entertains a different kind of hope. To him, it is the novelist rather than the philosopher who best reveals the West to philosophers who are remote from it. It is, Rorty writes, ‘the example of Dickens that could help them think of the novel, and particularly the novel of moral protest, rather than the philosophical treatise, as the genre in which the West excelled.’

When we return Rorty’s make-believe to our own time we may find it a little self-serving. Is philosophy being ordered to keep its hands off art? Or is Rorty’s notion of philosophy as a kind of cultural aide-memoire too suggestive of openness? Where some philosophers hope to bridge the gap between philosophy and literature Rorty is indifferent. Speaking of ‘bridges’ or ‘roads’ between different ways of thinking makes little sense if there is no compelling reason to regard them as autonomous. In repudiating the claim that beliefs can be judged from
a single transcendental standpoint, severe doubt is cast on the idea that there can be a theory of the relations between philosophy and literature. The absence of privileged access to facts independently of beliefs means, for Rorty, that classification of neighbouring conceptual territory is unlikely to be conflict free.

Against those philosophers who express anxiety if any breach is made in conceptual boundaries, Rorty argues that there is no satisfactory method for mapping those boundaries in the first place. When philosophers persist in the empiricist language of permission and prohibition Rorty quickly slaps them down. The liberal moderns think that unauthorised crossings of the boundary between philosophy and literature risk anachronism and conceptual confusion. For Rorty, all talk of licence and trespass indicates the presence of false completeness. It manifests the urge to make experience systematic that is the intellectual disease known as metaphysics. In the grip of this, philosophers are possessed by the need to explain the world in terms of atemporal categories such as ‘reality’, ‘truth’, ‘good’ and ‘justice’. Philosophers who are beguiled by this misleading picture seek definitions of philosophy and literature as preliminaries to an investigation of their relationship. Thus, Rorty claims that metaphysically inclined philosophers see the relation between ethics and the novel as a matter of correct genre identification. They look to order texts ‘by reference to a previously determined grid, a grid which, whatever else it does, will at least make a clear distinction between knowledge claims and other claims upon our attention.’

From this perspective, if there is a method for moving from ethics to the novel it will not be the liberal modernist device of reflective equilibrium. For Rorty, all writers – philosophers, novelists, poets, dramatists – inhabit open country, dialectically speaking. There is simply no basis for a method in philosophy that is closed to pragmatic application elsewhere. Rorty considers philosophy to be a way of dissolving problems rather than addressing them respectfully on their own terms. Philosophy is not a matter of establishing anything; it is resistant to closure, although Rorty does stretch a point by including discussion of what is wrong with the foundational view. In this therapeutic form, philosophy proceeds less by propositional argument and interrogation than by the altogether looser and more flexible conventions of a conversation. The aim is not to clinch the argument, but to sustain the discourse. In revoking necessity, conversationalists speak not in a timeless realm of theory, but in recognition of their own contingency and particularity. Freed from the distractions of metaphysics, from the
continual pressure to pursue greater accuracy in the representational function of language, both philosophy and literature in Rorty’s revisionist conception find their boundaries reshaped.

What philosophical reading of the novel does Rorty encourage once the desire to classify and distinguish is set aside? Does literary criticism lend itself to philosophy as objective moral principle once did for metaphysics? If so, how does this help us understand how Rorty reads the novel? Given the logical force of his anti-representational stance, Rorty sees no need to defend literature against allegations of deception or untruth. Indeed, in one of his earliest works, Rorty abandons a theory of truth, arguing that we learn notions of truth/falsity from engagement in the linguistic practices in which they work. There is no hidden realm of truth waiting for our discovery that would guarantee those practices. Nor is there any question of constructing a synthesis of the novel and the liberalism that Rorty quite clearly favours. He claims that ‘there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory’, adding, ‘we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools – as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars.’

Rorty’s tool analogy is striking. Suggestive of scepticism, while avoiding the relativism that is often thought its corollary, the analogy offers an effective way of uncovering Rorty’s positive doctrines. Central among these is the view that human vocabularies aim not at an accurate representation of things, but at the fulfilment of quite specific purposes. Descriptions are not so many reflections of an external reality, but tools to be judged in relation to their use.

Thus, philosophers in the grip of metaphysics take the question – what is justice? – at face value. They assume that it can be answered by discovering the moral reality to which justice refers. Rorty, by contrast, defends a form of anti-realism in which no vocabulary can justifiably be regarded as more final than any other, criticism taking place not from a neutral standpoint, but only from the perspective of another vocabulary. Descriptions can be erased only by redescriptions, and redescriptions by further redescriptions. There is, in other words, nothing beyond vocabularies that could sensibly act as a criterion of choice between them.

Exemplary philosophers, according to Rorty, drop any title to authority in favour of a stance that is ironic, open to radical and continuing doubt, recognising that vocabularies are provisional in the face of influence from a variety of textual sources. They are not unduly
disturbed by the realisation that there is no non-circular way of justifying their beliefs. Nor does the inability of argument to finally dispel their doubts cause them too much dismay. Quite the opposite, in fact, because an ironic stance encourages appreciation of the contingency of our beliefs and desires. It privileges nothing and exposes everything.

With the curtailment of the urge to classify ways of seeing as different types of information, literary texts emerge from the Cartesian shadow. The novelist’s talent for redescription increases our sensitivity to another’s pain. Imaginative literature enlarges and enriches experience that might otherwise remain parochial, gauche or unworldly. It puts liberal ironists in touch with new vocabularies, enlarges their moral range, so building and possibly extending human solidarity.

Familiarity with Rorty’s teasing style of philosophy alerts us to his use of allusion and nuance in taking conversation forward. Exemplary philosophers should be pioneers challenging textual boundaries in a spirit of curiosity, not fearful of trespass, but hopeful that abstraction and system can be left behind. Rorty’s anti-realism extends from theories of knowledge to theories of literature. The independent, pragmatically minded philosopher ‘asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose.’.5 He approaches the novel not as a windowpane that gives a sight of a reality that otherwise remains opaque, but as a contrived – sometimes brilliantly contrived – collection of re-descriptions that work for different purposes on different occasions. If literature is a ‘decent sign’ to ethics then it is not because the moral philosopher has cracked the novel’s ethical code, so getting its signification right. This move Rorty renders untenable by discarding the whole idea of language representing how things are. On the contrary, philosophers, Rorty states ‘should see our poets as edifying examples of how to be mere human self-fashioners, rather than as people who open us up to something other than themselves, and perhaps other than human.’.6

But how do ‘human self-fashioners’ see themselves? If they were to think of the literary art as akin to a metaphysical key to human understanding, to moral authenticity or to the secrets of the universe, then they would simply perpetuate the illusion they seek to dispel. As Rorty himself remarks, there would be little point for pragmatism to dethrone numerous metaphysical false gods if in the end it determined to ‘set up an alter to Literature.’.7 For the pragmatist, error in philosophy is largely a matter of one voice claiming a role in the conversation it does not merit, by aiming to curtail, block or even silence the debate. So for exemplary philosophers to elevate the novel would be
close to self-destruction since by doing so they would lose the sense of irony that most clearly marks them out. Liberal ironists find the transcendental air too thin for them to breathe. To raise the novel to such rarefied status would be to concede its great skill in conveying what William James calls ‘the struggle and the squeeze’ of moral existence. If the novel is important in the pragmatic view of ethics it is not as the exclusive supplier of ethical gold, nor does it reveal hidden springs in human behaviour that we are not familiar with in life. Equally, the novel will not tell experimentally inclined pragmatic readers what to think, but will allow them as ironists to make up their own minds by responding freely to the redescriptions that face them.

Freeing irony from metaphysics is not, however, uncomplicated. One immediate reason for this is that ironists depend for at least some of their job description on the survival of the metaphysician’s point of view. Indeed, for Rorty, ‘without the foredoomed struggle of philosophers to invent a form of representation which will constrain us to truth while leaving us free to err, to find pictures where there are only games, there would be nothing to be ironic about.’ The ironist needs, as Rorty puts it, a ‘straight man’, for without a common-sense realist to provoke them ironists have nothing to criticise, nothing for their doubts to target. However, contra Rorty, not all straight men are stooges. Some cleverly provide the discipline necessary for the humour to work and which ironists might not find uncongenial so long as pomposity and officiousness serve a comic and, hence, deflationary purpose. So, without the bourgeois seriousness that Margaret Dumont represents in the Marx Brothers films, Groucho’s neurotic and obsessive redescriptions would be merely rapidly delivered patter. Whereas Chico and Harpo are wholly anarchic and self-regarding, Groucho’s comedy draws on the intelligent straight man and so has links with a public world.

If freeing irony from metaphysics is not uncomplicated, in Rorty’s view this does not make it any less desirable. But how can liberal ironists be haters of cruelty without a metaphysical belief in the essential humanity that reveals the victims of cruelty, the victims who suffer as a result of that kind of treatment? If liberals are bound by an obligation to diminish cruelty then surely they are bound not just by the stories that they happen to tell each other in their kind of a society at that stage of its history, but universally. How can ironists remain liberals if they are continually dubious about their moral vocabularies?

It does not astonish us to discover that Rorty’s answers to these questions set moral theory aside. No pragmatist would privilege theory in
advance of activity and, in any case, a literary example is as likely to wreck a theory as confirm it. Pragmatists are, of course, highly responsive to the use of examples in philosophy, seeing them as vivid ways of revealing the ‘dead end’ character of philosophy’s traditional problems. Better, the pragmatist claims, to take small examples from how we live now than try to build big edifices of reason that will turn out to be jerry built. Hence, the exemplary philosopher’s concern with literature. Novels, among a number of literary genres ‘which sensitise one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do.’.\(^{11}\) The novelist offers philosophers everything that pragmatists defend. Where traditional philosophy looks to abstraction and the essence of things, the novel brings narrative and particularity. It relishes diversity and the ambiguities of perspective. No novel, Rorty suggests, could be written from a standpoint of historical determinism or essentialism. The novel’s strengths lie not in programmes and patterned generality, but detail. It is, therefore, as inexhaustible of possibility as life.

Ironism, as Rorty elucidates it, emerges from sensitivity to the ways redescription works. We should not be surprised to learn, therefore, that what the novel achieves is a talent for getting people to notice what others are experiencing. It is for this reason that liberal ironists do not ask why they should abstain from humiliating others or behaving cruelly towards them. Rather, they ask what humiliates, or what is cruel. Human beings, in Rorty’s view, are not united by a juridical language of rights and duties, but by a common susceptibility to pain. Virtues such as decency and kindness reflect attentiveness and noticing rather than rational agreement. Making readers see a vice via a character’s name, as Dickens does with Gradgrind or Skimpole, is one of the ways the novelist’s special skills communicate such attentiveness to us. Great literature draws us in, but not, Rorty stresses, because it is revelatory of eternal truth or because it tells us how the world is.

As an edifying example the novel encourages imaginative identification with the lives of the characters it portrays. But why should Rorty think this of special interest to moral philosophers? The answer is that ironists do not approach the novel in the spirit of traditional moral philosophy. Worries such as whether or not the novel is created for the sake of art or for some moral purpose strike exemplary philosophers as old-fashioned, derived from a bifurcated view of the self that is no longer persuasive. Arguments over the novel’s aesthetic qualities, as opposed to the secure descriptions of right conduct emanating
from ethics, are wasted on ironists. For they see no common possibility of weighing such considerations, no independent scale that can be contrived to measure the one criterion against the other. Rather, what liberal ironists look for are texts that warn against the cruelty inherent in particular searches for autonomy. They need to envisage what cruelty is like from the inside, from the point of view of the victim. Texts that warn against injustice, exploitation and cruelty out of malice or greed reflect the moral vernacular. Liberal ironists look to literature to alert them to new possibilities, to cruelty from artistic obsession or from political power.

As pragmatists, exemplary philosophers do not read texts wilfully, inventing and re-inventing them merely to suit private fantasy. Re-reading the novel in a different context depends on readers precisely formulating the purposes they have in mind. Not all readings are fabrications because then cannibalisation of the novel would become the norm. By breaking with realism, Rorty is not turning the ironist over to relativism. We need to remember the comic’s need for the straight man. An indisposition to read the novel straight means simply a willingness to consider it in terms other than its own. If this is the price we have to pay to escape from representational pictures of interpretation then it is surely worth it. For we begin to see, with Rorty, that the novel’s creative energy is not best released by allowing it to speak for itself. Rorty writes, ‘there is no constant vocabulary in which to describe the values to be defended or objects to be imitated, or the emotions to be expressed, or whatever, in essays or poems or novels.’

Paying attention to the novelist’s own words to the exclusion of everything else is like assuming that someone’s own vocabulary is always the best form of explanation for what they do. There may be occasions where this is not the case. By responding to the novel on its own terms we are not discovering an objective truth, but hoping that it will interpret languages that are strange to us. It is a matter of finding out which vocabulary, the original or that of the imposed ‘grid’, will do the work. Malleability between texts is now a necessary virtue.

Exemplary philosophers are sceptics who manage to keep their liberalism intact through irony. Precarious though this position appears, it is not insubstantial since the ‘thick description’ found in literature contributes sharply to the refining of the sentiments that liberals value. By warning of pathologies not often encountered in life, literature is not easily set aside. And, yet, we sense a gap. What we need are examples of the kind of novel-reading that exemplary philosophers practise, the degree of entry into the novel’s world that they countenance and
recommend. If, as Rorty teaches, literary vocabularies are like all others in being edifying instruments rather than true representations, we might ask how far philosophical readers should go in stretching and utilising them for their own purposes.

What, then, should be our response to Rorty’s commentary on Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? At first glance we might find his choice surprising since Orwell was not a philosopher and he had little enthusiasm for argument. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a work that depends heavily on a common sense view of morality. Decent people, once they are permitted to see the world clearly, will not contemplate torture, and will agree that it is as plain as the sun rising in the morning that kindness is better than cruelty, telling the truth better than lying. In short, Orwell is a moral realist, and so we must ask what possible use could his novel be to Rorty.

In reading Rorty’s commentary we do not have to progress far before discovering the answer. The choice of novel is not accidental. For the whole idea is to find out how a realist text can profitably be read in a non-realist way. The aim, in other words, is to show what non-realists can gain morally from making *Nineteen Eighty-Four’s* close acquaintance. Rorty’s willingness to re-trace an author’s steps using language other than his own is a reflection of this. But if this is the way that pragmatists read the novel, is it also the best way for them to get what they want? Rorty finds it a matter of indifference whether Orwell wrote as a philosopher. Exemplary philosophers are not over-troubled by stepping across boundaries if it serves their purposes. And yet, even though no rules are laid down to govern this inter-textual journey, some account of what it might mean to make a mistake about a text is surely unavoidable. Getting a novel wrong through, for instance, a misunderstanding of narrative or motives of character should be of as much concern to pragmatists as to any other style of philosophical reader. Making a text the subject of your purposes, that is, will only work if you know what your purposes are and if you get the text right. Even exemplary philosophers must tolerate this minimum degree of realism, or, to put it slightly differently, this degree of suspension of their irony.

If the novel’s energy is best transmitted by its being read in a different philosophical voice from its own, how, then, should exemplary philosophers proceed? They might try to bring out the potential in the familiar by placing it in contexts that are unfamiliar. Relocating a literary example like moving the dilemma of Captain Vere to the context of a criticism of Kantian moral theory, for instance, is one way of
demonstrating the example’s philosophical power. Laying a grid of liberal argument derived from Mill’s *On Liberty* across, for instance, Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* both tests and elevates the formal claims about liberty contained in the argument. Such manoeuvres have their appeal, of course, but to exemplary philosophers they suggest a surfeit of leisure. Little redescription is involved in these cases. Both assume a degree of integrity in the text that ironists find unwarranted. Rorty is a sceptic about the authority of the text. He writes, ‘the idea of a method presupposes that of a privileged vocabulary, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself as opposed to those we read into it.’.\(^{13}\) But *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is most commonly read as a strong exemplification of a realist metaphysic of ethics. From the perspective of a non-realist understanding of literature whatever clues are contained in the novel for liberals they will not be like those of a crossword puzzle, neatly inter-linked and necessarily checkable against an external reference.

What is most immediately striking about Rorty’s reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is how briskly it sets realism aside. Rorty is certainly not reticent in dismissing talk about foundations for moral value, points of intellectual or factual neutrality to which appeal can be made when faced by indoctrination in the shape of force. But, surely, realism is the novel’s great theme, the source of its philosophical strength and its interest to liberals. By asking us to imagine a society in which the Inner Party controls objective reality, Orwell is also asking that we reflect on the limits of that control. By portraying a society in which the Party determines what people can know of themselves and others, what they can remember of their past and how they speak, he also shows us where such terrible power stops.

In Rorty’s interpretation, the central figure in the novel is O’Brien. Rorty’s interest is sparked not by the novel’s redescription of the Soviet Union, but by the invention of O’Brien. To the non-realist, successful redescription derives from literary skill, not the power of objective truth. Novels do not function as windows, through which we glimpse an independent reality, but as, in Rorty’s words, ‘the sort of thing which only writers with very special talents, writing at just the right moment in just the right way are able to bring off.’.\(^{14}\) What, then, do liberal ironists find worthy of attention in O’Brien? What they find is an endorsement of their views on metaphysics, but detached from the totalitarian politics O’Brien supports. As ironists, they agree that human vocabularies are devoid of metaphysical grounding. Whether \(2 + 2 = 4\) is not to be settled by an appeal to a discoverable underlying
reality, nor, indeed, should this absence condemn ironists to eternal anxiety about the dangers of relativism. Of course, ironists who are liberals find O’Brien shocking. This is not because ironists have no recourse to the liberal metaphysical belief that history is progressive, a rational movement that gradually but insistently reveals the presence of human dignity and freedom. As philosophers who are sensitive to the role of contingency in life, ironists do not miss the consolation of being able to tell a story about how liberal virtues evolve. They are well aware that whether the future is ‘a boot stamping on a human face – forever’,\(^{15}\) whether intellectuals rule decently or badly, is not a reflection of an inner human dynamic. The future comes not from a spring in human nature that specifies how it must unfold, but simply from how things turn out. In Rorty’s view, the gift that Orwell brings to philosophy is the conviction that ‘O’Brien is a plausible character-type of a possible future society, one in which the intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization.’\(^{16}\)

But O’Brien also shocks ironists for more commonplace reasons. He shocks them because he has the power to take away the freedom to express beliefs contrary to those ordered by the Party and because he causes suffering out of cruelty and the desire to humiliate. The torture that Winston is forced to endure represents the cruelty that liberals fear most. In these ways, therefore, non-realist liberals read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as rewarding both their liberalism and their non-realism, but is this profit or merely false coin?

Consider a criticism of Rorty’s commentary.\(^{17}\) In this Rorty’s non-realist interpretation is thought remarkable and extraordinary; we, too, might feel the same, and so we should ask ourselves if Rorty’s philosophical stance towards the novel obstructs his expectations rather than fulfils them. Is the novel’s realism a theme that even ironists are unable to avoid? The novel’s realism is received wisdom. Certainly, Rorty’s refusal to discuss the novel in terms of truth and falsity requires an explanation. His philosophical views filter truth and falsity out, but does this make sense as a reading of the novel? Rorty’s striking comment, ‘if we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself’,\(^{18}\) seems to be a confirmation, but the question remains.

As we have seen, Peter Winch treats literary examples very much on their own terms, whereas Rorty adopts a revisionist strategy, one that positively demands radical entry into the novel’s world. Rorty transforms its descriptions by his own, thinking of the novel almost as a devised example, one whose aesthetic authority must be demystified by beating it into whatever shape pragmatists find useful for their
purposes. Works of literature are, in Rorty’s view, structures that can be re-developed when human goods require. Perhaps, then, Rorty’s erasing of realism is his way of paying realism a compliment, but this is surely not the whole story.

There is a tendency in Rorty’s writing to make alternatives exhaustive when they are clearly not. This way of speaking seems at work here. But why should readers be forced to make a choice between interpretations as if these are the only ones available? If Orwell’s novel is realist it may not be wholly so. Indeed, there may be important aspects of Orwell’s meaning, or features of his technique, that would be lost if this either/or framework were to be accepted. Equally, it is clear that Rorty himself wants his commentary to go against the novel’s grain. In response to a critic who questions the appropriateness of applying his brand of non-realism to the novel, Rorty draws an analogy between himself and an atheist gaining moral instruction from Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. Just as it is possible to achieve this without imputing to Bunyan atheist beliefs so, he argues, it is possible to give a non-realist reading of Nineteen Eighty-Four without converting Orwell into a non-realist.

Is this response convincing? If a novel is to be read from a standpoint alien to its own surely more needs to be said beyond a bald recognition of difference. Once again the dependence of the liberal ironist on the direct and the prosaic should be remembered. So for the comic to say of the straight man that he’s the one who never tells jokes is not exactly a generous appreciation. It may be that a novel like Nineteen Eighty-Four can only be read in a spirit different from its own if its distinctive voice is fully attended to. The realist elements it contains must, in other words, be given proper weight.

A Hollywood film offers a nice metaphor for the liberal ironist’s problem. In The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948) two distrustful, down-at-heel strangers who are concerned with nothing but their own self-interest accompany an old prospector in search of gold. After a long struggle a mountain at last yields up its riches to them. The old prospector insists they demolish the mine and return the earth they have strenuously excavated, so thanking the mountain by allowing it to revert to its original state. Of course, the rational calculators cannot see the point. To them it is just wasted effort. But the old prospector finds reasons that convince them and his proposal wins the day. The metaphor is a neat way of probing the liberal ironist’s defences. For giving thanks to the mountain seems neither description nor re-description. Since the fact that the mountain has been mined can never be
erased, giving thanks cannot be a description. Equally, it cannot be a redescription since all that it involves is returning the mountain to what it was. Giving thanks operates neither like the tailor’s old clothes nor the tailor re-tailored, so how does it work? From Rorty’s pragmatic perspective on the novel, is the old prospector’s wish a myth? Or can the novel’s ethical gold come to philosophy only by respecting the novel’s shape and structure, the autonomy and security of its terrain?

In their conversations with the novel, liberal ironists wish to avoid pointing to anything beyond keeping the conversation going. They may find authorial intention useful as an indicator of meaning, but a firm guard is always kept against making it decisive. Equally, liberal ironists will try to avoid putting words into the author’s mouth. But what kind of philosophical engagement with the novel follows from this hermeneutic? Are the novel’s frontiers so porous to the liberal ironist’s investigations that no boundary crossing is ruled out? Is it possible for liberal ironists to play chess and drink gin with Winston in the Chestnut Tree Café? Almost as soon as this last question is asked, the negative answer in regard to the gin shoots out. But why should they not play chess? No transcendental chessboard is being presupposed, in which optimal gambits reflect an eternal Form of checkmate. Their game would not be a representation of a truth in chess independent of its actual moves. Perhaps, we should research a number of possible solutions. The liberal ironist might read about a fictional game as she might observe one in life. She would then replay the moves in her head, imagining herself as the opponent by adopting her own strategies, so reaping her own successes and rewards. But reconstructing a game played by others is very different from playing a game oneself. Could the liberal ironist imagine that she is in the novel, having been placed there by the author inventing some situation in which a chess encounter with Winston is essential to the plot? Yes, this circumstance could be imagined, but why this ironist with her particular chess skills? Perhaps, it would be possible to think of an author clever enough to devise a game that the liberal ironist could play without entering the novel’s world. Perhaps a game could be so cunningly scripted that whatever moves were made the same fictional ending was reached. The liberal ironist could then take responsibility for her choice of move without disturbing the fictional narrative. But, surely, this would not satisfy liberal ironists. For they want precisely to disturb the novel’s world. They wish to use liberal irony as a method for fulfilling pragmatic purposes. In which case, it is the exigencies of practice that keep the novel’s frontiers intact.
Rorty talks often about a hermeneutic conversation being important because through it we encounter perspectives we might have been prone to ignore and vocabularies we might have thought alien. But whether or not conversations diverge in mutual recrimination, reach stand off, break up in violent disagreement or proceed to common understanding must be dependent on their having at least begun. There will be some occasions where this simply cannot happen. The conversation just cannot get off the ground. In these cases liberal ironists would be well advised to concede ground to realism. A hermeneutic understanding, in other words, will lose little by acknowledging gaps between vocabularies as well as points of convergence.

Perhaps there are different kinds of case where the ball of conversation between liberal ironists and the novel may manage a minimal roll, even though speed may not be very great and the philosophical distance covered small. In this respect, we might recall a novel by E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, which starts with a philosophical discussion about the existence of external objects. No actual philosopher is cited, the discussion taking place between the fictional characters. Further, the novel’s philosophical start turns out to have little to do with its moral theme, except to point to the abstraction of argument in philosophy compared with the particularity of actions and their consequences in life.

Nevertheless, can liberal ironists engage one of the fictional characters in argument? After all, if liberal ironists can argue with O’Brien, then why not with these? Not in the way we argue with our actual colleagues, for even if we sometimes do not know exactly how they are going to respond we can at least in principle find out, as they, of course, if similarly perplexed, can do of us. But with fictional philosophers it is different, the lack of reciprocity forming the main obstacle. In Forster’s novel one of the characters, slightly bored, makes an effort to follow the discussion. They are trying to prove the existence of the cow, a much more familiar concept than objectivity. ‘But what of the cow? Was she there or not? The cow. There or not. He strained his eyes into the night.’

When we read these reflections perhaps we urgently want to engage the bored one in dialogue, to show him that these are not the questions that philosophy should ask. But such standard overtures are closed.

Could we engage in an argument if it is an actual philosopher that we encounter in the novel? Suppose we are reading Wyndham Lewis’s novel *Self Condemned* in which the philosopher R. G. Collingwood makes a brief appearance, then could we argue with him? Does this
injection of fact into the novel help to bridge the gap? In this case conversational opportunities certainly appear greater than they are with the fictional philosophers. Having read *The Longest Journey*, perhaps we left the novel disappointed that not much philosophically had happened to us beyond our own thoughts on the problem of the external world, and these had hardly been dependent on the novel. In this new case, however, we can refer to Collingwood’s own philosophical works to establish if his views are mistreated or misunderstood. In other words, some connection between actual philosophers in fictional contexts and actual philosophers in actual contexts can be mapped out. Similarly, some attempt might be made to discover what philosophical themes in the novel prompt Collingwood’s appearance in it. *The Longest Journey* presents us with the double problem of talking philosophy with imaginary characters. By contrast, when liberal ironists argue with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* they are not arguing with an imaginary character who just happens to have some interesting philosophical conversations, nor are they arguing with an actual philosopher whose work just happens to find itself within the novel’s world. In both these cases liberal ironists should easily be able to cede a degree of realist territory. But in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the philosophical problems that face them are of a different order because they are intrinsic to what Orwell wants to say.

The idea of intrinsic meaning has little appeal to Rorty. More than gentle coaxing is required, therefore, to gain any further concessions to realism. Indeed, the point we have reached is starting to look more like a straightforward disagreement than a conversation in which both sides share common ground about how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is to be interpreted. Rorty wants to cut the novel down to a size determined by his opposition to realism. He wants to deflate the novel’s realist pretensions, but to us it seems that he takes this too far, so radically diminishing the novel’s ethical case.

The issue of objective truth vital in the novel is, for Rorty, a philosophical red herring, but is this simply a roundabout way of getting the novel wrong? For Rorty’s critics it is not simply that Rorty reads Orwell’s novel partially, omitting to discuss large sections of the book that they think damaging to his case. It is rather that his case makes it impossible for him to attend to what Orwell says. So for one major critic, ‘Rorty’s obsession with Realism thus leaves him unable to identify the concerns which Orwell calls upon such a vocabulary to express, even though Orwell himself takes those concerns to be internally related to the very matters which Rorty urges we all should be
concerned with (for instance, the prevention of cruelty, the preservation of freedom, and the promotion of conditions under which a liberal polity can flourish).’. This is surely a resourceful and important remark. A more serious charge is being made than lack of sympathy for fictional characterisations or interpreting Orwell’s work implausibly. Now the complaint is that the attempt to read Nineteen Eighty-Four in terms other than its own leads inexorably to paradox. For, in wanting to be free from what Orwell actually says, Rorty finds necessarily that it is more difficult to say what he himself wants to say. It is not just that Rorty’s non-realist reading is incompatible with Winston Smith’s beliefs. Nor is it solely that Rorty’s reading dissolves too much in the novel to explain why readers should care about it. It is rather that cruelty, freedom and truth are not so readily re-described as wholly unrelated to one another, islands of conceptual probity whose work for liberalism depends on maintaining their autonomy. We might agree, therefore, that ‘most of the point of the novel is missed if one misses the internal relation between its concern with cruelty and with the possibilities of freedom, genuine community and truth. The novel seeks to exhibit how cruelty becomes commonplace in a world in which these three concepts no longer have a secure foothold.’.

However, the debate between Rorty and his critics has little chance of stopping here. Perhaps Rorty should adopt a more robust conception of literary truth, one that does not seek to convert the novel into a representation, but nevertheless captures what it is that enables us to gain a purchase on its world. Something, in other words, within the story – for instance, an honesty and sharpness of focus that permits true descriptions, or an obtuseness and dependence on rationalisation that weakens them. Where Rorty takes O’Brien as revealing how ‘intellectual gifts – intelligence, judgment, curiosity, imagination, a taste for beauty – are as malleable as the sexual instinct’, we want to query Orwell’s descriptions on their own terms. To us, philosophical interest in the novel emanates as much from its own descriptive power (or lack of it) as from the redescriptions of liberal ironists. Sometimes Orwell’s descriptions seemed to invite re-writing, at others the novel’s voice is decisive. The example that springs most obviously to mind is Orwell’s portrayal of Julia and her sexually frank relationship with Winston, a relationship that in Orwell’s hands does not seem truly convincing. Can this relationship mark a political challenge to O’Brien when Julia’s only significant notion of freedom is the freedom to fornicate? Recall Winston’s remark ‘You’re only a rebel from the waist downwards’ and Julia’s response: ‘she thought this brilliantly witty and flung her arms
round him in delight.’.24 Here the weaknesses in Orwell’s descriptions of love and friendship undermine the novel’s capacity to draw the moral philosopher in.

What is at stake in the novel is to be found in the novel’s own words rather than the redescription that the ironist brings to it. So, to take just one example, Nineteen Eighty-Four trumps Rorty’s interpretative framework in its descriptions of the proles. One of the novel’s crucial and most frightening themes is the possibility that language can be completely controlled. For Rorty it is the replacement of one vocabulary by another that opens up new ways of seeing. Nineteen Eighty-Four shows the converse of this by telling us what can be lost. Newspeak in displacing natural language is also an assault on freedom. Can such displacement ever be total? The Party stipulates that pollution does not exist, and, yet, look and see. Investigate the effects of the fumes in your lungs or the poisonous waste on your farms, your animals and your children. Language, too, is vulnerable to power only within the confines of the Party. Only intellectuals concern themselves with the logical mysteries of tautologies. Outside the Party, in the world of the ruled, the proles have to put up with the grammatical imprecision and linguistic distortions of Oldspeak, but its use appears richer, more reflective of the contingencies of language change that we find in life. Does Orwell desire to spare the proles the effort of worrying over $2 + 2 = 4$, or is it that in the survival of their vernacular he wants us to see a sign of hope?

In 1985, Anthony Burgess argues that complete control is as inherently unrealisable of a language as it is of a way of life. By way of illustrating making fun of the Party, Burgess comments ‘Big Brother, being the only deity, can be invoked when we hit a thumb with a hammer or get caught in the rain. This is bound to diminish him.’.25 Here is a sense in which Nineteen Eighty-Four slips from Rorty’s grasp. For the notion of linguistic change outside the Party’s orbit is something that Rorty’s ironic redescription cannot afford to miss. Not only is it essential to the novel, it also challenges the non-realist assumptions that Rorty brings to it. Moreover, it can be read as the best route to topple O’Brien.

A non-realist reading of Orwell’s novel is suspect in other ways. For Nineteen Eighty-Four is a dystopia and as such bears multiple connections with actuality that are hard to explain in terms derived exclusively from realism. The novel’s imaginative reach so obviously transcends its chronological title. Neither does its impact on ethics depend on its world being realisable in any strict sense. It is not a
portrait of an existing society, but it does draw on actual features of its author’s time to extend them to human hopes and fears generally. 1948 is metaphysically projected to become 1984. While not being a prediction or even an expectation of what will happen, the novel operates as a mode of apprehension, pointing to the totalitarian tendencies in the uses of power in all societies.

It is the sting in the tale with irony that makes us see its reversals as true. Orwell’s novel is thickly populated with redescription. The Ministry in which Winston is cruelly tortured and his spirit taken apart is the Ministry of Love; the Ministry of Peace plans for future wars; and Julia is employed at ‘Pornosec, the sub-section of the Fiction Department which turned out cheap pornography for distribution among the proles.’ How can these ironies be themselves ironically redescribed? We might usefully recall Nussbaum’s work on The Princess Casamassima. Would it have made sense in terms of irony for Hyacinth Robinson to be redescribed as a rational calculator plotting his political strategies prudently and objectively, leaving no consequence unhearsed, no choice unexamined? Surely, liberal irony must depend on the text being to some degree unalterable as comedy depends on the straight man or the innovative design the old. Rorty uses the liberal metaphysician as a stooge, but in his treatment of Nineteen Eighty-Four this move fails. A similar tactic is at work in Rorty’s commentary on Nabokov’s Lolita. Can Humbert Humbert’s aesthetic enthusiasms be read as a form of idealism or does the pervasive and expansive irony in the novel leave the liberal ironist with nothing to be ironic about?
Reflection on ethics and literature is an education in contrasts. Winch treats the novel as a source of examples, important because of their capacity to throw philosophical argument about moral life into relief. Nussbaum, in her predominant mode, sees literature as essential to the central question of ethics – what kind of life should I/we live? Rorty turns to the novel as an edifying example, a distinctive and often unsettling way of increasing our sensitivity to others, and possibly, our solidarity with them. But what is it for moral philosophers to find a novel edifying? To be edified is not merely to be entertained or amused, even though both may contribute to instruction. An edifying example is not the same as one that convinces. Indeed, in the sceptical ironist vocabulary the phrase “you’ve convinced me” looks unwanted, as neither necessary nor welcome.

For Rorty, examples teach through their power of redescription. It is the ironists’ awareness of this that marks them off from the metaphysician. So fables and novels have a particular attraction because they invite us to see the usual in terms of the not so usual. In the criss-crossing of vocabularies Rorty finds the mainstay of a liberal aesthetics. Not that he is ungenerous in giving instances of redescription. It is going on when, as he puts it, the Founding Fathers asked people to think of themselves as citizens of the Republic rather than ‘Pennsylvanian Quakers or Catholic Marylanders’.¹ We find it, too, when we are asked to think ‘of the world as rebounding atoms’² or, with Copernicus, ‘of the sun as at rest.’³ Redescription is a device for catching the attention. It helps liberal ironists appreciate the contingency of their beliefs. It shows them just how vulnerable human beings are when as children, for example, their toys, as things irreplaceably precious, are ‘redescribed as “trash”, and thrown away, or
made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child.'

From this perspective, a moral education is not a matter of learning a universal vocabulary, but rather of noticing what people are experiencing when they are humiliated, say, or treated cruelly. What a close imaginative acquaintance with literature achieves is, in effect, a more inclusive recognition of moral possibilities. Thus, a novel by Nabokov, in Rorty’s view, provides ‘the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves.’

The appeal of redescriptions to liberal ironists should not come as a great surprise. Not all redescription is ironic, and, yet, we know that some must at least be so for the reversals of meaning found in irony to do their work. Redescription is the device that suits liberal ironists as reflective equilibrium suits liberal perfectionists. Remember the irony with which Socrates draws innocent truth seekers into philosophy by disclaiming that he has anything to teach. The issue that faces us, however, is not the potency of irony for philosophy alone. It is rather the meaning of what is said when one vocabulary is placed under the rubric of another. Do novels and works of philosophy stand to each other as friends whose occasional errant redescriptions can be taken on trust, or is the gulf too wide even for irony to bridge?

In relation to Nabokov’s *Lolita* – for this is one of the novels by Nabokov that Rorty comments on – the question is pointed, not to say barbed. What Rorty sees in the novel is ‘the possibility that there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets – masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering.’ But against that we need to set Nabokov’s assertion that ‘*Lolita* has no moral in tow.’ Neither philosopher nor writer speaks of moral condemnation as exclusively a matter of the intellect. Neither sees goodness as safely located in a set of common-sense beliefs about how human beings are constructed, a framework of abstract principle that guards against excess and contradiction. What separates them, however, is the philosopher’s determination to discard the writer’s aestheticism. Nabokov’s statement, almost his artistic credo, that ‘the work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me aesthetic bliss’, Rorty dismisses as ‘aestheticist rhetoric.’ By wanting to pack into ‘aesthetic bliss’ the notions of ‘curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy’, Nabokov merely glosses a standard way of yielding to metaphysical temptation. The result is a false reconciliation between morality and art, and the elevation of the artist to a realm where true contact with
life is lost. Disconnecting the novel from the manifesto Rorty believes to be the best way of releasing its value to ethics. For the novel offers knowledge of moral possibilities that the metaphysical entreaty succeeds only in repressing. Artistic delight and tenderness are not just distinguishable, ‘but tend to preclude each other.’.\textsuperscript{11}

Can an indifference to others, amounting to cruelty towards them, be intrinsic to the pursuit of autonomy? How does Rorty express it? The phrase he uses to describe Humbert is a ‘monster of incuriosity’,\textsuperscript{12} but why a monster and what is he neglectful of knowing? In plain terms the answer is all too obvious. Humbert is an obsessive abuser of young girls who goes to any lengths to satisfy his desires. He is a corrupter who is indifferent to the lives of those he corrupts, a desecrator who is blind to the effects of his designs. And, yet, if we want to take from the novel what the philosopher takes, plain terms will not be enough. Weaknesses in the language of autonomy certainly capture something of the obtuseness involved. We might think of Hegel’s example of the individual who prizes moral autonomy so highly that nothing is allowed to interfere with keeping their conscience clean. Consider, also, Rorty’s reference to Mrs Jellyby in Dickens’ \textit{Bleak House}, whose single-minded dedication to ‘Telescopic Philanthropy’ leads her to become impervious to the needs of those closest to her. Extending autonomy to others is so pressing a requirement to her that she simply does not see her own children as starving drudges. Plain language is tested by these cases. From being one value among others autonomy is now asked to become the sole moral end, a guarantee of rectitude. Autonomy, however, cannot bear the weight. Taken too far it results in moral paradox.

In \textit{Lolita} autonomy is just one piece of a more complicated jigsaw. Humbert is not merely a monster who is cruel out of sexual obsession. Humbert is a creative artist who represents his mania in terms that are anything but plain. His terrible story is told sublimely in prose of such entrancing, seductive power that the act of reading itself almost becomes a transgression. If there is more than a hint of paradox here its source must be metaphysical. This comes from the urge to make concern for the welfare of another a part of bliss, a touchstone of the ‘spine and its tingle’. A comment of Rorty’s ironically exposes the unintended consequences of Nabokov’s aesthetic manifesto. If ordinary readers were to allow such fancies then, he writes, ‘the curious sensitive artist will be the paradigm of morality because he is the one who always notices everything.’.\textsuperscript{13} Separating the novel from the aesthetic theory of morality is another way of resisting metaphysics. The
novel tells us poetically what we know already from life, that bliss and kindness are often at odds. Nabokov effectively reinforces the point through irony, through portraying Humbert as if his aesthetic idealism were true. Irony mostly gains its effects from deflation. In this case, it just happens to be the metaphysician who feels its force.

Perhaps ironies are a bit like jokes, lost in the explaining if you don’t get the point first time. Indeed, getting to grips with the mechanisms of irony is a useful exercise in aesthetics because it helps us to understand and so to criticise Rorty’s doctrine of redescription. Nabokov writes of the novel, ‘he who seeks treasures examines every thread’, a remark he makes during a discussion of Bleak House, a novel whose themes are interestingly adjacent to philosophical readings of Lolita. Exploring these common threads might offer opportunities for amplifying our responses to Rorty. There is, of course, the theme of childhood made miserable by social deprivation or by the avoidable actions of others. But there is also the theme of childhood used as a disguise, childhood falsely presented by hiding behind a role of childlike innocence and natural playfulness in order to deceive. Skimpole in Dickens’ novel is this kind of figure, one who preys upon others out of his own contrived sense of vulnerability and charm. As Jarndyce describes him, Skimpole ‘in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, he is a perfect child. He is an artist, too; an Amateur, but might have been a Professional.’

This is a persona that touches our imagination. It is important that what Skimpole represents cannot be understood in isolation either from the motives behind his mask or from its effect on others. Indeed, it is a significant feature of Dickens’ method that it reveals the corruption in Skimpole by the power of contrasting description. Thus, Esther’s description tells us that his charm is both entertaining and cheap. Behind the fanciful appearances of the poetaster lie selfishness and cruelty. Skimpole is a man who pretends to be a child, and in this portrait Dickens succeeds in throwing into precise relief the state of those actual children in the novel who through necessity of circumstance have been forced prematurely to take on the responsibilities of adults. Skimpole is in reality a sponger and a betrayer, a parody of the good.

Surely, it is the presence of such bedrock descriptions – cruelty, selfishness, a childhood that is not a travesty, a genuine interest in the welfare of others – that makes the distinctive nature of Skimpole’s vanity drive hard into our imagination. Surely, these notions can not be re-written, cannot be asked to drop out. Rorty in his commentary
on Nineteen Eighty-Four insists that ‘truth and falsity drop out.’ Here
is a clear indication of just how easily a complicity in realist ways of
looking at the world can distort a reading of a novel. With his com-
mentary on Lolita the same concern applies. For one of irony’s most
skilful operations is missed if it is thought to sanction indefinite
redescription. Even Skimpole, at his most posturing and manipulative,
cannot choose limitless role-playing. Skimpole cannot allow anything
to determine minute by minute who he is. Redescription that is ironic
depends on there being truths in its neighbourhood that inspire our
trust. Without the nature of the man behind the rhetoric there would
be nothing for irony to trade off and, hence, nothing for the ironist
reader to see.

For liberal ironists, fictional discourse follows no single logical
model, either the discovery of fact or a representation of an underlying
reality. Liberal ironists are untroubled by reading one text in terms of
another, even if this leads them to treat one vocabulary as if its major
terms were optional. There is an obvious danger in this way of reading.
It risks emasculating irony of all intellectual fixtures and fittings, so
threatening to undermine its point. Ironies in literature and life com-
monly pursue their quarry in crowds, multiple layers of meaning draw-
ing their readers in. There is an example in a work by D. J. Enright. It
seems that it is the practice in Thailand to acquire merit in the eyes of
the Buddha by buying caged birds in a street market and then setting
them free. However, one common explanation for this has it that the
birds are actually trained to return to the vendor, who then resells
them. As Enright remarks, if the popular theory is true and if the pious
purchaser is ignorant of it or simply does not believe it, then irony has
located a well-meaning dupe whose merit is protected by his inno-
cence. But there is an additional irony that is closer to the bone, for if
the purchaser is seeking to gain merit on the cheap, ignoring the fate
of the birds, then, as Enright comments, ‘he has ended up a few coins
poorer, as he richly deserves. Or – if the theory is untrue – still better,
or worse: he has brought about the release of the birds who would fare
better in captivity since someone further along in the market will snare
them and roast them for eating. No merit there.’

The layers of irony in Enright’s useful anecdote introduce us to com-
plexities of intention and circumstance that do not necessarily cancel
each other out. In Lolita, too, enmeshing and multiple ironies con-
tribute to the trickiness of the text, turning it almost into a hall of
mirrors, making us reflect hard on our own expectations. Nabokov is a
mischievous sponsor of openness, who deliberately seeks the narrow
path between permissiveness of interpretation and narrative closure. Of the novel’s many suggestive paradoxes, we might single out the conjunction in Humbert of art and cruelty. He is akin to Skimpole in being ‘one of the devil’s allies’, but Humbert’s aesthetic sensibility is genuine whereas Skimpole simply pretends to an artistic ability he does not possess. So Humbert’s prose moves us to tears while his desires repel utterly. *Lolita*, for many obvious reasons, has been called a novel of loss. We find in its pages great literary beauty, detached, however, from a conspicuous sense of tenderness and decency. Humbert’s illicit love sends these virtues underground by turning them into techniques of gratification, more or less complicated means of getting what he wants. The novel also tells us that the attempt to articulate a synthesis between art and morality is only idle speculation, representing human aspirations as more united than they are, or could be. Human beings can be attentive and cold, sensitive and indifferent, creators of bliss and instigators of ugliness.

Readers of *Lolita* find themselves asking if they have become too entranced by the seductive language with which Humbert paints his point of view. When this happens, irony is our friend because it permits a moral breathing space from the narrative, a perspective from which Humbert’s evil can be recognised and displayed. With enthusiasm, we pore over the text for signs that Humbert has come to a realisation of what he has done. To help us, Nabokov allows irony to release its sting gradually. At times, Humbert’s responsibility simply stares out at us. At others, contingent attributes of personality seem in some degree to save him. On these occasions it strikes us that Humbert is an odd kind of monster – he can be funny and self-aware, he can be academic and pedantic, or charming and absurd. Is it possible for these traits of character to act as a hindrance to his obsession? Nothing like a single virtue blocking the implementation of evil, but rather the way forgetfulness or impracticality stall even a plan that has been carefully and thoroughly formulated. Is there a moral equivalent of the hidden hand, a mechanism that works against Humbert’s will despite his best efforts to enforce it? Sometimes we might think that Nabokov’s portrayal of adolescent freedoms gives us what we want, but, then, we realise that this would change Humbert forever. Far from being a knowing sexual predator he would then become an alien, hugely at a loss among the winks and nods of youth. Humbert would be a relic of some erotic ancien régime, adrift in a world in which Lolita has already been corrupted, a world in which she is not as he dreams her to be.
Why does Rorty insist in his essay on Orwell that the realist notion of truth be discarded from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? On his view, liberal ironists find ethical value in the novel only if its metaphysical assumptions are set aside. Realism is so much intellectual lumber, best not recycled but scrapped completely. The novel comes alive to liberal ironists only when it is kept separate from its author’s general ideas.

But, then, can we turn these points against Rorty? A novel like *Lolita*, Rorty argues, alerts us to suffering less through explicit focus than by drawing our attention to another’s indifference. Humbert’s preoccupation with his own desires tells us more about Lolita as the exploited object of those desires than if her pain had been portrayed directly or if genuine concern for her had been shown somewhere along the way. Can the method of liberal irony capture this? We have no prior commitment to the idea that cruelty cannot be condemned without the support of external reasons. We simply want to know if liberal irony possesses the resources to notice what cruelty is.

To pursue these questions imagine two instances of irony at work, one from my own experience, the other from *Lolita*. I recall once skillfully avoiding the labour involved in being an expert member of a committee, only to discover later that the committee also needed an independent voice to assess its conclusions. As the only expert left, I was given little choice but to accept, so ending up with more work than I would have had if I had agreed to sit on the committee in the first place. One of life’s medium size ironies, I thought at the time, promising that in future I would not allow my will to make deals with my knowledge. In *Lolita*, too, a moral emerges as a result of irony. Here the twist is that Humbert discovers the source of his transgression only when he tries to express his self-directed vice in the other-directed language of love. Readers should examine the famous passage at the end of Humbert’s narrative in which he comes close to an expression of remorse for what he has done, ‘Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic — knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.’

One philosophical commentator on the novel shows clearly how close Humbert’s state of mind is to contradiction. He writes, ‘Humbert’s tragedy is to love someone whose affection for him he has systematically obliterated. He makes contact with reality far too late in the day to avert this tragedy. Driven by sexual and aesthetic obsession, he
makes impossible the only thing that could complete the miserable arc of his life.’.\textsuperscript{20}

Does the method of liberal irony help us to understand what is happening in these cases? In Rorty’s view, irony is ‘reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.’.\textsuperscript{21} Just as the comic needs the straight man so does the ironist need the metaphysician, but in \textit{Lolita} irony is not set against metaphysical speculation for the simple reason that no such ambition exists. There is no detailed physical sexual description for the ironist to be ironic about. Neither is there any reliance on theories of sexual deviance, except to paint their authors as figures of satirical fun, scientists of the animal urge whose pretensions are readily exposed. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which the irony in the novel makes the liberal ironist redundant. For either the novel speaks in its own voice, in which case the liberal ironist must bear the experience of remaining silent, or the liberal ironist chats away, piling irony on irony, so destroying what the novel has to say. In this respect, liberal irony is oddly inelastic. As reactive only, it seems to foreclose on what we want to see in the novel, so damaging our sense of its variety. The absence of a straight man equivalent in the novel should not, therefore, give us too much cause for sorrow. Nevertheless, it makes us realise that liberal ironists cannot stand to the novel as they do to metaphysics, or, at the very least, if they were to do so it would have to be a most distinctive kind of novel. With this conclusion in mind we might turn to the redescriptive element in liberal irony for a possible solution.

In one of Rorty’s works, there is a crystal clear statement of Rorty’s expectations regarding irony. He writes, ‘for us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original.’.\textsuperscript{22} Can this explain even the slight example of irony drawn from my own life? Surely, if my unwillingness to take on the committee work were to be redescribed as the tactic of a self-absorbed person, a gamble made because I wanted sole responsibility for judging the committee’s findings, then all irony would be lost. As it would be in Nabokov’s novel, too, if Quilty and not Humbert were to be taken as the hinge on which Lolita’s fate turns. For Quilty is the follower behind the scenes, the hidden manipulator of events whose identity the author hints at, but only gradually reveals. His mystery is, however, plain rather than
ironic. Quilty is the dangerous watcher in the shadows whose past victories will never be crowned either by aestheticism or love. Whereas Humbert is hopelessly in love, Quilty is a hopeless degenerate, a scheming pornographer. As Lolita with infinite sadness tells Humbert when he encounters her after a long separation, Quilty ‘broke my heart. You merely broke my life.’. 23

When examples depend on irony to be edifying trouble ensues. We can look once more at Enright’s pleasing work to uncover a story that should make liberal ironists more alert to the sting in irony’s tale, and, hence, to the defence it contains against a surfeit of redescription. A clergyman, who congratulates a Wiltshire gardener on successfully clearing some land with, ‘you have done well, my man, with God’s help’, receives the reply, ‘you should have seen this place, Vicar, when God had it to Hisself.’. 24 An irony, we might reflect, that is no less successful if unintended. For one of the many oddities surrounding irony is that it depends on the knowledge it wants to debunk. In Rorty’s work, irony is often an effective way of puncturing metaphysical ambition, but it can also instruct liberal ironists as to their close involvement in the pictures they want to overthrow. Here irony’s debunking effect is more forgiving of foolishness than scornful of it. Whether ironies are cruel or habitual, precision comes from some meanings holding their ground.

For some time we have been aware that the ethical significance of the novel is not bound up with telling the reader what they ought to do. The novel is not the kind of sign that leads one to perform immediate action or indicates the direction one ought to take. In part this reflects the resistance of life to ethical operational briefings, but it arises also because casuistical views of the text result in travesty. The novel is not a decent sign to readers because on the road to somewhere they find themselves lost or off the beaten track. Nor should readers look to fictional characters for a representation of abstract ideas. This would instantly transform figures in the novel from agents who have lives of their own to sandwich board creations interesting only for the slogans they carry. In this respect, there is more common ground between ethics and the novel than we might think. To explore a literary text philosophically is a matter of giving up the quest for single dimensions of meaning and attending closely to comparison, nuance and ambiguity. It is through such modes, of course, that irony communicates. They are the essential mechanisms whereby the false is made to appear true. In comedy laughter piles upon laughter almost arithmetically until a moment is reached,
indefinable, but hard to miss, when it is realised that someone is milking the joke. Tragedy draws us in through tension and the suffering involved in irresolvable conflict. Neither, however, proceeds necessarily by stealth as irony does.

Socratic irony, for example, startles us by trading off a juxtaposition of knowledge and ignorance. About this ignorance Socrates is utterly serious since it gives him the weapon for puncturing claims to knowledge. On the other hand, at least in the case of his own death, his ignorance precludes seriousness because it is in life that he believes the tests that matter are found. A remark by Kierkegaard is apposite: ‘irony is the infinitely light playing with nothing that is not terrified by it but even rises to the surface on occasion.’ To be resistant to irony, therefore, is to expect from Socrates a deliberate intention to overcome his ignorance. As with the Vicar in Enright’s example, it is not to know that you have been stung. Or, if in my own case, I had closed my mind to the instruction that irony presents. Or, again, if Humbert is read plainly as either a paedophile or an artist.

In other words, irony in all these cases is the most precise tool available. By portraying Humbert as an aesthetic idealist Nabokov successfully brings his cruel reality into sharper focus. More literal minded moralists should not complain when artful textual management produces the condemnation they seek. For what *Lolita* shows is that once Nabokov’s aestheticism has been set aside, no necessary opposition exists between aesthetic merit and the expression of moral truth. Moral philosophers do not have to become moralists, nor do they have to subscribe to Nabokov’s aesthetic project and with it his teasing assertion that his book ‘has no moral in tow.’ And, yet, for one commentator, ‘Humbert’s lacquered version of events’ remains an acute philosophical problem.

At issue here is the role of ambiguity in the novel when it is read in a voice other than its own. Ethics requires its procedures and conclusions to be stated clearly, to be free from ambiguity. Liberal ironists who find the theoretical stance repugnant should be no more attracted to equivocation and obscurity than any other ethical perspective, possibly even less so when their emphasis on redescription is born in mind. In the novel, however, ambiguity is not so straightforwardly proscribed. For ambiguity is not only an essential feature of the novelist’s stock in trade by, for example, furnishing control over the revelation of motive, it is also a vital characteristic of life. So Humbert’s narrative, as frequently self-serving and inaccurate, gives readers a positive invitation to be suspicious. Ambiguities seem too cunningly contrived to be
believed completely. Equivocation is too tendentious to be an artless comment reflecting lack of foresight or thought. Nabokov must bear responsibility here. Hence, some believe that the decreasing ambiguity in the way Humbert talks about what he is doing is a measure of the self-awareness that will eventually lead him to contrition. But for others his promise to bestow on Lolita literary immortality will always be suspect since, as one writer on the novel puts it, ‘only notional creatures can find solace in the immortality offered by sonneteers and portrait artists eager for exorbitant commissions.’ 27

In Rorty’s commentary on *Lolita* the notion of an ideal readership for the novel catches his imagination. Nabokov wants his readers to be like ‘a lot of little Nabokovs’ 28 who devote as much attentiveness to the clues in the novel as its author did in laying them down. However, when one vocabulary is overlaid on another, what constitutes a clue is likely to become an increasingly open question. The novel’s deliberate ambiguities are filtered through the net of philosophical opinion that the liberal ironist brings to it. Indeed, one good reason for liberals’ hesitating in the face of Humbert’s offer of immortality is that they are not interested in the pleasures of a supposedly lasting aesthetic bliss, but in sufferings experienced in the here and now. Rorty intends irony to be reconciled with liberal hope, and to this end in standard liberal fashion he distinguishes between public and private vocabularies. One of Rorty’s critics puts his distinction well, ‘public vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our answering to each other; private vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our each answering to ourselves.’ 29 In literature, too, in Rorty’s view, we can separate works that explore autonomy from those that extend our grasp of cruelty. And, again, within this last category, once more in archetypal liberal terms, Rorty distinguishes novels that show the effects of social and political arrangements from those that reveal the consequences for others of private idiosyncrasy, obsession or fantasy. As Rorty wants us to, we read *Lolita* in the light of this classification. It is a book that shows ‘how our attempts at autonomy, our private obsessions with the achievement of a certain kind of perfection, may make us oblivious to the pain and humiliation we are causing. They are the books which dramatise the conflict between duties to self and duties to others.’ 30

We should note how close this language is to a traditional liberal vocabulary. Hobbes, too, formulates liberalism so that it maximises freedom and minimises fear. But where Hobbesian individuals fear death, premature and violent, liberal ironists fear cruelty, a highly specialised and socially virulent form of disregard. For liberal ironists, the
public/private split is neither a reflection of nature nor the result of contractual agreement between individuals presumed to be of a certain psychological type. Rather, it is simply the best way liberals now have of charting their lives in terms of noticing and indifference, attentiveness and self-regard.

Nabokov’s novel stands in complex relation to these aspirations. Where the ironist in the liberal ironist relishes the challenge of the text’s ambiguities, the liberal may be extremely resentful, looking instead to codification and principle. Indeed, there is an affinity between the liberal ironist’s terminology and the basic liberal position on the limits of liberty as, for instance, it is analysed by John Stuart Mill. For plain speaking liberals, cruelty can demand legal intervention in addition to moral condemnation and this in turn, as Mill knows well, presupposes a reasonably secure and clear principle against which proposals for state intervention can be tested. Literary ambiguities have only a marginal bearing on this kind of political thinking. Mill is as aware as any liberal ironist that principles may collide with practice. He is alert to the possibility that some kinds of intervention may be justified even though the principle on which intervention is based is silent. As much as any ironist he thinks of individuals as social beings whose use of language reveals nuance as well as explicitness, cultural shading as well as stringent design. Hard cases, we are told, make bad law, but ambiguity actually defeats the law’s purpose by shrouding it in mystery. For some moral philosophers, ambiguity makes bad principle, too, but ambiguity in the law’s construction threatens rights and obligations where the need for publicity is paramount.

Sometimes we sense that reading the novel under the rubric of liberal irony is less of an escape from theory than Rorty intends. Of course, Rorty wants more from the novel than merely an example that confirms or refutes an independently derived philosophical theory. He has no interest in theories as modes of human understanding in any case, and regards squaring the novel’s voice with liberal theory as nothing more than a pseudo-problem. And, yet, Rorty should not be allowed to be cavalier about his debt to liberalism. His picture of public and private goods as incommensurable at the level of theory, as simply different kinds of lever for dealing with different human capacities as the need arises, is more reflective of standard liberal theory than he is prepared to admit. Beneath the ornate fresco of liberal irony lies the dull but necessary plaster of conventional liberalism. Would it not be ironic if Rorty had returned from his ambassadorial excursions into
continental philosophy only to discover that his real debt had been to the American Founding Fathers all along?

It is time to draw together some of the strands that make up a liberal ironist response to literature. For liberal ironists the novel’s ethical riches do not come to philosophy as counter examples to theories, nor as sources of illustration from life. Learning from the novel involves listening for a predominant tone of voice. *Lolita* probes one form of cruelty through irony, so sharpening our understanding of obsession while allowing literary reflexivity the freedom to orbit alone. Rorty puts what he has learned from the novel in the following way, ‘the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering.’ Thus, the novel’s edifying purpose is not external to it, but necessarily bound up with its narrative and tone. An exploration of one variety of aestheticism and the moral dangers that ensue is shot through, as it is in the figure of the Kasbeam barber, with incongruity, with delicate and hidden clues about the emotions that are easily missed. As readers we notice what Humbert signally fails to by standing at his shoulder during his journey, attending to characters both on and off the novel’s stage, some exciting our curiosity from the barest mention, others by our coming to live with them in intimacy and detail.

In representing *Lolita* as a triumphant protest against the novel’s treatment as a devised example, we can be fairly certain of our ground. Contemplating *Lolita* as a text to be redesigned to meet the needs of the philosophical arguments at hand is surely not what Rorty has in mind by redescription. Philosophical discussion, as Rorty understands it, follows the model of a conversation. It is not a Babel in which all meaning goes undetected because no one voice is distinguishable from any other. We have noticed how keenly Rorty deciphers Lolita’s world, how carefully he attends to the novel’s ethical signature, how robustly, and, rightly, in our view, he places its author’s aesthetic theories aside. And, yet, all this is achieved without any entry into the novel’s world. No crossing of boundaries between life and art takes place. Does Nabokov’s novel discourage, or even prohibit, travel between vocabularies? Or is it simply that Rorty has no philosophical purpose for doing so? Unlike Winch who is prepared to ask what he would have decided in a fictional character’s place, Rorty appears reluctant to make any such move, apart that is from elucidating the general theme of moral attentiveness. Winch’s question is obviously significant as a way
of furthering his exploration of moral universizability. But it seems to imply, too, a redescription of the novel since it invites us to imagine Winch’s feelings in the circumstances that face Vere, the reasons he may have given to support his decision and how he would have dealt with the consequences that ensue.

By steering clear of close involvement in fictional worlds Rorty seems to side with common sense. Intelligible questions about our responses to the novel always concern the ways it is read by us. They do not run in the opposite direction, to a concern with the impact of our responses on the novel. We are interested in how literature can affect our lives, how it can influence us, possibly by bringing about moral changes in the way we think or act. It is this assumption that lies behind characteristic liberal concerns with the novel as an endorsement of a point of view or a kind of behaviour. But try to redescribe Humbert as a possible object of personal moral criticism and you are unlikely to make much progress. You can no more redescribe Humbert in these terms than you can think of Steerforth as an object of your love or Iago of your hate. While Iago shows vividly what malice towards another is, there is no possibility of being malicious towards him. Whatever the power of redescription as a lever for the pragmatic adjustment of diverse vocabularies it cannot extend, say, to mounting an actual prosecution of Bill Sikes for his treatment of Nancy or of Thérèse Raquin for being an accessory to murder. It is a feature of emotional responses to the lives of characters in the novel that they are immediate. To consider them on their own terms, so to speak, we might look at an imaginary reader’s reaction to *Lolita*, a kind of ‘virtual diary’ in which her feelings are recorded in relation to the novel. What would this look like?

‘My despair at the tragedy that Humbert is enacting is real and I want desperately to warn him of the consequences of living his obsessions both for himself and others. I know, however, that offering help or advice is unavailable to me since Humbert cannot change his ways from anything that I might say. He will never defend himself against my rebukes nor will I ever hear him answering back or going on the offensive against me. Sometimes I wish that Nabokov had written the novel so that Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s mother, was more like me, diligent and acute, more knowing of the sexual motivation of others, streetwise in translating her feelings of revulsion into action by, say, heading Humbert off into less harmful pursuits. I am sadly aware, however, that a change such as this would make an unlikely improvement to the novel and, in any case, I know that Nabokov’s imaginative
reach has no difficulty in keeping a step ahead of conventional responses like mine. If I cannot criticise Humbert directly, as I certainly would someone in life, perhaps I can vent my feelings on what he represents. If my critical journey into the novel’s world is fated never to start then I must look elsewhere for a link between the emotions that I know I am experiencing and their fictional source.

I want to see Humbert as representing an idea of cruelty that transcends the novel and which can be scrutinised on its own terms. This would not only give me a target for appraisal: it would allow me to make the connection between criticism and action that I normally find in life. I could make the criticism and do something about it. My problem is that this representational move leaves the novel’s voice muted. Why should I assume that others share my view of what makes Humbert what he is? Different vocabularies find their own distinct meanings in his behaviour. While some may classify him as a sexual deviant to be treated as one would any sufferer of a pathological condition, others think of him as morally culpable, acutely aware and responsible for his actions. Some vocabularies focus on the novel itself, even reading it as an endorsement of the idea it portrays, so converting the novel into an object not only of straightforward criticism, but also of possible censorship. Perhaps I can still think of Humbert as the embodiment of an idea if I use it as a measure of his personal collapse. Now I am not checking a fictional figure against an original outside the novel, but the original in the novel against the idea it has of itself. But I think that in both cases the mistake is the same. Humbert is not a literary extension of an idea whose most complete formulation is always elsewhere. He is not a wrecked version of fully operational nymphomania, but a unique creation that needs no supporting reality either within the novel or beyond it to draw my moral imagination in.’.

So we might consider that Rorty is right to be reticent. Criticism of the conduct of fictional characters makes no sense either as a redescription of what they are assumed to represent or in terms of their lives in the novel. But what kind of mistake has our imaginary reader made by attempting such criticism? Is it that there is something lacking in the vocabulary of fiction that is ever present in life? Or that moral criticism of fictional characters is not a possible species of practical attitude?

Liberal ironists do not look to the facts for corroboration of the novel’s ethical riches. Nor do they understand the novel as a representation of anything beyond itself. It seems to them, therefore, that our reader has simply got her wires crossed. But what kind of mistake has she made? It is surely not like the mistake of Miss Havisham in
Dickens’ *Great Expectations* who wants to stop time out of pique. To live like Miss Havisham perpetually in sight of her own bitterness is a horror we are glad that we do not have to face. In the novel we read a credible story about how Miss Havisham’s terrible psychological state arises, but we need no such explanation. We simply want to know how far redescription can be taken. Nabokov brings Humbert to life. He conjures up a world and contrives to make us believe in it. But he has no interest at all in frustrating us, in making us irritable at our inactivity. There can be no frustration because there is no possibility of action being blocked, suppressed or not discharged. Where in life we find fear followed by action – say, that of a soldier facing the enemy for the first time standing firm or running in terror – in our responses to the novel our emotions fend for themselves.

So attempts to superimpose a vocabulary of practical life on literature invariably result in confusion and mystification. Compassionate readers who shed tears at the fate of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, but in life are sternly cautious of pity are not then necessarily inconsistent, still less need we regard them as little Skimpoles, taking pleasure from trying to persuade us that their fancies are the only reality.

Rorty’s redescription of the Marylanders as citizens of the republic is at least one that makes sense. It can also be seen as a confirmation of their own self-descriptions since a federal way of proceeding in politics might be one they have a right to expect. But a redescription of a fictional character from outside the novel has as much sense as Miss Havisham’s attempt to live in the past. Liberal ironists wish to maintain a sceptical stance in ethics while avoiding the relativism often associated with it. The method of redescription finds its work in the context of plural and diverse vocabularies that vary widely in terms of sense and possibility. Rorty pictures moral philosophers as moving pragmatically between private and public realms with as much facility as they display in transferring between ethics and the novel. At stake here is the capacity of the novel to furnish knowledge of moral concepts. It is to ask what makes the novel’s descriptions work. What is it about the novel’s world that makes it convincing? What draws the liberal ironist in?
One of the strengths of redescription is its capacity to alter the perspective, to so radically move the line of vision that we are shocked into changing our view. This is what Rorty has in mind when he speaks of learning about institutional cruelty from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the cruelty inherent in the pursuit of private bliss from *Lolita*. There is no hint in this of a cognitive free for all. For a redescription to be liberating there must at least be some description that has held us captive, some way of looking at moral experience from whose grip we are thankful to be released. But the power of redescription is, like all power, vulnerable to abuse. It is akin to metaphor in being able both to open our eyes to the awareness of possibilities and to close them. As Bambrough comments of liberating descriptions, ‘whatever can achieve this shift will also be capable of misleading us; the more useful, the less life-like, and the less life-like the more dangerous to the just apprehension of one who is no longer or not yet suffering from the passive or distorted vision that it is calculated or inspired to rectify.’

When the redescriptions at stake stem from the contrasting vocabularies of ethics and the novel, what frees and what obscures become complex questions. We have not ignored the commonly held view that ethics holds the promise of a critical attitude to life. Throughout its history ethics has been preoccupied with the search for a criterion of right conduct. In both its Kantian and utilitarian forms moral philosophy has aimed at the construction of a standard against which action can be measured. So in politics, for example, ethics looks for a norm of justice according to which actual institutional arrangements can be judged. The focus, in other words, is action and how it can be assessed.
This picture of moral philosophy as action guiding goes very deep. Without the possibility of criticism ethics is blunted, its reason for existence weakened. But one sure consequence of thinking of ethics as practical is the underlining of its distance from the novel. For it is the essence of the practical attitude to want to make its criticism effective in the world. The practical attitude expects intransigence and knows how to deal with it. The risks it encounters are those of trespass, and the gains it hopes for are those of mutual benefit and tangible reward. The practical attitude turns on reciprocity and the achievement of ends. It positively demands replies to its criticisms and it thrives on debate. A practical ethics is not averse to literary criticism so long as it does not harbour ambitions beyond its means. It welcomes estimations of the novel that proceed on the novel’s terms alone because they make no presumption regarding practice and they do not attempt to pass themselves off as life guiding when they are not. Critical scrutiny of the novel’s constructed world will attend to the depth of its descriptions, the sincerity of its tone of voice or the strength and persuasiveness of its narrative. However, when the novel is read as a text in practical ethics it is practical criticism that is the first fatality.

As readers, we commonly need little persuasion to laugh with Pickwick or to cry tears of pity at the fate of Antigone. We find ourselves completely involved, almost at the mercy of the writer’s descriptions. The reader asks what she would have done if she had been Mrs Bardell faced by Pickwick’s unintended offer of marriage. Would she have brought an action for breach of promise? Dickens makes us understand why a woman like Mrs Bardell would act as she did. He makes us realise, too, how Pickwick’s discomfort can be made to appear funny. But nothing in the novel enables the reader to say ‘he’s not the man for me’ or ‘I’ll make him pay’ or ‘I must make it easy for him since he didn’t mean what he said’, as she might in life. Should moral philosophers stop behaving like readers, however sophisticated their grasp of the appropriate response to a work of art? Then, at least, they could regain the conventional ethical concentration on life by addressing the moral problems found in life, such as boundary issues between life and death in medical ethics or slippery slope questions in political morality. In these areas, ethical criticism can matter. It aims to make a difference to the decisions individuals reach, to the way they behave. Or should moral philosophers step aside from ethics as a source of practical criticism? For then, at least from the perspective of life, both philosophy and art can be pictured as strategies of avoidance,
of abstention from propositional knowledge, from instruction, from the general idea.

The ways moral philosophers answer these questions will largely depend on the assumptions about ethics that are brought to them. Moral philosophy thrives on examples. They prevent ethics from losing sight of life. And, yet, in the history of ethics it is the power of the general idea that has proved tempting. It is the discovery of the key to moral reality, to the source of our obligations and the nature of their demands that exerts the fascination. So, for example, utilitarianism aims to expose the structure of moral thinking and to tell us that we would be better human beings if we followed its precepts. Utilitarianism, however, bears an awkward relationship to the novel. When life proves obstinate in the face of utilitarian demands it is simply posing another problem for the theory to solve. So utilitarians might try to meet the argument that their basic claims are too demanding by formulating supplementary principles of fairness that satisfy both the requirements of benevolence and our ordinary intuitions. In life the idea that we should always act to bring about the greatest good can seem paradoxical, but utilitarians respond to this not by junking their fundamental rule, but by trying to refine it so that the moral clarity they believe it represents is reinforced. Neither of these strategies is obviously relevant in the case of fictional worlds. We recall a remark of D. H. Lawrence that ‘only in the novel are all things given full play.’ If this is right, what confronts utilitarians in the novel is not simply a mirror held to life, but life so refined and enhanced that it resists practical exploitation by theory.

It is not simply that the processes of intellectual adjustment taken as standard by utilitarians in the movement between theory and life are wholly unavailable with the novel. Nor is it that any transformation of the novel on the model of life must remain stillborn. Still less is it the case that the novel’s contributions to ethics can be squared at the level of theory, that, for instance, the rich contrast between fact and fancy that Dickens deploys so inventively in his novel *Hard Times* can be elevated to the status of a general idea. Or that Gradgrind as the embodiment of a general idea can demonstrate what is wrong with it. Utilitarians will see the value of the novel to ethics as a source of illustration only, and this limits what they can learn from it. Once again, it is Lawrence who celebrates the intimate connection between the novel and life. He tells us, too, how both are scornful of theory: ‘in the novel, the characters can do nothing but live. If they keep on being good, according to pattern, or bad, according to pattern, or even
volatile, according to pattern, they cease to live, and the novel falls dead. A character in the novel has got to live, or it is nothing.’.

Of course, Rorty does not adopt the stance of a ‘disinterested hypothesizer’, scouring the novel for evidence to support or cast doubt on a theory of morality constructed independently of it. The novel does not offer ethics a sight of something hidden as metaphysics might aspire to do. It is not to be thought of as a key for unlocking a reality external to it. Rather, Rorty pictures literary vocabularies as contributing to a conversation of many participating voices, one that has, as the Oakeshotttian origins of this idea suggest, no ultimate resting-place and no final epistemological port of call. Rorty makes this point emphatically in one of his many enlightening replies to his critics, ‘the realm of possibility is not something with fixed limits; further, it expands continually, as ingenious new redescriptions suggest even more ingenious re-redescriptions. Every purported glimpse of the boundaries of this realm is in fact an expansion of those boundaries.’.

This is an image that seems almost made to measure for capturing the novel’s complex gifts of form and content. What Rorty wants to learn from the novel about the operation of a moral concept such as cruelty cannot be expressed as a proposition. But neither can it be detached from the body of the novel, as one sensibly might detach a part from a mechanistic process or one event from the course of a game. For Rorty, a novel like Nabokov’s Lolita is not to be explored as an unknown country with philosophical Baedeker and phrasebook in hand to avoid disturbing the locals. Yet, while recognising this, we should not be untroubled. Undeniably, Rorty has his own philosophical agenda. At times, it looks as if he is imposing his conception of philosophy on the novel, as one might overlay one map on another. We need to remember Bambrough’s pertinent remark that the possibility of finding a re-redescription misleading belongs primarily to context and grammar, and so we should ask how this could occur here. Certainly, it makes sense to redescribe Rorty’s Marylanders as citizens of the republic – but of the world? Surely, such a re-redescription is question begging. When Rorty places a philosophical grid over the novel, does this make its signs to ethics even more strongly illuminated or do we merely become confused and lose our way?

Reservations about Rorty’s pragmatist readings of literature are raised by a number of his critics. In their eyes, Rorty’s defence of liberal irony is too much at one with the transcendentalism it aims to discard. He allows a well-directed opposition to metaphysics to determine his account of liberal irony, so leaving human understanding crudely split.
It is a point that one of Rorty’s critics wants his readers to dwell on: ‘whereas the transcendent position wishes to put a stop to questioning, Rorty asserts the infinite possibility of questioning. Whereas the transcendent standpoint wishes to assert a way of life that is true for all, Rorty wishes to portray life as non-ending interpretation.’. In other words, while Rorty is right to discard the idea that the truth of vocabularies can be checked against what they represent, his mistake is not to extricate his views sufficiently from it.

Another of Rorty’s critics, D. Z. Phillips, offers a perceptive account of what has gone wrong. Rorty denies that there is a single discoverable sense of the world that transcends the forms of discourse used to describe it. What he has not fully accepted, however, is the full force of this denial. For, as Phillips argues, ‘if a privileged notion of reality is confused, so is the notion of “further sets of descriptions” that trades on it.’. This point is relevant to literary descriptions and so we should note its wider resonance. Phillips is not simply showing how particular descriptions might be found compelling or open to query. His argument is that as an account of human understanding the whole notion of redescription comes to grief. In Phillips’ view, Rorty fails to return language ‘from metaphysics to our ordinary conversations’. Ironic redescription has, in fact, got in the way of life. As a result, Rorty misses the sense in which some descriptions are just satisfactory as they stand. In these cases, we do not look on our ways of seeing as infinitely revisable. Nor do we think of them as necessarily precarious, always vulnerable to alteration or challenge. Our sense of certainty is found in our ordinary conversations. It is this sense that liberal ironists find hard to explain.

The loss of the ordinary meaning of getting it right would be a significant absence in life. But, equally, our responses to the novel would be somewhat less than vigorous if there were no occasions on which its descriptions hit the nail exactly on the head. For Rorty, the novel is one of the many different kinds of stories that human cultures recount to themselves. But, then, in terms of liberal irony, what does it mean to find the tale implausible? Not simply that it has exhausted cultural possibilities or that its subject is now regarded as anachronistic. A much stronger notion of fictional truth is available. So there are times when we feel that the novel’s voice fails to do justice to its theme. It might smack of rationalisation or favour may be given to one character when this is at odds with the narrative flow. By the same token, we know when the description is spot on. Saying this involves no claim of privileged entry into the novel’s world. This is not a plea.
for universal exactness in artistic judgement. Nor is it asserting a meta-
physical truth. Interestingly, neither is this a reference to irony’s need
for the straight man to ensure that its message strikes home. Rather we
are pointing to the experience of knowing that a form of expression
cannot be improved upon, that it is fine as it is, that it exactly suits
what the author wants to say. We can see this nicely illustrated in a
phrase that V. S. Pritchett gives to a character in his short story ‘The
Necklace’. In this a man who does not understand his wife observes
her putting on a necklace and remarks, ‘when women put on some-
thing new, they look high and mighty, as if you had got to get to know
them all over again.’.9 This is one small instance of the importance in
literature of the incontrovertible. Seeing the point is at one with seeing
why it has to be expressed in that way. Without the sense that the
author has hit the spot it would be hard to enter the story’s world,
difficult to ask what it would be like to be the person the description so
neatly conveys. In literature, as in life, some descriptions just fit the
bill.

In ethics, too, Rorty’s critics spark our imagination. We have already
charged Rorty with trading on the metaphysical liberalism he wishes to
deny. We have noticed his use of the distinction between realism and
non-realism, a use that in relation to Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four is
too rigid, too restrictive to act as an attentive recipient of the novel’s
voice. But in Phillip’s chiding of Rorty’s hermeneutics we find some-
thing new. Phillips argues that Rorty’s notion of a conversation
between differing vocabularies actually contains hidden values. This is
important because it indicates that Rorty has not moved as far from
foundationalism as he wants his readers to believe. He stands accused,
therefore, of applauding agreement, if not as present in life then as an
aim to be encouraged. He assumes that a willingness to keep the con-
versation going is an unqualified good. He supposes too readily a dis-
tinction between normal and abnormal discourse, between forms of
communication that possess authoritative and established criteria for
settling disputes and those that do not. Moreover, his advocacy of edi-
fying examples amounts to little more than a thinly disguised prescrip-
tivism. In this respect, his attempt to shed edification of its association
with the Enlightenment is simply a sleight of hand aimed at concealing
the extent to which liberal irony dictates to life.

For Phillips, ‘Rorty cannot let conflicting vocabularies be them-
selves.’.10 The simple reason for this is that doing so would put him at
odds with the hermeneutics he defends. The philosopher’s business, in
Rorty’s view, is with charting the different voices in the conversation,
noticing what occurs when one voice changes its tone or when one becomes dominant or finds that it is overlaid by another. Human vocabularies are like so many different perspectives, to be adopted or not depending on the purposes they serve. Description can be met only by redescription. The human conversation is a history of displacement in which the driving forces are adaptability and ingenuity. But for Phillips this converts the philosopher into someone who merely experiments with ways of life, and this in turn quickly blocks the edification that the liberal ironist seeks. Rorty’s confusion comes from thinking that the values of hermeneutics can be superimposed on the moral practices the ironist philosopher is considering. Thus, Phillips writes, ‘to analyse the attitudes of the participants in terms of the dabbler’s attitudes would lead to radical incoherence. The dilettante does not commit himself to any perspective. He claims to be absorbed in their history, in their comings and goings, their formations and declines. But to be truly absorbed in the history of various practices is to wait on the conceptions found in them.’

For ethics to have a bearing on literature we expect a degree of adjustment on both sides. Dropping ethical abstraction is a precondition for learning from the novel. Without this change of mind (and it surely does not involve great sacrifice), the novel’s insights remain permanently concealed. The standard assumption that learning is either straightforwardly factual or licensed by reason, in fact, blocks access to the novel’s world. It prevents us from reading the novel’s descriptions as conceptual possibilities rather than as options we might decide to take up or not. On the side of literature, the concessions seem even less demanding. The novel needs only to be itself, to shun moral typology, the patterning of character and circumstance that Lawrence thinks destroys the novel’s grace. To Phillips, liberal irony, perhaps surprisingly in its defenders’ eyes, is one such pattern. The fact that it originates from outside the novel is irrelevant. The ironist voice has as much potential to impair learning from the novel as that of any theoretically inclined philosopher. However, it seems to follow from Phillip’s analysis that this confusion can be made apparent only by philosophy. Art alone cannot do the trick.

Phillips takes issue with Rorty’s reluctance to allow a form of discourse to speak for itself. He draws attention to Rorty’s disposition, sometimes hidden, to scrutinise moral practices from a pragmatist perspective as if this were universal. By way of contrast Phillips quotes a remark of Rush Rhees, ‘if a man is determined to fight for liberty (for the furtherance of liberty in this society) – then fine. But if he says he
is determined to fight for liberty for the reason that – then I lose interest. And similarly if he is determined to fight for the achievement of communism.’. In Phillips’ view, Rhees ‘does not replace the metaphysics of realism with the metaphysics of pragmatism. Rather he contemplates the political possibilities without meddling with them.’. Neither Rorty nor Rhees look for foundations for liberalism, but Rhees allows ‘love of liberty to speak for itself’.

What does it mean for a moral concept ‘to speak for itself’? Clearly some principle of philosophical non-intervention is being proposed, but in what? Is it in life or literature or both that philosophy must wait on what it finds? Rhees chooses an example of a political value to illustrate his point and so we might usefully examine the figure of Rubashov in Koestler’s novel *Darkness at Noon*, a work interestingly balanced between actual and fictional worlds. Since liberty might be understood to ‘speak for itself’ in both these contexts, Koestler’s text looks promising.

In the novel, the old Bolshevik, Rubashov, has lived a life dedicated to the service of a political cause only to discover that the same cause required him to admit that he has betrayed it. Between the humanistic ideal of freedom and the Party’s conception of its historical purpose there lies the opportunity for terror. In his cell Rubashov remembers, ‘how he had raged in the great field of experiment, the Fatherland of the Revolution, the Bastion of Freedom! Gletkin justified everything that happened with the principle that the bastion must be preserved. But what did it look like inside? The bastion would be preserved, but it no longer had a message, nor an example to give the world.’. Koestler’s fiction is a sustained commentary on an actual event, the trial of Bukharin in 1937. Called by Lenin the ‘darling of the Party’, Bukharin was arrested during one of Stalin’s purges, brought before the court in one of the many Moscow show trials, found guilty and then shot. Can we imagine Rubashov outside the pages of the novel so that we can talk with him, as we obviously could have done with Bukharin? For, then, we can listen to his love for the Party and what it stands for. We would hear his love of liberty ‘speaking for itself’, but, if Rhees is right, what would it say and what could we say in return?

Rhees’s point concerns justification. Not only that it is empty for moral philosophers to keep pressing for reasons to be given for moral and political beliefs, as if some final reason was always just beyond their grasp, but that such reasons distract attention from the beliefs themselves. If, for instance, someone defends liberty for the reason that it leads to greater happiness or greater social well being then they
would be taxed with the problem of defending liberty when it did not lead to these things. Or they may feel encouraged to trade liberty with the end it is supposed to produce. These reservations certainly punch their weight. And, yet, we might feel that Rhees does not invest sufficiently in justification either in terms of the case that can be made for liberty or its scope. As a result, both life and literature are sold a little short.

Imagining that we are talking with Rubashov in life enables us to see just how refined his reasons are for committing himself to the political cause. His revolutionary sensibility and the reasons he finds morally compelling are two sides of the same coin. Justification for Rubashov is not simply a matter of allowing his political ideals to speak for themselves, even though their ultimate end is the stand that he impressively takes to defend them. Justifying liberty involves making a case for it in the context of Marxist understandings of history and political morality. Here there is considerable room for argument just as there is with classic liberal defences of liberty, such as that offered by John Stuart Mill. But making a case is only one part of justification. Moral and political beliefs are defended against the background of ways of life. A moral justification can ‘speak for itself’ only by responding to the conditions of life. Given that these are complex, involving, say, the nature of one generation’s obligations to its successors, it is only rarely that justification can take the form of a single assertion and have little else to say. So, in contemplating the revolution’s obligations to the future, Rubashov asks whether the Party can be the guardian of the future distributing benefits and burdens accordingly, or merely the custodian of the present, conserving, but not attempting to calculate gain against loss. In this way, he reflects on the fact that the abolition of senseless suffering that had been the revolution’s purpose had demanded an enormous increase in the suffering of present generations. By the same token, the Party’s power had to be massively expanded in order to protect the liberties it stood for.

In life we might feel that we would have wanted to argue with Rubashov about justice between generations, but we would have supported his opposition to the Party’s understanding of guilt. Does a political movement committed to the removal of exploitation have a licence to use any means to achieve this end? Surely, the attempt to make the Party the sole arbiter of guilt and innocence is an obvious fraud. The idea that individual guilt can be replaced by historical guilt is impossible to maintain without retreating to a full utilitarian theory of punishment in which all contrast between guilt and innocence is
lost. So, contra Rhees, we do not lose interest when Rubashov gives reasons for what he believes. Neither have we imagined ourselves in life confronting Ivanov, arguing the opposite case, ‘we are tearing the old skin off mankind and giving it a new one. That is not an occupation for people with weak nerves; but there was once a time when it filled you with enthusiasm. What has so changed you that you are now as pernickety as an old maid?’. 16

But if we can argue and keep our interest in life then why not with fictional characters, too? Why can we exchange views with Rubashov outside the novel, but not in it? One answer certainly does not satisfy. On this view, *Darkness at Noon* is a novel of ideas. It is compelling to philosophers because its arguments about justice and freedom are also theirs. The presence of political ideas in the text gives philosophers their passport for entry. But this answer ignores a crucial difference. The political ideas in the novel are portrayed as belonging to life. They matter because they are attacked and defended in life. They are lived ideas, informing the fictional lives of Rubashov and Ivanov with as much force as Christianity might the real life of a religious believer. It still seems curious, however, that returning Rubashov to the novel brings him back to life. Should we, perhaps, resign ourselves to accepting the uniqueness of the novel’s world, a potentially disturbing and depressing idea? For, then, examples like Rubashov would come to ethics like reports from behind the enemy’s lines. Or, in trying to listen to the novel’s own voice, are we, as Phillips calls Rorty’s liberal ironists, ‘dabblers’, since we can claim no true knowledge of Rubashov’s experience, nothing that cannot be redescribed?

One way of thinking about the distinctiveness of a fictional world sends us along the wrong track. This is the view that a fictional world can be treated as a language game, involving its own specific conventions and standards of use. In Rorty’s understanding, language games are autonomous. What is true or false is dependent on the criteria operating within each particular game. All that can be derived from an analysis of language games is the description of how a word is used in any given case. It is not possible, Rorty argues, to criticise one language game from the standpoint of another. Nor can one language game be better or worse than any other, except in relation to pragmatic purposes or interests. A degree of mutual exploration between vocabularies may lead to the discovery of new games, but in Rorty’s account cross boundary assessment is ruled out. There is simply no basis for it.

It is odd to think that it is the language game character of fictional worlds that excludes them from criticism. If this were so, then, talking
to Rubashov would be empty not for the straightforward reason that we have put him back in the novel, but because the novel is a language game, and critical conversation between language games is impossible in principle. A return to the philosophical origins of language games allows us to see the question differently. For Wittgenstein, some language games are not only highly misleading, but also nonsensical. Indeed, some of the language games engaged in by philosophers he thinks have that character. In life, too, certain games are open to strong criticism, or to total rejection as ‘absurd’, one instance being found in Wittgenstein’s remarks on the practice of ordeal by fire.  

An obvious solution that does not discard the suggestiveness of language games completely is to understand the fictional world as the kind of language game that can only be criticised from within. Unlike a philosophical picture that confuses, or a primitive practice that appals, the novel’s world is one that functions necessarily under its own constraints. If this is true, moral philosophers who wait on the novel adopt the only stance available to them. Not to wait is like treating the novel as a devised example, one to be abbreviated at will. And this, in turn, is to lose sight of everything that makes imaginative literature what it is. The conclusion to be drawn, then, from language game analysis is neither that the novel’s value to ethics is closed nor that its role is predetermined by philosophy. Rather it is that reflection on a novel like *Darkness at Noon* must be in terms of its own capacities for insight. This requires us to curb the instincts for intervention that in life we freely indulge. For with the novel we can add nothing without changing the story. Nor can we exclude anything without altering the story’s meaning, without transforming it into the everyday, utilitarian example that it can never be. Patience in the face of contrasting vocabularies, therefore, is a better strategy for philosophy than any attempt to overlay one on the other, however creative this might be.

This emphasis is in tune with an evaluation of the novel’s aesthetic qualities, but we should remain wary. If literature gives ethics an independent focus on life, then how is it that the novel can be read in such a bewildering variety of ways? To take the text in point, how is it that whereas liberal philosophers read *Darkness at Noon* as an indictment and a warning, non-liberals see it quite differently? In other words, the contrasts between liberal and revolutionary understandings of temporality, law and justice are not only at work in the novel: they are not fully operational only in its portrayal of life. They are commonly and, sometimes, omnivorously present in the assumptions that are brought
to it. Thus, Merleau-Ponty in his famous commentary on Koestler’s novel writes, ‘the revolutionary judges what exists in the name of what does not yet exist. Bourgeois justice adopts the past as its precedent; revolutionary justice adopts the future.’

When Rubashov speaks about the Party as no longer worth following he presents himself as an example to life. In life, we often have strong feelings about the fictional stories that come our way. The instruction to listen to the novel’s voice is not an imposition, but, as the case of Merleau-Ponty illustrates, not all philosophers agree with our readings. Are we to say that disagreement over the novel’s tone and meaning is as intransigent as disagreement often is in life?

Henry James’ story ‘The Beast in the Jungle’ might stand as a parable. It is a tale of a man corroded by inaction. The central figure is obsessed by the fear that some unknown terror will destroy him, come out at him like a beast in the jungle. It is a fate that he desires to avoid at the cost of everything else. A woman learns of this fear and, as time passes, she shares it with him, giving him friendship, intimacy and consolation while asking nothing from him in return. Much later, she tells him that she knows what the nature of his terror is, and that while he remains in ignorance it has already consumed him. After the woman’s death he realises that the terror was simply his inability to notice and return her love. More serious than the terror having been endured was not to have had a worthwhile life.

Once again we notice that it is irony that has brought the point home. Irony is about to make a similar revelation to us. Are we like the man in James’ story, in that our fears for philosophy have made us blind to what the novel has to say? Does the single-minded association of philosophy with argument block out the conceptual resources the novel contains? A philosophical friend of the novel shows more confidence, arguing that there are cases where ‘conceptual understanding depends on having certain convictions and insights into what is possible for human beings, where those would be extremely difficult to arrive at without being curious about and sensitive to the qualities of some human beings’ lives, and where we might even need some imaginative and symbolic illustrations in order to articulate a different structure of thought.’

This must surely be reassuring. Where the novel’s philosophical friend defers to ‘imaginative and symbolic illustrations’ we have seen clearly what philosophy can learn from fictional characters. Billy Budd, Vere, Hyacinth Robinson, and Humbert Humbert are in their fictional form characters that speak from different scripts, but each offers
specific conceptual clarification to philosophy that it would not have gained alone.

As with most areas of philosophy, in the relation between ethics and literature it is practice that speaks louder than theory. Phillips wants moral philosophy to become more respectful of the depth of moral disagreement revealed in life, but we have queried the picture of reason-giving associated with the idea of a moral belief speaking for itself because this constrains the role of reason both within the novel and life. But there is one form taken by philosophy in the novel that we have deliberately kept to one side. A philosophical novel, such as Sartre’s *Nausea*, expresses both a philosophical claim and a narrative identity. This makes it two steps removed from life, first, because it looks to have its philosophical claim about life lived out in the novel, and, second, because it overlooks the distinction between the story and life. As Kierkegaard famously remarks, ‘it is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards.’ If Kierkegaard is right then the philosophical novelist seems to be moving backwards and forwards at the same time. His voice may, therefore, be just a little too prejudicial of both philosophy and life to act as a safe intermediary between them.

Now what do we call ‘safe’? The most disputed questions in philosophy are often those of method. Interestingly, both Phillips and Rorty understand the issues as coming from philosophy, and the illustration of those issues as coming from the novel. So, illustration lends plausibility to philosophical claims, but if there are as many stories as there are claims then plausibility is threatened and with it the usefulness of literature to ethics. That “if”, however, is too permissive, too generous of what might count as an illustration of an argument. Winch, for example, is committed philosophically to reading Vere’s decision in *Billy Budd* in a particular way and so he does not argue that Vere’s decision is the only one that could have been made. Nothing in his actual argument requires Winch to think of Vere’s decision as the right one. And, yet, as Winch makes clear, the list of possible alternative decisions cannot be open-ended. Not any story could have made Winch’s philosophical claims plausible.

Acknowledgement of the force of this qualification does not remove the difficulty entirely, however. So how much leeway does it allow philosophers who wish to trump the novel’s stories with tales of their own? Stories just as plausible as Koestler’s can be told about the same moral concept. It is a point that ethics can turn to its advantage. Thus,
we might recall a remark of O. K. Bouwsma made during one of his conversations with Wittgenstein when they were discussing pride: ‘How did I exhibit ‘pride’? By reading from *The Brothers Karamazov*. W. seemed to approve of this but he made some objection which I did not understand. He said somebody else might write a different book, apparently exhibiting pride in a different light. The point seemed to be that what is relevant is patterns of life which are enmeshed with all sorts of other things, and so this makes the matter much more complex than at first it seemed.’.21 The notion of ‘exhibiting pride in a different light’ indicates the dangers of thinking that a moral concept can be clarified in only one determinate way. It is a question of exploring different contexts, and in this the novel’s variety strengthens ethics. It is one of literature’s decent signs. So, in Bouwsma’s words, Wittgenstein continued, ‘no man is pride alone, pride is specified in a context of other interests and other human beings. It is this total situation in which pride infects with evil. Pride is like an infection, a fever. It isn’t located like a sore thumb. The fever permeates the whole body. So pride too.’.22

Recall a story by V. S. Pritchett, ‘The Fall’, that brings out beautifully the connection between a secret pride and vulnerability. Mr Peacock is a shy man who is immensely proud of his brother, a great star of the cinema. His brother is a giant of a man who has contrived a famous physical fall. He can collapse without harming himself and then gracefully stand up. During his firm’s annual dinner Mr Peacock starts imitating his brother’s star turn. At first, his fellow guests are complimentary, but Mr Peacock gets carried away, he has had too much to drink and he performs the magnificent fall over and over again, demonstrating it to strangers, diners and waiters alike. Soon his audience has vanished, all too aware of what his pride has preceded.

Philosophers who argue that the novel’s stories can be retold in different terms aim to bring contextualism on their side. But the essential point is that much depends on what is being retold and what is brought to the retelling. So if a story is retold in other words then it will not be the same tale. If a story is embellished with anecdotes or incidents new to the telling then it is obviously not the same tale. If, by contrast, it is still the story’s lines that are spoken but in a different tone of voice, then the task may be beyond even the most versatile since the humour of a joke often depends as much on the distinctive delivery of the punchline as the line itself. A story may be cleverly rewritten so that it confirms a new set of theoretical assumptions while continuing to display its own identity, but all this achieves is a minor
distraction from what the novel uniquely says. For in this case we have to evaluate the theoretical assumptions that lie behind the rewriting. We have to examine what divides those assumptions from our own reading of the story. And we will not be able to carry this out unless we fully accept the independence of the novel’s voice.

In converting, to some degree, philosophers into literary detectives we cannot assume an objective critical point above the play of interpretation. One of the reasons Phillips values the novel in ethics is to do with the way it reveals the heterogeneity of morals. We see this too, but there is more. For the diversity that Phillips wants us to notice in life, comes not from keeping our eyes open, but is noticed through the novel. In life we can see things from the perspectives of others as well as our own. As readers we also possess this imaginative capacity. We look at Lolita with Humbert’s obsessive eyes and then we see her as she sees herself. As in life, she sometimes sees despairingly, at other times laughingly, whimsically or flirtatiously. As in life, she sometimes finds a clear perspective hard to reach. But unlike life, in the novel what – and whether – she sees is derived from the novelist’s favour, from his sense of truth. Unlike life, too, the novelist can make us side with or turn against his fictional characters, or may simply refuse to take a stand through wanting us to imagine our likes and dislikes emerging impromptu or naturally as they might in life.

Socratic questioning is often thought by philosophers to be the paradigm of method in philosophy. Unlike readers who volunteer themselves completely to the novel’s world, novel-using philosophers are not permitted to drop their guard. In the hands of a Melville, a James or a Nabokov, the novel’s ability to seem to order and control experience is also an invitation to trust. Readers who take up this invitation hope for a widening of understanding, a more finely tuned sense of generosity towards others. These, we might say, are the rewards of aesthetic trust. Philosophy, Cora Diamond remarks, ‘needs literature and its neighbours’, and need, we should remember, is one of the prime motives for trust. By making this need explicit in ways that satisfy them philosophers are, in effect, identifying occasions for trust.
Conclusion

A nineteenth century proverb has it that those who marry in haste repent in the suburbs. Usually, however, moral philosophers who are interested in making overtures to the novel do so cautiously, being keen to avoid a vivacious companion turning into someone superficial and brittle. The risk of blighted hope is, of course, common to both sides, but, as with marriage, quarrelsomeness and circumspection do not exclude mutual benefit, even if it is hard to think of them actually encouraging it. As with partnerships in life, an independent tally of advantage would seem to be of limited value since the success of the relationship is so closely bound up with the perspective that each takes on the other. We might think that as soon as philosophy gets into the novel that is the end of it as a novel, but there are times when a representative idea or an argumentative flow, even a piece of logic chopping, are exactly what the fiction requires to keep it on course. Equally, the incorporation of fiction into ethics is seen by some to be a marriage of true minds where the danger almost invariably is that minds will be thought true only when they are one.

One reason for moral philosophers turning to the novel is as a respite from the generality that in the history of ethics has commonly been understood as its justifying principle. And, yet, and this is an important qualification, what results from this exercise is rarely a straightforward revision of identity. A novel may be a source of moral particularity to ethics while remaining perfectly general in some of its most significant characterisations and insights. Thus, Mann’s *Mario and the Magician* is a portrait of the general force of the concept of humiliation. By contrast, Winch takes a particular feature of a story and uses it to bring to light a false generality in philosophy.
The switching of logical points between general and particular has, of course, potential for trouble. It is one of the many reasons why relations between ethics and literature have traditionally been rather less than cordial. Indeed, some suggestions for moving from one to the other have been spectacularly unhelpful, as can be illustrated by reference to Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The web of beliefs that make up Antigone’s tragic decision represents ethical particularity in the play. The problem for those seeking ethical generalisation is how to break through this web to uncover the pattern that lies beneath. Often, it is claimed that this can be achieved by means of abstract nouns – the individual, their rights and duties, the family, the state – but all this produces is simply another screen to life. So even when Antigone is performed in a modern context in which such abstraction might at least make sense – as it was, for instance, in Paris under German occupation – it is the play’s ethical particularity that remains the driving force.

Fears about false generality have often determined how the novel is to be approached. Winch, for instance, wishes the novel to speak on its own terms, but it does not follow that in doing so no generality is permitted. From Winch’s philosophical perspective, generality might sensibly be said to appear in the novel in terms of the moral practices the novel describes. It might be taken to include those ways of life that constitute the background to moral decision. But there are good reasons for proceeding carefully here, most obviously because literature portrays a variety of ways of life, as well as the antagonisms and tensions between them. Indeed, it is in the novel that we often find best displayed the lack of completion in life, its abruptness, arbitrariness and contrariness. For moral philosophers other than Winch this is a powerful reason for listening to voices different from that of the novel. It may be a strong motivation to return to philosophy, to ask ethics to supply the general frame of moral reference that is only rarely one of the novel’s gifts. Even if we allow a way of life some general status in the novel, as we might justifiably in any number of examples, we have still to be careful about the nature of the philosophical stance that is taken towards it. To speak about life in the novel as you might the practices of a primitive society, awaiting transcription either in their own possibly numinous terms or in the language of the liberal anthropologist, would seem to indicate the presence of an ethical theory that is already sure of its ground. From this point of view, the partnership between ethics and literature begins to look like a marriage in which the husband is always quoting the wife.
Defenders of liberal theory will say that an impartial voice must always be an advance on an arrangement in which partners are forever quoting each other. Philosophers who wish the novel to speak for itself may dislike this arrangement too, but they do not have to share liberalism’s assumption that it is that voice, or even that some such elevated standpoint exists. In this respect, dissatisfaction with liberal theory’s calling the ethical tune to the novel is a plea for a redirection of attention. For Winch, waiting on the novel is not a matter of mapping it as if philosophers were cartographers in a foreign land. Neither does it involve the assumption that there must be a single method of releasing the novel’s riches or one ethical maxim against which they can be judged. It is here that the shift in philosophical attention is most noticeable. For if we cannot ignore the differences between speaking about characters in fiction and speaking about them in life then it becomes impossible to engage in ethical reflection through the novel as if it was ethical reflection on life. It is for this reason that the nature of the philosopher’s entry into the novel’s world has been of deep and enduring interest. This revised focus has allowed a number of fascinating questions to emerge from their original fields of enquiry, such as what it might mean for you to fall in love with a fictional character (are you like Sebastian in Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, carrying the hopelessly inert Aloysius wherever you go?) Or to criticise a character, to become impatient with one, or to turn the pages of the novel realising that what it chronicles is a life falling apart and that there is nothing you can do about it.

Fictional objects raise problems that cannot easily be set aside by philosophers wishing to include the novel in ethical discussion. Encouraged by the idea that to ethics literature is exclusively a business-like source of example, rather than of delight, say, or edification, some philosophers are quick to reject any claim that their feelings as readers are relevant. Others, by contrast, fully embrace the novel’s world.

We have discovered the complexities involved in engaging with fiction in moral philosophy. Such complexities involve recognising the differences between fictional and actual worlds. They probe the use that can be made of these differences in ethics. For philosophers like Nussbaum it is a radical error to disregard the way we feel about figures in fiction, as if our feelings towards them made no difference to the philosophical account we would want to give. But neither, of course, does Nussbaum think it safe for ethics to proceed as if our responses were our only guide. What Nussbaum brings to the novel is, therefore,
something approaching the full force of the liberal personality, embracing both private and public realms, the need for personal disclosure and the liberal hope for political redemption.

If Winch is right (at least on the basis of his articulate silences), ethics will go wrong if it fails to disentangle its first task of clarifying the moral practices found in life from any contingent responses the moral philosopher might have to the literary examples in hand. Further, ethics will go wrong if it fails to distinguish clarification from exhortation or instruction. Whatever philosophical use is made of the novel it excludes edification and moral advice. If Nussbaum is right, the disentangling that Winch thinks is essential looks like a series of ad hoc prohibitions. Ethics doesn’t simply impinge on life by clarifying it. Through reflection on the question ‘what is the good life?’ in collaboration with the novel’s insights, ethics is capable of a more ambitious, possibly a practical or therapeutic role. If Rorty is right, then literature’s value to ethics is dependent first on ethics dropping its theoretical pretensions. A vigorous building up of their moral resources is, then, what the novel offers liberals, even though it is an offer they can only accept by ceasing to treat liberalism at face value. Irony is a sophisticated mechanism for ensuring that when liberals get their wires crossed everyone still knows what they mean.

We have spoken of a method that guides movement between moral philosophy and the novel. Perceptive equilibrium and liberal irony are different ways of enabling philosophers to get what they want. Each is reflective of a specific and detailed picture of philosophy in which ethics has its own independent voice. In neither is the novel thought of as a kind of magic which creates from nothing the news that philosophers want to hear. A method of perceptive equilibrium requires philosophical readers to balance their responses by taking both the arguments that interest them and the beauties of the text into account. In addition, the method of liberal irony could scarcely be deployed at all unless liberals paid some degree of tribute to the novel’s artfulness. In neither method is the philosopher represented as an explorer in a foreign land. Equally, neither is fireproof since in each set of procedures the novel speaks not when and how it wishes, but only when the methods permit. And these, of course, are the inventions of philosophy. Yet, again, in neither are the skills of the ordinary reader ignored or simply set aside.

Philosophical encounters with the novel need not always exhibit the same pattern to be enlightening. Conant thinks of his conversation with Kafka as a double movement. In the first movement there is
partnership, but, in the second, it is philosophy alone that speaks. By contrast, Winch thinks of his conversation with Melville as an ongoing collaboration in which philosophy and the novel combine to reveal a moral possibility that might otherwise be missed. In both, it is vital that the actors do not confuse their lines – if, for example, the philosopher tries to play the role of the artist by re-inventing the story, or the artist the role of the philosopher by re-formulating what the story has to say. And, yet, in the conversation between philosophy and the novel there is no tune for all seasons. The idea that a fixed method is needed if philosophy is to learn from the novel has limited appeal.

Exclusivity and prescription are the great dangers here since following the method to the letter will always risk shutting out what the novel wants to say. This does not mean that we want the novel’s boundaries to be porous to just any invasion that comes along. Some of the questions that philosophers ask of the novel point to confusion about the kind of text being examined, as when, for instance, they treat the novel as a series of extracts or as a devised example. More positively, what is learned is not necessarily learned from one source. Sometimes it is a single incident in a novel that repays attention, at others one character’s choice. Again, it may be by comprehending the novel as such that the moral philosopher learns. In a different enquiry, it may be that a comparison of different treatments of the same concept – say, innocence in Henry James, in Dostoyevsky, and in Melville – will contain greater promise. When texts are put side by side in this way what is learned comes not from a theory of their interchange, but from noticing the differences and complexities that make up the meaning in each case.

Lawrence warns readers, ‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale’,¹ a remark that prompts a more radical line of thought. Dependency is at the very heart of trust. To trust another is to show confidence in their doing what you want when there is the real possibility that they may not. It is the coexistence in the trusting of confidence and vulnerability that gives rise to the inescapable risk in trust. Aesthetic trust shares these features. Winch is a philosopher who, as we have seen, talks firmly of the need for examples in moral philosophy, examples ‘which bring out the real force of the ways in which we speak and in which language is not ‘on holiday’ (to adapt a remark of Wittgenstein’s).’² It is a stance that is resonant with trust. By contrast, philosophers who approach the novel wholly in the light of their own philosophical preconceptions are, in effect, refusing trust. They refuse it as escaped prisoners of war in an enemy country might do – by never believing that
any of its inhabitants are well disposed towards them. Such a strategy erases the risks of trust, but only at the cost of eliminating the rewards. Nothing, of course, forces a philosopher like Winch to put faith in the novel. And, yet, novel-using philosophers who follow Winch’s example do ‘trust the tale’.

Ethics from this perspective finds in the novel a review of possibilities. As John Wisdom comments, ‘novelists present to us possible situations, they do not assert like the historian that such situations have actually occurred. They review the possible. But such a review of the possible leads to a new view of the actual, whenever, and insofar as that reviewed as possible, becomes actual.’. The suffering portrayed as possible in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* did lead to a new view of actual suffering. It could not lead to meeting Oliver in the flesh. We are shown what can be the case in life through the novel illuminating what we already know or by introducing us to moral possibilities that we have not encountered. Meirlys Lewis speaks well in encouraging philosophers to think of the novel ‘in terms of its own capacities of yielding complex relations, of yielding insights which qualify and interpenetrate what is general, of breaking down stereotypes.’. Moral philosophers wait on the story. They put themselves in the novel’s hands since they are wholly dependent on the novel’s narrative and characterisation to discover how things turn out. They also leave aside any reference to the novel as art because this risks indulging the authorial embellishment that Lawrence fears. More importantly still, they will not try to settle the differences between philosophy and the novel prior to reaching an understanding of it. For then, in Cora Diamond’s metaphor, they will become bad neighbours to the novel, accepting its help only on their terms: a stance that is, in effect, quite the opposite of waiting on the story. All these are features of trust.

Philosophical readers, however, cannot always ‘trust the tale’ as ordinary readers do. For ordinary readers, imagining what it is like to be in a fictional character’s place may be taken as the full embodiment of aesthetic trust. It is a sign, we might say, that the novel has successfully completed its work. In trusting the story the reader is drawn irresistibly into its world. So, in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, for example, we are made to see how Pip’s ‘great expectations’ unfold through his eyes. By putting our trust in the character that Dickens has created we discover what Pip discovers, in his slow recognition of how much in life his expectations have concealed.

Moral philosophers learn this too. Also, like an ordinary reader’s trust, the moral philosopher’s trust in the story need not be blind. It is
open to both to withhold trust if the novel looks to fail them, as it might through, for instance, weakness in plot or characterisation or self-indulgence.

Novel-using philosophers like Winch, however, are not at liberty to leave the matter there. For, if, like Winch, they ask not what it would be like to be a fictional character, but what they would have done in their place then all is changed. For this question arises specifically in the context of the problems that the philosopher wishes to be clear about. Dickens gives ordinary readers everything they need to see the world as Pip sees it, as Melville also does in the case of his character Vere. But we have seen how Melville’s tale leaves the philosopher looking for more. There is now little choice but to acknowledge that the novel can no longer be left as it is. Waiting on the novel is over. So, does this mean that novel-using philosophers at this point reach the limits of trust? Not, we must insist, if this means that the novel is no longer thought of as trustworthy. For everything that brought Winch to Melville’s *Billy Budd* initially – its language, characterisation and plot – remains intact, ever willing to repay the philosopher’s readings and re-readings of the story. Everything, that is, bar the philosopher’s need to ask what he would have done in the fictional character’s place. Here we surely cannot avoid a qualitative change. The novel-using philosopher arrives at the limits of trust because, with the philosopher’s re-writing of the story, the rewards it originally inspired are no longer the same.

The consequence of this is the creation of two worlds. In one, the world of the novel, philosophy’s interjection has no place. In the other, the philosophical world, interjection thrives. The model of the devised example covers neither of these. The novel’s structure is too rich in description and narrative to act as a servant to a thesis put forward independently. Similarly, in the part it plays in the philosopher’s argument interjection cannot take on the role of a devised example since the interjection trades off the situation in the novel it reconstructs. We might think of this as a classic instance of having it both ways.

The trust in the tale that Lawrence recommends to readers derives no more from aesthetics than trust in life does from ethics. Practice is primary. As William James remarks, ‘the tangible fact at the root of all our thought-distinctions, however subtle, is that there is no one of them so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference in practice.’

Perhaps readers might for a concluding moment imagine themselves in the position of Callicles at the end of Plato’s *Gorgias*. After a long
debate in which Socrates has tried by the use of his strict method of argument to convince you that your moral scepticism is fallacious, it seems that stalemate has been reached. You are a tough-minded opponent for Socrates; you are streetwise and keep your eye on the ball; you sense that as far as ethics is concerned philosophical reasoning is going nowhere. Suddenly, after hours of logical interchange, Socrates says to you, ‘Give ear then, as they say, to a very fine story; you may think that it is just a story, but I regard it as true.’ (523A). Do you, as Callicles would surely have done, dismiss the story as an old wives’ tale? Or, knowing what you do about literary interventions in ethics, do you tremble with anticipation, aware that the philosopher has found your Achilles’ heel?
Notes

Introduction

1 Plato, Republic, 376b.
4 Ibid. p. 535.
9 Murdoch, op cit. p. 202
10 Ibid. p. 294.
11 Ibid. p. 294.
13 Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics, p. 5.
15 Ibid. p. 56.
17 Ibid. p. 215.


22 See Lamarque and Olsen, op cit. p. 397.


25 Ibid. p. 173.


30 Gibson, op cit. p. 11.

31 Ibid. p. 10.


Chapter 1  The Middle Ground

4 Hampshire, op cit. p. ix.
7 Murdoch, op cit. p. 4.
9 Ibid. p. 215.
10 Cary, op cit. p. 137.
11 Lawrence, op cit. p. 538.
12 Murdoch, op cit. p. 205.
13 Ibid. p. 205.
15 Ibid. p. 114.
16 Murdoch, op cit. p. 257.
17 Goldberg, op cit. p. 294.
contributors to the current debate, see Lamarque and Olsen, op cit. especially Part 3.


20 LK, p. 46.


23 Ibid. p. 129.


26 Ibid. p. 686.

27 Ibid. p. 681.

28 Ibid. p. 682.

29 Murdoch, op cit. p. 379.


32 Conant, op cit. p. 687.

33 Ibid. p. 680.


36 Kundera, op cit. p. 43.

37 Murdoch, op cit. p. 257.


Chapter 2 Decent Signs


Notes

4 Quoted in Winch, *Trying To Make Sense*, p. 173.
9 I have taken these examples from Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 217ff, pp. 68–9, and pp. 151–170 (hereafter referred to as EA)
10 Lawrence, op cit. p. 528.

Chapter 3  Enter the Novel

2 Ibid. p. 484.
5 As quoted in EA p. 157.
6 As quoted in EA p. 157.
7 EA p. 168.
8 EA p. 163.
9 EA p. 163.
10 BB p. 390.
11 EA p. 163.
12 BB p. 331.
13 BB p. 329.
14 BB p. 371.
15 BB p. 78.
16 BB p. 380.
17 EA p. 166.
19 BB p. 408.
20 BB p. 385.
21 BB p. 400.
22 BB p. 400.
23 BB p. 351.
Chapter 4  The Novel’s Gifts

1 James, *The Art of Fiction*, p. 37.
2 Collingwood, op cit. p. 317.
6 Bambrough, ‘Ounces of Example’, p. 177.
8 Ibid. p. 146.
10 Ibid. p. 224.
11 Ibid. p. 124.
12 Ibid. p. 124.
13 Ibid. p. 10.
17 Rhees, op cit. p. 154.
18 Ibid. p. 149.
19 Beardsmore, op cit. p. 64.

Chapter 5  Fiction and the Good

1 Rhees, op cit. p. 148.
2 Rhees, *Moral Questions*, p. 79.
4 Rhees, *Moral Questions*, p. 79.
5 Ibid. p. 73.
6 Ibid. p. 81.
7 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.i.7.
8 LK p. 28.
10 LK p. 46.
Notes

14 LK p. 162.
15 LK p. 162.
16 Nussbaum, ‘Reply to Papers’, p. 73.
17 Ibid. p. 73.
18 LK p. 335.
19 LK p. 354.
20 LK p. 354.
21 LK p. 284.
22 LK p. 284.
23 Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? p. 327.
27 LK p. 283.
28 Diamond, ‘Martha Nussbaum and the Need for Novels’, p. 64.
29 Nussbaum, ‘Reply to Papers’, p. 54.

Chapter 6 The Novel and Ethical Reflection

2 Ibid. p. 37.
5 Ibid. p. 78.
6 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, p. 12.
9 LK p. 182.
10 LK p. 183.
15 BB p. 380.
Chapter 7  Good and Powers

3 Ibid. p. 17.
4 Ibid. p. 17.
5 Ibid. p. 17.
6 Ibid. p. 17.
8 James, *Preface to The Princess Casamassima*, p. 17.
9 LK p. 206.
10 James, *Preface to The Princess Casamassima*, p. 27.
15 Ibid. p. 258.
17 LK p. 217.
18 LK p. 199.
20 Ibid. p. 85
22 As quoted in LK pp. 210–211.
24 Ibid. p. 361.
25 LK p. 213.
26 James, Preface to The Princess Casamassima, p. 27.
28 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 318, paragraph S85 (A).
30 James, The Princess Casamassima, p. 159.
32 LK p. 216.
33 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, p. 422, paragraph 802.
35 Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, p. 1.
36 Ibid. p. 1.
38 Ibid. p. 280.
39 Williams, op cit. p. 102.
40 Lionel Trilling, op cit. p. 99.
42 Cavell, Must We Mean What We Say? p. 339.
43 F. Nietzsche, Schopenhauer As Educator, Section 6.
44 Phillips, Philosophy’s Cool Place, p. 154.
45 Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics, p. 287.
46 Ibid. p. 294.
47 Ibid. p. 293.
48 Ibid. p. 295.
50 Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, p. 5.

Chapter 8  Truth Drops Out

1 Rorty, Philosophical Papers, Volume 2, p. 68.
3 Ibid. p. xiv.
4 Ibid. p. xiv.
Chapter 9  Versions of Events

2 Ibid. p. 88.
3 Ibid. p. 88.
4 Rorty, Contingency, irony, and solidarity, pp. 89–90.
5 Ibid. p. xvi.
6 Ibid. p. 157.
8 Ibid. p. 314.
9 Rorty, Contingency, irony, and solidarity, p. 159.
10 Ibid. p. 158.
11 Ibid. p. 159.
12 Ibid. p. 161.
13 Ibid. p. 159.
14 Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, p. 87.
15 Ibid. p. 83.
16 Rorty, Contingency, irony, and solidarity, p. 179.
Chapter 10  Fictions and Freedoms

1 Bambrough, ‘Ounces of Example’, p. 179.
2 Lawrence, op cit. p. 538.
3 Ibid. p. 537.
4 Denham, op cit. p. 354.
6 Weston, op cit. p. 113.
7 Phillips, Philosophy’s Cool Place, pp. 69–70.
8 Ibid. p. 80.
9 V. S. Pritchett, ‘The Necklace’; I am grateful to James Wood for reminding me of this story, see his article, ‘Chekhov for the English’, The Times Literary Supplement, 4.1.2002.
12 Phillips, Philosophy’s Cool Place, p. 84.
13 Ibid. p. 84.
14 Ibid. p. 84.
16 Ibid. p. 130.
Conclusion

2 EA, p. 154.
4 Lewis in Dilman, op cit. p. 141.
List of Works Cited


Cavell, Stanley *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).


James, William *Pragmatism*, (London: Longmans, 1907).


Lyas, Colin *Peter Winch*, (Teddington: Acumen, 1999).


Rorty, R. The Consequences of Pragmatism, (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).
Index

aesthetics, 19, 20, 29, 49, 60, 64, 68, 71, 83, 93, 123, 133, 137, 145–48, 154, 155, 157
Adamson, Jane, 9, 10
Altieri, Charles, 9
anti-realism, 130–1
Aristotle, 77, 108
art, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10–12, 14, 16, 17, 20, 22, 36, 39, 40, 42, 44, 48–50, 55, 60, 62, 70–1, 73, 77–9, 85–6, 91, 96, 102, 104–5, 109, 113–7, 119, 124–5, 128, 146, 150, 157, 167
autonomy, 39, 53, 61, 116, 147, 155
Balzac, Honoré de, 66–7
Bambrough, Renford, 50, 54, 56–7, 161, 164
Beardsmore, R. W., 65, 68
‘beautiful soul’, 108, 111, 120
Benjamin, Walter, 108
Berlin, Isaiah, 118
Bouwsma, O. K., 174
Burgess, Anthony, 143
Bunyan, John, 138
Burke, Edmund, 3
Cary, Joyce, 16, 19
Cavell, Stanley, 5, 81, 121, 124
Collingwood, R. G., 7, 20, 55–6, 140–1
comedy, 132, 144, 153–4
Conant, James, 23–24, 26, 179
Conrad, Joseph, 89, 93, 97, 108
The Secret Agent, 93
The Heart of Darkness, 97, 108
conversation, 24–30, 60, 120, 129, 139–41, 157, 166–7, 180
Crane, Stephen, 83
The Red Badge of Courage, 83
cruelty, 13, 132–5, 137, 142, 146–8, 150–1, 155–7, 159, 161, 164
Cunningham, Anthony, 8
Denham, A. E., 89
Descartes, R., 1
description, 13–14, 17, 20, 32, 70, 81, 127, 130, 139, 142, 148, 165–7
Diamond, Cora, 6–7, 18–19, 26, 87, 101–2, 175, 181
Bleak House, 13, 68, 147–8
David Copperfield, 53, 79
Great Expectations, 38, 67, 160, 181
Hard Times, 62, 90, 100–3, 163
Oliver Twist, 86, 181
dilemmas, 3, 12, 34, 40–7, 50–2, 55, 57, 72, 93, 109, 114–5, 125, 135
Donne, John, 88–9
Dyson, A. E., 127
Eaglestone, Robert, 23
Eldridge, Richard, 8
emotion, 7, 12, 21, 29–30, 79, 86, 159–60
Enright, D. J., 149, 153
evil, 41, 43–4, 47–8, 51, 54, 150
examples, 8, 10–14, 31–8, 39–54, 56–68, 70, 75, 101–2, 111, 119, 126, 131, 133–4, 137, 156, 163, 166, 171
Faulkner, William, 65
Intruder in the Dust, 65
Flaubert, Gustave, 61, 109
Forster, E. M., 28, 140
Howards End, 28
The Longest Journey, 140–1
Gadamer, H. –G., 15, 25
Gass, William H., 77, 127
Gibson, Andrew, 10
Goldberg, S. L., 8, 20
Graham, Gordon, 22
Green, T. H., 105–6, 108, 111, 118
Greene, Graham, 122
   *The Quiet American*, 122

Hampshire, Stuart, 16–17

Hardy, Thomas, 71, 89, 136
   *Jude the Obscure*, 71, 89, 136

Hegel, G. W. F., 120, 147

Heidegger, Martin, 128

Hermann, Grete, 33

Hobbes, Thomas, 155

Holland, Roy, 35

humanism, 8, 9, 111, 168

Ibsen, Henrik, 31
   *The Master Builder*, 31

innocence, 20, 26, 43, 46, 48, 51, 54, 61–2, 102, 148, 169, 180

irony, 30, 67, 91, 97, 122–3, 127, 130–5, 144, 146, 148–54, 157, 166, 172, 179

James, Henry, 11, 39–40, 66, 99–102, 105–22, 172, 175, 180
   *The Golden Bowl*, 100, 106
   *The Notebooks*, 108
   *The Princess Casssamassima*, 12, 99–100, 102–4, 105–27, 144

James, William, 132, 182

Kafka, Franz, 23–4, 26–7, 179

Kant, Immanuel, 19, 24, 31, 92

Kenny, Anthony, 107

Kierkegaard, Søren, 24, 123–4, 154, 173

Koestler, Arthur, 2, 109, 168, 172–3
   *Darkness at Noon*, 2, 109, 168, 170–1

Kundera, Milan, 26–7

Lawrence, D. H., 3–4, 14, 19, 38, 163, 167, 180–2

Leavis, F. R., 7

Lenin, V. I., 116, 168

Lewis, Meirlys, 21, 181

Lewis, Percy Wyndham, 21, 140
   *Self Condemned*, 140


liberalism, 9, 90–1, 100, 102–3, 108, 111–12, 117–19, 121, 125, 130, 134, 137, 142, 155–6, 168

Lichtenberg, G., 78

Locke, John, 59

Lowry, Malcolm, 58–60, 127
   *Under the Volcano*, 58–9, 127

love, 20, 29, 53, 66, 68, 72, 76, 79–87, 88–9, 100, 110, 114, 143, 150–1, 158

MacIntyre, Alasdair, 3, 5

Mann, Thomas, 72–3, 78, 176
   *Mario and the Magician*, 72, 78, 176

Marx, Karl, 110, 112

Maupassant, Guy de, 61

McGinn, Colin, 14

Melville, Herman, 11, 13, 20, 22, 37, 40–54, 70, 93, 97–8, 102, 175, 180, 182
   *Billy Budd, Sailor*, 11, 13, 14, 20, 22, 37, 40–54, 59, 61, 70, 93, 98, 102, 173, 182

*Moby Dick*, 22

Merleau-Ponty, M., 172


metaphysics, 7, 10, 30, 105, 129–31, 136, 146–7, 164–5, 168

Mill, J. S., 25, 85, 136, 156, 169

mimesis, 20–1

Murdoch, Iris, 5–7, 18, 20, 22, 25, 27, 29, 125, 126

Nabokov, Vladimir, 13, 68, 73, 86, 91, 119, 127, 144, 146, 148–9, 150–60, 175
   *Lolita*, 13–14, 86, 91, 144, 146–9, 150–60, 161, 164

narrative, 3–5, 10, 12–13, 17–18, 21, 24, 28, 31, 38, 44, 53, 55, 60, 63, 65–6, 77, 135, 157, 165, 182

neo-Aristotelianism, 4, 12, 14, 76, 108

Nietzsche, F., 54, 85, 116, 119, 124


Orwell, George, 18, 28, 108, 135–44, 151, 166
   *Animal Farm*, 28–9
Nineteen Eighty-Four, 108, 135–44, 151, 166

Ovid, 7

parables, 23, 31
‘perceptive equilibrium’, 30, 94–5, 179

Phillips, D. Z., 63–6, 98–9, 125, 165–8, 170, 173, 175

Plato, 1–2, 6–7, 25, 182

Powell, Anthony, 37

A Dance to the Music of Time, 37

pride, 174

Pritchett, V. S., 102, 166, 174

Rawls, John, 94–6, 98, 100–1, 104, 106, 108, 110, 117, 119
realism, 134–8, 140–1, 143, 151, 166–7
redescription, 97, 130–1, 133, 136, 139, 142–46, 148–9, 154, 157–61, 164–5

Rhees, Rush, 33, 61–2, 67, 70–3, 167–70
relativism, 42–4, 130, 134, 160

Ruskin, John, 114

Sandel, Michael, 96

Sartre, J. –P., 2, 27, 173

Nausea, 2, 173

Scruton, Roger, 84

Shakespeare, William, 5, 73

King Lear, 71, 124

Socrates, 1, 146, 154, 175, 183

Sophocles, 12, 177

Antigone, 12, 177

Taylor, Charles, 4–5, 25–6

Thomas, Dylan, 17

The Map of Love, 17

Tolstoy, Leo, 20, 42, 89, 160

Anna Karenina, 20, 61, 89, 160

The Death of Ivan Illych, 63, 65

Hadji Murat, 42

tragedy, 11, 154

Trilling, Lionel, 108, 113, 122

trust, 28, 64, 84–6, 92, 113, 175, 180–2

universalisability, 34, 40–2, 48–9, 51, 56–7, 92, 99, 102, 158

utilitarianism, 7, 9, 18, 34, 62, 65, 75, 90, 161, 163, 169

Waugh, Evelyn, 178

Brideshead Revisited, 178

Wharton, Edith, 63, 65

The Age of Innocence, 65

Wilde, Oscar, 102

Williams, Bernard, 34–5, 37, 119, 121

Wisdom, John, 35, 181


Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 11, 24, 31–2, 35, 37, 40, 42, 63, 126, 171, 174

Zola, Emile, 80–7, 104, 107

Germinal, 104

Thérèse Raquin, 80–7, 107