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How Literature Can Be a Thought Experiment: Alternatives to and Elaborations of Original Accounts

Much has been written about the relationship between literature and moral philosophy and about how literature contributes to our moral education. I have claimed at the outset of this book that literature can make such contributions not just by providing striking illustrations of particular moral insights (although it certainly does that) but sometimes by leading us to have such insights, insights that reflective thinking alone is unlikely to produce. This is not the first occasion on which I have made such claims in print. More importantly, I am by no means the first philosopher to do so, which makes me beholden to those whose endeavors and observations precede my own, or whose work has paralleled my personal efforts. I will begin by addressing the work of the most prominent of these investigators, and eventually branch out to discuss the observations of others who are, I am afraid, too numerous to be done justice to in a single chapter. Divergences between the former and my own project will be employed as a template to guide the direction of the discussion.

Martha Nussbaum claims that literature, or at least the best literature, can evoke from us the fineness of perception requisite for moral judgment. She maintains that literature contributes to moral knowledge in two ways. First, it offers paradigms of conduct. Next, and perhaps more important, it draws us into a form of imaginative engagement and awareness that is vital for the deployment of what Nussbaum regards as a characteristically Aristotelian ethical perspective in all its complexity and responsiveness to human experience, a kind of awareness that is less accessible from the standpoint of "excessively simplistic and reductive approaches to human experience . . . that can be found in some parts of philosophy."[1] Nussbaum

[1] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998): 343–65, 347–8.

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emphasizes that "it is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling"[2] that makes some kinds of fiction an adjunct to ethical judgment. Vital to the exploration of such a moral stance are "(1) an insistence on the plurality and non-commensurability of a well lived life; (2) an insistence on the importance of contextual complexity and particularized judgment in good deliberation; (3) an insistence on the cognitive role of the emotions; (4) an insistence on human vulnerability and the vulnerability of the good."[3] In the preceding claims and explorations Nussbaum has come much closer than most philosophers to the provision of a satisfying and convincing account of what can happen at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics and of how it is that one can *do* ethics by perusing or creating literature. The claims which I will make throughout this book owe a great deal to some of the ground that Nussbaum has already broken, but depart from her assumptions in three ways.

First, while I absolutely agree that the ethical significance of literature crucially involves its eliciting of emotion, I do not believe that emotions are value judgments, as Nussbaum has maintained,[4] nor am I convinced that such an account of emotion is compatible with an emphasis on the role of emotion in our moral engagement with fiction. Second, I am more inclined to regard literature as a thought experiment which articulates hypothetical cases, elicits moral responses, and allows readers to test moral intuitions, to see whether different circumstances do or would make a fundamental difference in moral judgments or outcomes. This is not something that I see as being fundamentally at odds with Nussbaum's project, but it does involve a considerable difference in focus: on clarity rather than the kind of complexity and obscurity that make Nussbaum "see literary works as guides to what is mysterious and messy and dark in our experience."[5] I am inclined to see the tack I am taking, though perhaps Nussbaum would think it a mistake to do so, as another chapter of the *same* project she pursues, whose different concerns stem at least in part from the fairly radical difference we see in the style, tone, and axiological

[2] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82.10 (1985): 516–29, 521.

[3] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 348.

[4] Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," in *What Is an Emotion? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd edn, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 271–83. Originally published in *Relativism, Suffering, and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. P. Bilimoria and J.N. Mohanty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[5] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 348.

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predilections of Jane Austen and Henry James. And my third departure emerges from this, for I want to claim that the kind of Jamesian role that Nussbaum finds for fiction in moral discourse does not exhaust or, indeed, begin to exhaust the potentialities of fiction as an adjunct to practical reason. As is evident, the latter two departures are in the nature of friendly amendments rather than disagreements, and the first need not constitute an objection to Nussbaum's more general position on emotion and cognition, since she has been known to stress what she refers to as "the cognitive role of the imagination" in the context of her observations about literature and ethics.[6] It is to a discussion of that issue that I will first turn.

In "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance" Nussbaum contends that emotions are forms of judgment, explicitly arguing against accounts that would make relevant beliefs and perceptions mere constituents of the emotion (among other constituents which were not beliefs), or necessary or sufficient conditions for the emotion.[7] Thus, as seems clear from the preceding restrictions, judgments, as Nussbaum uses the term, are beliefs, or at least embody beliefs. Emotions "embody not simply ways of seeing an object, but beliefs – often very complex – about the object."[8] It is this outright identification of emotion with belief, however complex and incisive that belief happens to be, that is at the root of my difficulty. For it is not clear that such an account of emotion sits at all comfortably with intentional objects that are not believed to exist but are merely imagined. Nussbaum repeatedly emphasizes the particularity, the finetunedness, of the reader's attention. The proposition entertained by the reader in the course of an emotional response to a fiction could not, given this emphasis, involve some universal of which the fictional event represented a particular instance. Rather, the thought of the reader would have to be about a *particular* fictional event or entity. This means that, as Noel Carroll would put it, the relevant proposition would be entertained unasserted[9] – entertained in imagination *rather* than believed.

There are ways, of course, to make a belief-based account of emotion compatible with a story about an emotional response to fiction: by

[6] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 348.

[7] Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," 278.

[8] Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," 276 – this, despite a footnoted caveat to the effect that in some human and all animal emotions "the presence of a certain kind of *seeing as* . . . is sufficient for emotion" (fn. 5, p. 276).

[9] Noel Carroll, "Critical Study: *Mimesis as Make-Believe*," *Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (1995): 93.

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resorting to the aforementioned universals. Such an approach would be quite at odds with Nussbaum's insistence on particularity of focus, though it would provide us, as philosophers like Bijoy Boruah have pointed out, with a candidate belief that is not at odds with one's belief that one is dealing with a fiction.[10] Consider someone's emotional response of disapprobation upon contemplating some fictional depiction of injustice – Sir Thomas Bertram's attempt to bully Fanny Price into accepting Henry Crawford's proposal, say. This need not be tied to some specific thought about the very particular injustice which is done to Fanny: the purposeful aim that is taken at her vulnerabilities, the false charges of ingratitude, the sincere horror that is expressed at the idea of female autonomy. These things are, after all, merely entertained in imagination and are not believed real. Instead, the belief in question could be the belief that to be treated as the character is treated constitutes an injustice, that to induce unjustified guilt and self-loathing in others in order to get them to do something which they do not want to do can be a serious moral wrong. This would be a belief about a type or kind of action rather than about particular people and their treatment of one another, for the latter are things that one is well aware are fictional. However, this solution to the problem is unavailable to Nussbaum, for it does not accord with the kind of focused specificity of response that she believes the right kind of reading can involve, a reading in the course of which no paraphrase or summary can hope to capture what is morally valuable about a given literary passage.[11]

As will become evident, I am quite convinced that fictions very often give rise to just such universal beliefs as I have described and that these are extremely important in any assessment of the impact of literature on our moral lives, for beliefs about situation types or about kinds of people apply equally well to the fiction and to the world, a topic to which I return later. It is worth noting at this juncture, however, that such beliefs really cannot explain all of our emotional reactions to literature, some of which are clearly directed toward quite specific individuals and events, just as Nussbaum's stress on particularity leads us to believe they are. The latter must be addressed in any account that hopes to explain moral and emotional reactions to the fictional. Luckily, nothing suggests that we have to choose between the two approaches, for they are not mutually exclusive. My position is that literature elicits *both* kinds of responses and that no account of the moral impact of fiction can be complete without

[10] Bijoy H. Boruah, *Fiction and Emotion: A Study in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 108–17.
[11] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 522.

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addressing each. But that does little to solve the problem which presently confronts us.

Neither beliefs about situation types nor far more specific beliefs about what is fictionally the case will have the right kinds of intentional objects, if what we are searching for is a cognition that corresponds to an emotional response to fiction as Nussbaum has described it. If we delight in Elizabeth Bennett's defiance of Lady Catherine or empathetically share her regret over having made critically over-hasty judgments, then our delight and regret are about something we have imagined, not something that we believe has occurred. Setting aside the important question of the way in which what we imagine is guided by how it is that an author has put things, something that I believe Nussbaum is perfectly right about, but which will overcomplicate the present discussion, we need to consider the intentional object of a belief about what is fictionally the case. We do believe, after all, that Elizabeth Bennett is a fictional character, and that her courage and her feelings are likewise the products of an author's pen. We believe that it is fictional that Elizabeth Bennett has a witty and acerbic father, that she is brave, that she regrets having made certain judgments about Darcy and his motives. That is, we may believe any number of things about what is fictionally the case, but a fictional character remains a theoretical entity of literary criticism,[12] and as such it can have neither virtues nor sensitivities nor, indeed, non-metaphorical parents. And the belief that it is fictional that Elizabeth Bennett is brave is rather about the fictionality of a state of affairs than about something that would elicit our admiration. I suppose that a belief about the fictionality of something *could* elicit our admiration in circumstances where the fictionality itself is admirable: "You made that *up*? What an imagination you have!" But this is certainly not the kind of case under consideration. If admiration of Elizabeth Bennett on account of her courage, or disapproval of Sir Thomas Bertram on account of his maddening and narrow-minded certainty that he has a right to make everyone's decisions for them, involve cognitions (thinking that is liable to rational assessment), as I agree with Nussbaum that they do, then these are thoughts entertained in imagination rather than beliefs. I am therefore happy to concede that there is a cognitive aspect of emotional reactions to fictional entities and events, but must insist that the candidate cognition is a thought entertained in imagination. This does not rule out the possibility that emotions with

[12] Peter Van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977): 299–308. See also, Nicholas Wolterstorff on characters as person-kinds in *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 144–9.

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connections to beliefs can be aroused by literature, as has been indicated above. However, the latter have broader intentional objects – they would not be responses to specific fictional characters and incidents.

My second departure from Nussbaum's approach, though I hope to have shown that the initial difference is not a vast one, is in regard to my contention that literature serves some of the same functions that thought experiments do in ethics, though often with considerably more effectiveness. I describe this as a departure not because I think Nussbaum's account is in some way incompatible with it, but because the Jamesian concern with subtleties and mysterious or obscure distinctions seems rather different from the stark simplicity of the (often maligned) intuition pump, the kind of thought experiment with which fiction is most frequently associated. The term, I am told, originates with Daniel Dennett, in whose capable hands I leave the explanation:

> If you look at the history of philosophy, you see that all the great and influential stuff has been technically full of holes but utterly memorable and vivid. They are what I call "intuition pumps" – lovely thought experiments. Like Plato's cave, and Descartes's evil demon, and Hobbes' vision of the state of nature and the social contract, and even Kant's idea of the categorical imperative. I don't know of any philosopher who thinks any one of those is a logically sound argument for anything. But they're wonderful imagination grabbers, jungle gyms for the imagination. They structure the way you think about a problem. These are the real legacy of the history of philosophy. A lot of philosophers have forgotten that, but I like to make intuition pumps.
>
> I like to think I'm drifting back to what philosophy used to be, which has been forgotten in many quarters in philosophy during the last thirty or forty years, when philosophy has become a sometimes ridiculously technical and dry, logic-chopping subject for a lot of people – applied logic, applied mathematics. There's always a place for that, but it's nowhere near as big a place as a lot of people think.
>
> I coined the term "intuition pump," and its first use was derogatory. I applied it to John Searle's "Chinese room," which I said was not a proper argument but just an intuition pump. I went on to say that intuition pumps are fine if they're used correctly, but they can also be misused. They're not arguments, they're stories. Instead of having a conclusion, they pump an intuition. They get you to say "Aha! Oh, I get it!"[13]

If fiction is to be regarded as a thought experiment, then it will most often be so regarded with Dennett's intuition pump firmly in mind.

[13] http://www.edge.org/documents/ThirdCulture/r-Ch.10.html

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I will try to show that Nussbaum's Jamesian approach, however subtle and amenable to our apprehension of the obscure and the ambiguous, nonetheless encourages a clear and disambiguating alliance between literary works and certain kinds of ethical arguments. I will also attempt to establish that considering literary works outright as thought experiments requires one to take into account various kinds of subtleties and ambiguities in content and to consider as well the impact of literary form on how it is one takes that content. That is, I believe that Nussbaum's approach, in some respects at least, *does* treat literature as a thought experiment, and that different literary styles and concerns give rise to quite distinct forms of thought experiment. But, as some readers will doubtless note, I use the term "thought experiment" rather broadly.

First, in arguing against Posner's criticism of her work, Nussbaum makes it clear that the moral import of many works hinges on neither complexity nor obscurity. Dickens' novels, for instance, are said to "take us into the lives of those who are different in circumstance from ourselves and enable us to understand how similar hopes and fears are differently realized in different social circumstances."[14] This is clearly much the same process that we employ when we empathize with actual people. We form beliefs about their distinct situations and then proceed to imagine what it would be like to experience them. Although Nussbaum maintains that empathy in itself isn't always sufficient for compassion, it seems clear that both fiction and empathy lead us to inhabit the worlds of others in imagination, just as they both encourage the adoption of alien perspectives. This is surely not insignificant when we choose to regard literature with an eye to its impact on our ethical lives. Neither need this aspect of our encounters with fiction be hindered by complexities and obscurity. In the case of the Dickens example, at least, much of the ethical impact of the work centers on dispelling illusions and clarifying facts.

My own contention about Hume and Austen isn't simply that Austen provides us with illustrations of Hume's ethical stance, though it will be necessary to establish a range of such similarities at the outset. I would like to establish further, beyond these initial parallels, that Austen's novels may be regarded as thought experiments that *demonstrate* (at least in the loose sense employed by devotees of the intuition pump) something about the kind of moral reasoning that Hume advocates, that engage us in that rational/emotional process as part and parcel of our imaginative participation in the work.

[14] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 350.

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Consider the simplest kinds of thought experiments, especially thought experiments in ethics, and how they work. Many of these are intended to test the effectiveness or applicability of moral principles (often by providing counterexamples) in a way that depends almost entirely on our immediate reactions to particular cases. Utilitarians present us with examples in which a rigid adherence to moral rules – the rule of promise-keeping, say – prevents an agent from saving a life. Deontologists, on the other hand, muster an arsenal of cases in which insignificant increases in utility are obtainable only at the expense of someone's life or someone's rights, attempting to show that utilitarians would be required by their ethical system to take lives and trample rights without compunction. Such examples cannot assume the truth of the presenter's ethical stance without begging the question. They clearly do not assume the truth of the principle they are intended to criticize. The point of such thought experiments *must* be to confront the audience with a case to which they *react* as wrong, in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of the principle under consideration. Since this reaction should properly depend neither on the principle under review nor on that preferred by the presenter of the example, it seems clear that what is essential to the entire process is the emotional reaction of the auditor. That is, thought experiments, and the manner in which ethicists deploy them, suggest in themselves that emotion can play a serious role in ethics, something that Hume maintains from the outset when he claims that the source of morality is to be found in sentiment, and that our emotional reactions of approbation and disapprobation provide the key to identifying virtue and vice.

Some may maintain that if Austen were conducting thought experiments, she would have joined Hume as a *teller* of moral principles, assuming with Roy Sorensen that literary works cannot be regarded as thought experiments because their authors didn't create them with this purpose in mind.[15] But philosophers like Noel Carroll, Eileen John, Martha Nussbaum, and others suggest, as we have seen, that fiction can cause us to examine what concepts mean and can lead readers to apply them to characters and events on the basis of their actual conceptual commitments, ascribing to fiction the kind of clarificatory function typically associated with thought experiments. The same mechanism is thought to govern our reactions to fiction and to the world, leading these philosophers, just as Hume has done, to stress the connection between ethical salience and emotional response.

[15] See Simon Blackburn, "Thought Experiment," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 377; Roy A. Sorensen, *Thought Experiments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 289.

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Fiction is not a work of philosophy, but it can have philosophical value nonetheless. In this sense, then, it can be held by even the most conservative to do some of the work of a thought experiment.

Of course, Martha Nussbaum is not the only philosopher who has proposed treating fiction as the kind of thought experiment whose nature has just been sketched here, though she and Eileen John[16] are among the few to focus in considerable detail on literature itself – and on *the manner in which* literature may fulfill such a function. They are also among the few who do so with reference to the effects of literary form on this function. But there are other philosophers with a good deal to say about the matter. Noel Carroll, Berys Gaut, Matthew Kieran, Bashshar Haydar, James Harold, Amy Mullin, Mary Devereaux, and a score of others have all written, many at length, on the moral evaluation of art.[17] I cannot hope to do justice to the impressive body of philosophy that is represented by these names, but I can attempt to offer a general account of my own of the relationship between fiction and moral knowledge, an account that

[16] Eileen John, "Art and Knowledge," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 329–40. See also: "Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 331–48; "Subtlety and Moral Vision in Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995): 308–19.

[17] Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 223–38. Carroll goes on in several articles to argue that literature can be a source of moral knowledge and education. See, e.g., "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.1 (2002): 3–26. See also "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 126–60. Roughly similar approaches have been taken by: Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–205; Oliver Conolly and Bashshar Haydar, "Narrative Art and Moral Knowledge," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (April 2001): 109–24; Matthew Kieran, "In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Narrative Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (January 2001): 26–38; Amy Mullin, "Evaluating Art: Significant Imagining v. Moral Soundness," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.2 (2002): 137–49. Contributions have been made by Mary Devereaux in "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Levinson, pp. 227–56 and "Moral Judgments and Works of Art: The Case of Narrative Literature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62 (2004): 3–11. There are also significant contributions from James Harold in "On Judging the Moral Value of Narrative Artworks," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 259–70; "Infected by Evil," *Philosophical Explorations* 8 (2005): 173–87, "Narrative Engagement with *Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin*," *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005): 130–45; and "Flexing the Imagination," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 247–57.

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arises out of the discussion in which I and the aforementioned philosophers have for some time been engaged.[18]

Any investigation of fiction as a contributor to moral knowledge, whether or not one regards that knowledge as relevant to the aesthetic value of a work, brings with it as a corollary the assumption that fiction may be implicated in negative moral effects. My own entry into the discussion came as the result of my interest in David Hume's contentions about our disinclination to enter into moral perspectives that are alien to us. In "Of the Standard of Taste" Hume speaks of works in which "vicious manners are described, without being marked with . . . disapprobation" (ST 246).[19] We cannot "enter into such sentiments; and however [we] . . . may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, [we] . . . never can relish the composition" (ST 246). There is a wide literature on imaginative resistance, spearheaded by some fascinating work by Tamar Szabo Gendler, who takes the preceding to identify "the puzzle of imaginative resistance: the puzzle of explaining our comparative difficulty in imagining morally deviant worlds," a conundrum especially in view of the fact that we experience no difficulty whatsoever in imagining empirically deviant ones.[20] Although she considers and rejects Kendall Walton's claim that we're unable to engage imaginatively with a work which requires us to imagine conceptual impossibilities,[21] she concedes in the end (at least in the last conference paper I heard) that there may be a few cases of this kind. I want to say that they are more frequent than Gendler and other philosophers are willing to allow, and that a stance which focuses our attention on conceptual impossibilities has a direct bearing on the question of moral knowledge. Consider the following as a rough approximation of the central point. We cannot imagine what we cannot conceive. If we are asked to imagine the acceptability of conduct of a kind we believe is never

[18] I have published on related topics in the fourth chapter of my book *What's Hecuba to Him? Fictional Events and Actual Emotions* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1997) and in "Only Kidding: the Connection between Amusement and Our Attitudes," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 22.2 (2006): 1–16; "Knowing Better: The Epistemic Underpinnings of Moral Criticism of Fiction," *Southwest Philosophy Review* 21.1 (2005): 35–44; "Pleased and Afflicted: Hume on the Paradox of Tragic Pleasure," *Hume Studies* 30.2 (November 2004): 213–36; and "The Vicious Habits of Entirely Fictive People: Hume on the Moral Evaluation of Art," *Philosophy and Literature* 26 (2002): 38–51.

[19] Thanks to Susan Feagin and Aaron Meskin, who argued with me about issues related to this claim, thereby forcing me into a position of greater consistency.

[20] Tamar Szabo Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Journal of Philosophy* 47 (February 2000): 55–81.

[21] Kendall Walton, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality (I)," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 68 (1994): 27–50.

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permissible (via the endorsement of an omniscient narrator say), if we are asked to imagine it approvingly, we may well encounter imaginative resistance unless, of course, the fiction leads us to change our minds and come to consider that it is possible, at least on occasion, for such conduct to be acceptable. I concede that the moral cases of imaginative resistance that are most plausible tend to be extreme ones: white supremacist literature is a case in point. It is most obvious in such cases that our concept of what is morally permissible undermines our ability to adopt attitudes of approval toward what we imagine, and that is just because we cannot imagine what we cannot conceive (and we cannot conceive that genocide, say, is an admirable course of action). Naturally, it is a simple matter to imagine that some character or other believes that the conduct in question is permissible even if we do not. But we ourselves cannot imagine that conduct is permissible unless we believe it is *possible* for actions of that kind to be right.

Of course, the kinds of endorsements made in fictions do not typically challenge our moral concepts in such blatant ways. We will usually imagine that it is possible that the kind of behavior endorsed in a fiction is permissible in one circumstance or another. As regards endorsement, while some works are ambiguous on this score, there exist a considerable number in which endorsements are indisputable, in which it is true in the world of the work that certain conduct is correct or laudable – perhaps only in the special circumstances with which the fiction presents us. In such cases, our entering into the work's endorsement may merely amount to our believing that conduct of this kind is permissible in some carefully delimited range of cases. We will often enter into such endorsements. But the fact that we cannot *always* do so is something which strongly suggests that moral (and probably other) attitudes transcend fictional contexts. It is the negative case, more than the positive one, that clarifies the connection between moral concepts and the imagination.

The central matter of interest here is not about how often it turns out that we are afflicted by imaginative resistance, but about the epistemic underpinnings of the imagination. The resistance phenomenon suggests that imaginatively entering into a fiction's endorsements makes us complicit in its perspective on the world. I have described fictions as thought experiments because fictions engage us at the level of our epistemic and conceptual commitments, and a thought experiment is a device which enables us to discern possibilities and to clarify concepts. Thought experiments in ethics can reinforce or refine or even revise our conceptions of what is right or virtuous or just. And fictions can do the same. To imaginatively engage with a fiction and imaginatively enter into its endorsements can

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be to accede to certain judgments – that some behaviors are permissible given a particular set of alternatives, that some forms of decision-making morally mandate an initial attempt to acquire information, that one thing can count as evidence for another. We don't believe in the existence of fictional characters or states of affairs, but we have plenty of beliefs about what can count as evidence, about what is permissible in different ranges of situations, about what kind of information is necessary if one is to make a competent decision. Those beliefs may be reinforced by our perusal of a literary work. They may be undermined when a work invites us to imagine exceptions or presents us with counterexamples. A belief may even be refined, as a fiction leads us to imagine a new way of considering evidence or justifying a decision. Imagination and hypothetical thinking in general cannot be severed from their conceptual underpinnings. If we cannot imagine what we cannot conceive, then what we can imagine is something to the possibility of which we have acceded.

I hope that the preceding has established at least a few grounds for regarding fiction as a particular kind of thought experiment. I will next try to show that differences in the style and content of literary works will yield very different kinds of contributions to moral knowledge and to moral reasoning. As Nussbaum says, "not all readers will have the same ethical view or project; thus a work that bores or offends one reader ethically may be exactly what the other is looking for."[22] So, for those of us who find Henry James perhaps a little impenetrable, a little muffled in ambiguities, for those who are sometimes a little dizzied by the unremitting insistence on fineness of perception, there is still hope. There is more than one kind of ethical project. More to the point, as philosophers like Adam Morton have suggested, the deployment of reliable moral principles is only one part of an exponentially larger ethical story about how it is one ought to live one's life. Much human misery occurs, not because of sadism and cruelty and other commonplace vices and transgressions, "but because a large number of people act with limited care and imagination."[23] It is safe to assume that most literature will have what moral impact it does, not on account of the mere depiction of the applicability of various principles to different situations, but on account of an exploration of a multitude of other possible phenomena that can affect our moral lives. I will claim that both the phenomena so explored and the mode of exploration will differ with the pen.

[22] Nussbaum, "Exactly and Responsibly," 356.
[23] Adam Morton, *On Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 5.

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One of the things that a Jamesian literary approach will incline us toward, according to Nussbaum, will be the adoption of an Aristotelian ethical perspective. That is, "to respond 'at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best,'" a clear characteristic of the virtuous life.[24] This is a kind of responsiveness that Jamesian characters are said to demonstrate (although I am inclined to argue that their way is not the only way to demonstrate it) and that is elicited from readers of James by both the content and form of his prose (although, again, other types of form and content may do so as well). Just as Jamesian character may show "a respect for the irreducibly concrete moral context . . . [and] a determination to scrutinize all aspects of this particular with intensely focused perception,"[25] so the reader is invited to pay the very kind of moral attention that the novel demonstrates, to share the character's scrutiny of appearances and deploy a sensitivity to nuance that, in the end, can cultivate such habits for exercise in life.

And just as a reader of James may, in the end, pay the kind of moral attention to events in her own life that James' characters do to events in their lives and that James does to what he writes about, so an inveterate reader of Austen may, in the course of reading her work, begin to exhibit a pattern of moral attention that is cultivated by this practice. But here the differences begin, and they are enormous. Where James is complex and obscure and subtle, and prone to delve into a kind of moral microscopy of observation, Austen is direct, naturalistic, acerbic, and more than a little cold. There are no sensitive, metaphorical images or delvings into the minutiae of a given motivation. Rather, Austen mocks, strips away rationalizations, and reveals what is contemptible quite ruthlessly.

I will indulge myself here in a restrained and abbreviated diatribe simply to forestall confusion on the part of those readers who are more familiar with film versions of Austen's work and to whom the above description will probably seem utterly alien. A few recent screen offerings, *Pride and Prejudice* (written by Deborah Moggach and directed by Joe Wright)[26] and *Mansfield Park* (the 1999 Miramax iteration) for example, seem almost exclusively to be populated by Brontë[00EB] people, swooning and

[24] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 525.

[25] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 526.

[26] For a splendidly enraged review of this film, which happily led me to the first of the Virginia Woolf quotations below, see Gina Fattore, "Pride and Pathetic," on Salon.com, December 21, 2005. http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/movies/feature/2005/12/21/pride/index.html

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sighing, rather than any such persons as Austen may have had in mind (with the possible exception of Marianne Dashwood in any version of *Sense and Sensibility*). Here is my heretical thought on the matter, or at least heretical by Hollywood standards. Austen is not a romantic novelist. She writes novels about romantic entanglements, but she in not often inclined to be sentimental in the pejorative sense. I defer to Virginia Woolf's description of Austen's writing: "Never, even at the emotional age of fifteen, did she . . . obliterate a sarcasm in a spasm of compassion, or blur an outline in a mist of rhapsody. Spasms and rhapsodies, she seems to have said, pointing with her stick, end THERE; and the boundary line is perfectly distinct."[27] Austen's novels raise questions about character and human nature, present moral dilemmas, and address concerns about human interaction in a naturalistic setting, as do James' novels. But Austen addresses such questions in a way that shows just how infernally proximity can chafe, how ludicrous pretensions and overgenerous self-assessments really are, how narrow is the point of vantage from which it is possible for most people to see the world. Austen holds the world up for ridicule by pinpointing its idiocies. She doesn't inevitably make us aware of the myriad subtleties in human interaction and decision. What is inevitable is her drawing our attention to what is salient in those interactions and those choices. She is not, as it were, a focuser in, but a refiner. Delusions and self-deceptions are burned away with the kind of unscrupulous clarity that makes her very much a child of the Enlightenment. Austen's writing is spare – it is both less beautiful and less poetic than that of James. Austen writes about ordinary things in a direct way, with no heroics in her prose or her subject matter. Virginia Woolf compares certain aspects of Austen's writing to Greek drama:

> It is thus, with a thousand differences of degree, that in English literature Jane Austen shapes a novel. There comes a moment – "I will dance with you," says Emma [Watson] – which rises higher than the rest, which, though not eloquent in itself, or violent, or made striking by beauty of language, has the whole weight of the book behind it. In Jane Austen, too, we have the same sense, though the ligatures are much less tight, that her figures are bound, and restricted to a few definite movements. She, too, in her modest, everyday prose, chose the dangerous art where one slip means death.[28]

[27] Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, First Series (1925). Project Gutenberg of Australia ebook. http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0300031.txt
[28] Ibid.

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But this does not, I think, make her work any less likely to engage us morally than that of James. The nature of that engagement will simply be different – more amenable to the tastes and predispositions and ethical projects of some readers than others, as Nussbaum has pointed out. It is possible, of course, to profit from both.

Yet it is easy to see how a James person, an inveterate reader of James, would find Austen too ordinary, too narrow, too unreflecting and unlyrical. And one can see how an Austen person might look at the passage from *The Golden Bowl* as Nussbaum has explicated it for us, the passage in which Maggie realizes that "she cannot love her husband except by banishing her father. But if she banishes her father, he will live unhappy and die alone."[29] It is not that the passage would not be moving for an Austen person. The fantastic and lyrical sea metaphor, the father's recognition of and wish for his daughter's freedom, his sacrifice and renunciation, could not fail to move most readers. But an Austen person would wipe his eyes and proceed to irritate a devotee of James to distraction by wondering, after due consideration, why it had to happen just that way, why such a sacrifice was necessary, why no compromise was possible. Since when are loves mutually exclusive? Why could not the relationship with the father grow and evolve to make room for the relationship with the husband? Would everyday people with an understandable distaste for supererogation not, in everyday parlance, try to have their cake and eat it too? Or at least give it a try before deciding it had to be one or the other? This is not, I absolutely concede, the right way to read that passage in James. At least it is not the way to read it if one hopes to learn the things that Henry James has to teach us. But it illustrates just the kind of thing that can happen when someone with a different ethical attunement, an ear to different kinds of ethical concerns, gets ahold of James. It sometimes isn't pretty. If the experience of reading James does involve us in a thought experiment of sorts, it is of a different species from the kind in which reading Austen involves us.

For purposes of comparison, let me finish this chapter with an illustration of the kind of ethical and even aesthetic attunement that I believe is fostered by reading Jane Austen without, at this stage, resorting to Hume. Most of the rest of this book is replete with comparisons between David Hume and Jane Austen. At the present juncture, however, let us allow Austen to stand on her own, if only as a promissory note that suggests how it is that Austen may help us understand some things that philosophical writing alone may not. I have purposely chosen an example in

[29] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 518.

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which no argument or counterexample is embedded (many examples of the latter type will be offered later) in an effort to simplify the process. The following is a single, albeit capacious, sentence from *Persuasion*. Captain Benwick has not yet recovered from the loss of his fiancée a year past. Anne Elliot is sympathetic, and engages him in conversation about things literary:

> Though shy, he did not seem reserved; it had rather the appearance of feelings glad to burst their usual restraints; and having talked of poetry, the richness of the present age, and gone through a brief comparison of opinion as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bride of Abydos*; and moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced, he showed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other; he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to be understood, that she ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry, and to say, that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly. (P 100–1)

Here we have a young man who has lost someone he loves, and whose loss is blunted just enough by time to enable him to indulge in a little literary wallowing. He sees himself, a little absurdly, in the suffering heroes of Scott and Byron. He wants others to identify him as just such a sufferer: destroyed, wretched, deprived of love forever by a cruel fate – a tragic hero. Yet, just as is true in the case of the paradox of tragedy, it is clear that this identification and the requisite self-image are not devoid of enjoyment, that there is some compensation in casting oneself in a role typically taken on by poetic principals. Benwick has, clearly, become a little too fond of exercising his distress and sorrow, awakening and reawakening them in a passionate identification with characters too romantic for real life. Indeed, Austen conveys with greater subtlety here something that she is more direct about in *Northanger Abbey*: a critical attitude toward melodrama and high romanticism. Yet doubt is never cast on Benwick's distress. It is simply made clear that this distress can coexist with pleasanter experiences. And Anne's genuine kindness, her wish to help Benwick and, without injuring his pride, to detach him from his habits of identification are also made clear. The depiction of Benwick here is absolutely characteristic of Austen. We are led to see through the Byronic

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pretensions with amusement and contempt. But the contempt is not unkind and our amusement so benign that we cannot help but like him. Austen is less kind to other characters: no villain escapes being laughed at. It is a signal virtue of her prose to uncover the ridiculous in the least expected places. It is another virtue of her stories that she offers us blended people, always composites: never entirely bad, though sometimes entirely irritating, never entirely good, though sometimes frustrated by aspiring to such impossibilities, usually a combination of the admirable and the less so. That is, Jane Austen does not present us with ideals to live up to but with versions of ourselves, or our annoying college roommates, or our husband's mother, or the Vice President of Academic Affairs: always vivid, always believable, often as irritating as their real-life counterparts. And she teaches us how not to take them (or our expectations of them) too seriously. This is a moral lesson of a usefulness that cannot be underestimated.

Most remarkable, perhaps, is how Austen illustrates in one sentence the development of a friendship. The very rhythms of the prose that delimit the progress of the conversation mimic the emotional progress of that friendship. We begin with delight in discovery of a common interest and even greater delight in the identification of favorite authors, exhibited in a flurry of swift interchanges and excited questions. There is the happy discovery of a willing ear, open to confidences and questions, the sheer satisfaction of commonality. Then, on the basis of the mutuality which has been established, a different tone is adopted. Something personal, flimsily disguised in poetic allusion, is tentatively exposed. This is the beginning of vulnerability. A segue from the literary to the almost intimate. Will the other person be put off? Will she pretend not to understand? Is it permissible? Yes. The intimacy is not only acknowledged, but accepted. Only friends can give advice with concern and affection. The relationship, which began with books, is cemented into friendship by advice about books. More prose, says Anne, to leaven the poetry, more work by the moralists of the day. She recommends memoirs of real-life non-Byronic sorts who have had a hard time of it but refrain from wailing. The pattern here, both vivid and convincing, is of a swiftly evolving friendship, created through and by conversation, and through and by literature as well, beginning with commonalities and likemindedness, turning to timid but hopeful self-exposure, moving through acceptance and a kind of joining of interests. Benwick's imperfections are no bar to friendship. Indeed, later in the same book, we learn that the best company is "is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation" (P 150). Stupidity and ignorance and uncommunicativeness form more of a bar to companionship than a few personal foibles.

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Without belaboring the point, it is worth noting that a few other interesting things are suggested by the passage. We learn that sentiment is a necessary adjunct to the understanding of art, but that such sentiments must be regulated. We also learn that misery may sometimes be ameliorated not by changing one's circumstances, but by changing the objects of one's attention. Finally, we learn that literature, and reading in general, has the power to change the emotional tenor of one's life, that it resonates with and can reflect that life. Benwick uses literature as a kind of model in accordance with which to reinvest himself in his personal tragedy. Anne, seeing this, suggests a shift in literary subject from abject despair to fortitude, counting on a resonance of emotion between literary or biographical subject and reader. We, seeing Anne's sympathy for Benwick and (possibly also understanding exactly how it is that one can make friends over books), share it, and feel with her both the mild amusement and the affectionate concern. Benwick appeals to us because he appeals to Anne. He literally appeals to her for understanding, and figuratively appeals to her as a slightly absurd but endearing companion.

It would be difficult to regard a single sentence, however commodious, as a thought experiment. But there is something to be said here for the possibility that our conception of what constitutes an acceptable companion, or our conception of the role of vulnerability in the forming of a friendship, or our conception of the effects of literature on the emotional tone and attunement of our lives, may expand to accommodate some of the ideas conveyed by means of that sentence. In James, what is characteristic of a reading that holds ethical significance is the concentration, the ever finer focus, the transition to a sudden poetic metaphor or symbol that leaves us grasping for associations, sometimes bewildered by the loveliness of the images, often following out an unexpected analogy it presents. In Austen, such a reading is entirely different, for it counts on our *recognition* of the kinds of character traits and situations and interactions it presents. It takes our familiarity and then reconfigures it, shows us incongruities that hitherto escaped us, always noticing the absurdity of people and their desirable and undesirable connectedness to one another. If there is a laughing gaze that can be cast upon the world then Austen has it. It is a gaze that is at best sporadically kind. It is more often sympathetic in the sense Hume used that word, for we can enter into a given character's perspective without a touch of pity. It reveals the ordinary for what it is – an arena for the exhibition of human character.

With that in mind, we will soon proceed to consider correspondences between Hume and Austen. I have stated at the outset that Austen's works enable readers to see the world through the lens of a Humean

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perspective. But I will also want to make a few further claims, which will also have to rest on the investigation of the aforementioned correspondences. I believe that a Humean reading or interpretation of Austen can provide the most satisfying and complete picture of the insights her works convey, more so than would a Shaftesburian or Kantian or Aristotelian reading. That is, I believe that a Humean perspective can help us see things in Austen we haven't seen before. And conversely, I believe that Austen's prose can help to elaborate productively, and sometimes surprisingly, on elements of Hume's philosophy. These two claims will be reserved for the final chapter. But before we begin delving into the correspondences whose investigation must precede it, a final foray must be made into the question of literary form, the impact it has on content, and the role it might play in literature when it is conceived of as a thought experiment. What are the crucial differences between literary prose and exposition? It should not come as a shock that someone who takes a consuming interest in producing a naturalistic depiction of human virtues and foibles, who likes to trace out with her characters how life could be and could have gone and the impact we can have on it – is going to have a radically different agenda from a philosopher. And it should also not surprise us that some of those depictions can venture into arenas less accessible or not accessible at all to typical philosophical prose, or even the far less typical prose of David Hume.