

# Aesthetic Criticism, Interpretation, and the Creation of Ideals

Sharon Bailin  
*Simon Fraser University*

## INTRODUCTION

A central issue underlying Professor Taylor's address, that of the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic, is one with a long and lively history. From Plato's banishment of the poets for their potential harm to the moral fiber of the republic, to Sir Philip Sydney's eloquent defense of the ethical power of poetry, and beyond, views about the potential of the aesthetic for ethical good or ill have proliferated. Despite the move in contemporary analytic philosophy to deny such a connection, theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Noël Carroll have continued a productive exploration of the aesthetic-ethical relationship.

In his essay, Professor Taylor advances this conversation, but also moves it in a new direction. Adding stands of critical race theory, cultural criticism, and Emersonian perfectionism to that of critical aesthetics, Taylor weaves a tapestry intricate in its design and suggestive in its depictions. In what follows, I shall tug at several of the threads, but I do this primarily in the service of extending the design and adding detail to what is a richly textured, insightful, and original work.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ETHICAL AND THE AESTHETIC

The first issue that I shall explore is the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical that forms the warp and woof of Taylor's view, and those of the two theorists upon whose work he draws. I want to examine how, exactly, they view the nature of this relationship, and what the implications are for the kind of critical practice that Taylor supports.

I shall use as a starting point a passage from Taylor's essay in which he makes reference to the examples that Carroll uses to explicate his view of the aesthetic-ethical relationship:

Carroll makes his point by appealing to narratives that are good, both aesthetically and morally. His examples — *The Third Man*, *Great Expectations*, and *Howard's End* — state moral truths, and they do so by putting skillful artists to work in the service of moral truth. But less skillful artists, working unwittingly in the grip of moral errors, can open different analytic possibilities.

Taylor makes this statement in the context of a further argument, but I am moved by the associations between skillful artists and moral truths, and less skillful artists and moral errors, to inquire about the other two possible permutations: What of skillful artists whose works purvey moral errors? Or less skilled artists whose works state moral truths? There seems no reason, on this account, to think that a less skilled artist could not be in the grip of moral truth, although his lack of skill might result in the work not achieving a fleshed-out and nuanced portrayal. And, presumably, a skillful artist could achieve a persuasive and sympathetic rendering of the mind and motives of an evildoer reveling in a life of crime. The latter seems to me, on this account, to be a candidate example of a skillful artist purveying moral errors.

I do not, however, find these depictions of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value persuasive. I am not convinced that the artist whose work lacks the requisite aesthetic skill to create a nuanced portrayal is producing a morally edifying work. Nor am I convinced that the artist who gives us a compelling portrayal of the reasons of the villain is not producing such a work. I shall elaborate on these points in due course.

But first I want to point to what I think is a fundamental difficulty underlying the preceding account, and that is the view that works of narrative art state moral truths or purvey moral errors, and that, further, their ethical worth resides in the degree to which they achieve these ends. The idea that a complex, nuanced, and linguistically rich work of narrative art can be seen as stating anything so precise and unambiguous as a truth seems highly problematic. Works of narrative art are ambiguous, trope-laden, and multivoiced. Notions of authorial intention are notoriously problematic, and challenges of determining meaning are endemic. Such works demand interpretation, and rich works invite and support multiple viable interpretations. We, as readers, are required to be active interpreters of narrative works, and the process of interpretation is fundamental to how and what we learn from such works.

Taylor, Carroll, and others rightly criticize the views of contemporary theorists who would deny that art can have cognitive content, that we can learn from art, or that art can serve a moral function. Nonetheless, the idea that something as layered, multivoiced, and metaphorically charged as a novel could be seen as stating a truth drains the work of the complexity and ambiguity, which are among its chief artistic, cognitive, and, as I shall argue, ethical virtues.

I find this language of moral truths and errors interesting, given what I take to be the primary insights of both Carroll's and Nussbaum's accounts. Whether the ethical value of narrative art is conceptualized, with Carroll, in terms of the clarification of our moral concepts or, with Nussbaum, in terms of the cultivation of our moral perceptions, neither view seems to depend on any conception of such works as purveying moral truths or errors (despite the fact that both authors do, at times, use this language). Rather, the ethical value of these works is tied in with their ability to foster the kind of rich, nuanced perception and conceptual discrimination upon which ethical deliberation depends.

Moreover, as Nussbaum argues, such benefits are available through contact with aesthetically skillful works that are "elaborate, linguistically fine-tuned, concrete, intensely focused, [and] metaphorically resourceful."<sup>1</sup> This is because the kind of perception at issue involves an accurate and nuanced grasp of particulars, and such an understanding can only be expressed in the subtle, precise, and rich language that is the characteristic of good literature. As Nussbaum puts it, "A responsible action...is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic."<sup>2</sup> To return to our previous examples, I would argue that the skilled artist who provides us with "elaborate, linguistically fine-tuned, concrete, intensely focused,

metaphorically resourceful” portrayals, even when these depict the reasons of the villain, is working in the service of moral edification. On the other hand, works which lack such aesthetic subtlety and lucidity, which rely on cliché, stereotype, or stock responses, do not contribute significantly to moral edification, however morally worthy the intentions of the writer might be.

An implication of the connection I have posited between the aesthetic merit of a narrative and its moral worth is that the kinds of flaws that Taylor identifies as ethically problematic are, at the same time, aesthetic failings. For example, Taylor is critical of the portrayal of Idi Amin in the film *The Last Kind of Scotland* for its reliance on the narrative device of the innocent white hero set in contrast to the savage black villain.<sup>3</sup> Instead of “truly giving the spectator a portrait of the dictator, and instead of providing a glimpse of the individual, complex *person* who did the terrible things that Amin did,” the film falls back on the racialized stereotype of the irrational black tyrant (emphasis in original). The perpetuation of racialized stereotypes is a ground for ethical censure, but the reliance on culturally conditioned stereotypes in lieu of rounded, fleshed-out portrayals is also an *aesthetic* flaw. It fails to deliver the kind of “accurate and nuanced grasp of particulars” that might add to our insight into “a person who did terrible things,” and thus enhance our ethical understanding and deliberations.

What this construal of the aesthetic-ethical connection points toward is the importance of the tools of aesthetic analysis for ethical criticism. One way in which a focus on the aesthetic features of a work might contribute to ethical awareness is through fostering the recognition that the images and situations we encounter in fictional works are constructions. And concepts such as genre, style, convention, point of view, characterization, and stereotype can provide the critical purchase for exploring possible meanings of a work, and for “deconstructing” these constructions. This opens the way for exploring various repeated patterns of portrayal (Taylor’s notion of the drama of moral gentrification being a telling example). In addition to questions of the meanings of particular works and the images they create, we also are in a position to ask: How are they created? By whom? For what effect or purpose? In whose interest? Why do they work (or not)? Why do they work *on us*?

This focus on aesthetic critique highlights the centrality of the practice of interpretation. The rich, metaphorical, and ambiguous nature of aesthetically skillful narratives opens up possibilities for multiple interpretations, thus placing the audience squarely in the active role of interpreter of texts and images, rather than in the passive role of receiver. The interpreter interacts critically with the possibilities offered by the narrative, and becomes engaged with the ethical deliberations it engenders, both within the work and outside of it.

Acts of interpretation are not totally free, but take place within various constraints. These include constraints given by (1) the text, in terms of both content and formal elements (for example, genre, stylistic, and narrative conventions; (2) the social and historical contexts within which the text was shaped and within which we find ourselves as interpreters (including these contexts’ cultural distortions and

structural inequalities); and (3) who we are, including both our explicit beliefs and the kind of assimilated reaction patterns that Taylor highlights. We bring ourselves to the act of interpretation within a context where both the work and our own outlook and reactions have been shaped to various extents and in various ways by social and cultural conditions. Some works will accord with our expectations, and others will defy them. But it is the awareness of our active role as interpreters that positions us to ask the questions that Taylor proposes in the service of self-scrutiny: “What does it mean that I respond to this piece as I do? What kind of person am I, for this work to resonate with me?”

#### SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-CREATION

The mention of self-scrutiny brings me to the second strand of Taylor’s tapestry that I would like to follow, that of perfectionism. Here I would argue that art presents possibilities not only for self-awareness but also for self-creation. Cultural creations serve not only to convey and perpetuate cultural myths and stereotypes, but also, importantly, to upend them. Artworks can disrupt expectations, place the familiar into relief, and offer new possibilities for consideration. Maxine Greene argues, for example, that the arts may move us into spaces where “we can create visions of other ways of being and ponder what it might signify to realize them.”<sup>4</sup> And Jim Garrison makes the point thus: “Poetry as *poesis* may serve moral purposes by intervening in desires. In poetry, we may catch our first glimpse of what ought to be, the good beyond what actually exists.” And: “Unless one can see the possible in or beyond the actual, they cannot frame a moral ideal of what ought to be: they are slaves to the actual.”<sup>5</sup> Taylor makes an eloquent case for the role of aesthetic works in helping us to clarify our ideals. But aesthetic works can do even more: they can play a role in helping us to *create* our ideals.

I also want to highlight the importance, for the perfectionist project, of creating art. Through artistic creation, we have the possibility of going beyond the actual in order to envision possible futures and create new possibilities for living in the world. “Human beings make the world, and make themselves in the world.”<sup>6</sup> Through creating new possibilities in the world, we also are creating ourselves.

---

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 156.

2. *Ibid.*, 154.

3. *The Last King of Scotland*, DVD, directed by Kevin Macdonald, (2006; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007).

4. Maxine Greene, “Texts and Margins,” in *Context, Content and Community*, ed. Ronald Neperud (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 112.

5. James Garrison, “Assaying the Possibilities of Spiritual Education as Poetic Creation” (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, Sydney, Australia, August 2000).

6. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 381.