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CULTIVATING MORAL MEDICINE: ETHICAL CRITICISM AND THE RELEVANCE OF RICHARD SELZER TO MEDICAL ETHICS EDUCATION

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**CULTIVATING MORAL MEDICINE: ETHICAL CRITICISM AND
THE RELEVANCE OF RICHARD SELZER TO MEDICAL ETHICS
EDUCATION**

by
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Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of The University of Texas Graduate School of
Biomedical Sciences at Galveston
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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May, 2007
Galveston, Texas

Key words: Medical Humanities, Literature and Medicine, Martha Nussbaum

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For Melinda, who waited for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of course, it goes without saying that the completion of this dissertation represents the culmination of the efforts and influence of a number of people. However, given this space, I would like to acknowledge explicitly the contributions of those who helped make this dissertation possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Anne Hudson Jones, whose infinite patience and wisdom maintained me as I labored to complete this dissertation. At each step along the way, it was clear to me that she was as invested in this project as I was, and her interest always reassured and motivated me. Throughout my tenure at the Institute for the Medical Humanities, I have known Dr. Jones in a number of different capacities: teacher, graduate program director, faculty advisor, qualifying examinations chair, and dissertation chair and supervisor. However, for me, she will always be, above all, a mentor. She has taught me a great deal about literature and its relationship to medicine, and it is because of her that I have found that which stimulates and interests me most in the medical humanities and will continue to be an explicit focus of my scholarly career.

I would also like to thank and acknowledge the other members of my committee for their invaluable contributions to this dissertation. Dr. Sally Robinson provided a much needed clinical foundation to my understanding of this work. Too often in the humanities, it is easy to get carried away with ideas themselves and lose sight of their practical potential applications. I greatly appreciate Dr. Robinson's efforts to keep my thinking rooted in the work and practice of medicine. The same can be said of the contributions of Dr. Michele Carter, who worked tirelessly to keep me faithful to my philosophical forebears. The intellectual invigoration I found in this work caused me to take occasional flights of fancy, deviating from the demands of logic and argument. I thank Dr. Carter for reminding me not to throw the chicken out with the egg and that nothing is ever as simple as it may seem. Dr. Tod Chambers taught me a great deal about the relationship between form and content as well as about the relationship between an author and his or her work. I thank him for helping me to become a more careful and critical reader. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Ron Carson, without whom I might never have found my way to the Institute. Not only did he provide my first exposure to the Institute over eight years ago, but he also supplemented my interest in literature and ethics with a much needed philosophical perspective that enriched my work and thinking. One of the most important attributes of a great teacher is the ability to broaden a student's horizons, and it is for this that I am most grateful to Dr. Carson, as well as the rest of my committee.

Of course, I owe a great deal of thanks to Donna Vickers, without whose insuperable administrative assistance I might never have finished. Whenever I needed anything, whether I realized it or not, Donna always knew what to do. She is a wonderful person who does amazing work, and I am certain that I could never have done it without her. I would also like to thank everyone else at the Institute for the Medical Humanities. I still believe that I would never have made it through medical school without the stimulation

and comfort that I found at the Institute. For this, I am particularly grateful to Drs. Mary Winkler and Tom Cole. Without Dr. Winkler, I might never have arrived at the Institute in the first place; and without Dr. Cole, I would not have felt as welcome or valued as I did. When I arrived on the Institute's doorstep, I felt somewhat lost and confused, and it is as a result of the work and the wonderful people that I found there that I now feel like I have some sense of what lies ahead.

Of course, I owe a significant debt to my wonderful friends, who have played such an integral role in my development along the way. Thank you first to Mike, Jason, Angie, Laura, and Dan, for their unrivaled and unwavering intellectual and social support. Being an MD/PhD student in the medical humanities promised to be a very long and lonely enterprise. However, thanks to you, it never ever felt that way. Thank you also to Jordan, Corey, Christy, and Lisa, who made my small group of friends a family. I count these past eight years as among the best in my life and am thankful that they will not end here.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, without whose active encouragement I might not have made it this far. Throughout my life, my parents, Dave and Sue Caskey, made it both possible and expected for me to pursue whatever intellectual and professional aspirations I might develop, never giving a second thought to how long such an endeavor might take or how much it might cost. It is because of them that I am the person that I am today. Lastly, I would like to thank Melinda, my wife, my love. Early on in our relationship, my acceptance to the MD/PhD program forced us to a sort of crossroads and confronted us with a number of possible paths. Although we really enjoyed each other and had no desire to separate, I was contemplating committing to an additional four years in Galveston—a prospect that Melinda had never previously entertained. I am grateful that Melinda elected to continue to give us a try and never made me choose between my work and her, for I love both a great deal and might never have recovered from such a decision. Thank you Melinda, for all of your time and support over the years, through all of my ups and downs, through all of the stress and anxiety, through everything. I love you dearly and look forward to many more years like these.

CULTIVATING MORAL MEDICINE: ETHICAL CRITICISM AND THE RELEVANCE OF RICHARD SELZER TO MEDICAL ETHICS EDUCATION

Publication No. _____

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In much of her work, and especially in *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum argues explicitly for the essential contributions literature can and, indeed, must make to ethical education. In supporting her case, Nussbaum draws heavily upon the thought of Aristotle and the literature of Henry James to affirm her emphasis on the “noncommensurability of valuable things,” the “priority of the particular,” and the “rationality of emotions and imagination,” each of which she deems essential to answer the Aristotelian question “How should one live?”. In this dissertation, I undertake a project similar to Nussbaum’s, though one more specific to the practice of medicine. Rather than investigate the general moral question of how one ought to live, I instead seek to explore how one ought to live as a clinician. In the first part of the dissertation, I undertake a critical examination of the arguments of Nussbaum and others who describe the practice of the ethical criticism of literature. Then, in the second part, I assess the relevance of these arguments to the practice of medicine through an examination of the writings of Richard Selzer, in an attempt to determine whether his work, and, by way of extension, other shorter works of literature like his, might contribute to the moral practice of medicine as effectively as Nussbaum asserts James might to the practice of living. Ultimately, I assert that Selzer’s writings, by way of both the content and the form of his narrative, can indeed accomplish this end, contributing unique and essential moral truths to the conception of ethics fundamental to medical education and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men toward ill health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too. He was thinking of the nineteenth-century novel. Broad tolerance and the long view, an inconspicuously warm heart and cool judgment; his kind of doctor would be alive to the monstrous patterns of fate, and to the vain and comic denial of the inevitable; he would press the enfeebled pulse, hear the expiring breath, feel the fevered hand begin to cool and reflect, in the manner that only literature and religion teach, on the puniness and nobility of mankind . . .¹

Imagine, for a moment, a clinician-educator on faculty at an academic health center. Among her numerous and varied responsibilities is the facilitation of medical ethics education for first- and second-year medical students. Though many of her colleagues regard this particular duty as time-consuming and somewhat unnecessary, she cares deeply about it. Despite the fact that she receives little compensation or protected time for this part of her professional life, it remains one of the facets of her work that she enjoys and values most. On occasion, she has even taken the opportunity to pursue supplemental ethics education, in order to improve her own understanding of such matters and her ability to lead discussions coherently and effectively with her students. She does all of this because she is fervently committed to the belief that ethics constitutes a central part of the practice of medicine and that, therefore, ethics education ought to be a fundamental part of medical education. Frequently, she even goes so far as

¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2001), 87.

to assert, much to the chagrin of some of her clinical and scientific colleagues, that such material is often more important than some of the basic science minutiae that medical students are asked to learn but then typically fail to retain over the course of their medical education. However, despite such enthusiasm, she has become increasingly troubled in recent years by what she perceives to be a significant, disquieting, and growing trend in the form and content of much ethics education: the corruption and foundering of rational principle-based ethical analysis by the incorporation of other ethical models and systems that consider such matters as virtues and the like in the active process of ethical deliberation. Of course, she acknowledges that these other ways of thinking might play a relevant and valuable role in the development and implementation of ethical insight. However, she becomes concerned when she perceives her students to be overly preoccupied with what she calls *being a good doctor* at the expense of adequate and sufficient attention to the dilemmas inherent in the particular *ethical* problem(s) at hand. What she values most about ethics education in medical school and, subsequently, what she wants most from her students in discussing such issues is sustained focus upon the *ethical* issues at work in a given quandary until, together, they arrive at some sort of resolution. In this endeavor, such matters as feelings, virtues, and ways of communication possess distinctive roles, though these are necessarily background, *helping* one to consider alternative perspectives, but rarely playing an explicit role in the conduct of *rational* thought processes. Rather, the satisfactory resolution of ethical dilemmas should remain the product of the sufficiently formal, rigorous, and rational

practice of ethical deliberation that results from the application and balancing of ethical principles as they relate to the context of particular ethical problems.

Of course, the character described in this thought experiment is an overgeneralized and excessively stereotyped straw woman who does not fully convey the complexity of the numerous positions that exist in this debate regarding the right content and best method of ethics education. In such a brief sketch, such complexity would not even be possible. Nevertheless, as a composite personality developed from the culmination of my own experiences with medical ethics education from both sides of the lectern, she does at least model some of the positions being debated regarding this interesting and provocative topic: the operative conception of the nature of ethics and its effect on the content and method of medical ethics education. This debate is nicely, though incompletely, characterized by the dichotomy elaborated by this clinician and ethics educator, between *ethics* and *being a good doctor*. Inasmuch, this dichotomy also consolidates very nicely much of that which I shall explore throughout this dissertation and probes the meaning and essence of ethics itself, especially as it relates to medicine. Ultimately, much of the debate depends upon the operative conception of *ethics* being employed in one's investigation of these issues. Can *ethics* be adequately described as the consideration and attempted resolution of particular human problems through the application of general philosophical principles? Or is it something a great deal more sophisticated and unwieldy?

In *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum asserts that ethics more closely resembles the latter and looks to Aristotle and his question "How should one live?" to

ground her effort to articulate a more comprehensive and, therefore, more realistic and accurate description.² Fundamental to Nussbaum's broad vision of ethics is the notion that works of literature frequently possess the capacity to enrich moral perception through their careful development of matters that pertain to the conduct of human lives and their subsequent revelation of the unique particularities that may be relevant to such insight. Further, for Nussbaum, it lies within the province of literary *criticism* to reveal and explore this capacity, and, though Nussbaum only occasionally uses the term, it is this brand of criticism that I shall continue to refer to as ethical criticism throughout this dissertation. Ethical criticism, then, seeks explicitly to elaborate the potential contributions that able literature might make to ethical deliberation. In her work, Nussbaum draws significantly upon the thought of Aristotle and the literature of Henry James as she develops her argument regarding the relationship between literature and moral thinking, which is based on literature's demonstration of the "noncommensurability of valuable things," its insistence upon the "priority of the particular," and its concern for the "ethical value of the emotions."³ According to Nussbaum, each of these components is invaluable and essential to a conception of ethics concerned with the question of how one ought to live.

In this dissertation, I shall undertake a similar project, though one more specifically focused upon the practice of medicine. Rather than wondering broadly how

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23.

³ Ibid., 36, 37, 40.

one ought to live, I mean to explore specifically some conception of how one ought to live “*as a clinician*.”⁴ However, in order to do so, it is necessary, first, to lay some historical and theoretical groundwork. Thus, throughout the first part of this dissertation, in chapters 1-3, I shall explore some of the intellectual history regarding the relationship between philosophy and literature, beginning with Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece and culminating in the more contemporary conversation taking place between Nussbaum and others regarding the same issues: the possibility and/or extent of literature’s potential contribution to ethical deliberation. Originally, I had intended to focus solely upon Nussbaum’s ethical critical project and assess its specific relevance and potential applicability to the realm of medical education and practice and the literary work of Richard Selzer. However, as I embarked upon this particular line of inquiry, it quickly became apparent to me that a scholarly and critical discussion of ethical criticism demanded a significantly richer and broader approach than I had initially appreciated and that Nussbaum’s work alone could not accomplish all of that which I have come to regard as essential to a working conception of ethical criticism, and especially one intended for use in medical education. Thus, in chapter 2, I attempt to develop this richer conception of ethical criticism through an exploration of the work of a number of other literary critical and philosophical contributors to this conceptual dialogue. Specifically, in addition to Nussbaum, I shall examine some of the work of F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, Northrop Frye, Wayne Booth, Iris Murdoch, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Richard Rorty.

⁴ Rolf Ahlzen, “The Doctor and the Literary Text—Potentials and Pitfalls,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (July 2002): 151. Emphasis added.

Of course, few of these thinkers ever actually use the term *ethical criticism* to describe their work, but, nonetheless, each conceives of a substantive role for literature in ethical thought and deliberation, even if they approach this common ground by a variety of paths and perspectives. Ultimately, despite my branching out, Nussbaum remains a sort of touchstone for my assessment of this work, primarily for her unique and vigorous conception of the dynamic relationship(s) between philosophy and literature, as well as for her seemingly transcendent place in the contemporary continuation of this conversation. Of course, in delineating this somewhat heterogeneous conception of ethical criticism through the contributions of several thinkers, I think it is important to emphasize that I do not consider the work of these thinkers and critics to pose rival or contradictory conceptions of ethical criticism to one another, but rather I intend for these varying perspectives to contribute to a somewhat liberal and eclectic vision of ethical criticism. Thus, when I conclude this theoretical portion of my dissertation with a sustained reflection upon Nussbaum's conception of ethical criticism, it is with both her specific project as well as her contribution to this larger vision of ethical criticism that I intend to consider and develop in the second portion of the dissertation.

Then, having attempted to ground my work with a sort of foundational account of ethical critical theory and the potential contributions of literature to moral discourse and deliberation, I shall attempt to apply this work to the matter of ethical deliberation in medicine, exploring both theoretically as well as practically the question of how one ought to live as a clinician through the lens of the literary work of Selzer, in order to determine whether and how his work might contribute as substantively to the moral

practice of medicine as Nussbaum asserts James's might to living. Having spent his life as both a celebrated surgeon as well as a lauded writer, Selzer possesses the unique opportunity to offer a particular and essential vision of the good practice of medicine. Of course, his particular creation may be only one of many that might contribute singularly and substantially to this evolving conception of how one ought to live as a clinician. Nonetheless, it remains a task to which Selzer's work is especially well-suited given his explicit attention to many of the bioethical issues that have confronted (and continue to confront) the practice of medicine and contemporary culture at large. What sort of ethical guidance might Selzer's work provide? How does the style of his work contribute, and what is the relationship between form and content in his writing? What is the significance of Selzer's somewhat blurred style, in which he frequently combines literary nonfiction with exceedingly realistic fiction? How essential are Selzer's narrative form and style to the moral truths he conveys? And, finally, can Selzer's literature provide the sort of essential knowledge to medical practice that Nussbaum asserts James might for life? Ultimately, by way of a critical analysis of two of Selzer's stories, "Mercy" and "Abortion," I hope to establish that Selzer's literary creations, by virtue of both the form and the content of his narrative, might indeed accomplish this end, providing unique and essential insight to medical ethical thinking and the forum for an articulation of a place for ethical criticism in the contemporary conversation about moral education in medicine.

CHAPTER 1: THE RISE AND FALL OF ETHICAL CRITICISM

MORAL “PHILOSOPHY AS/AND/OF LITERATURE”

Traditional academic and cultural conceptions of philosophy and literature regard the two as different subjects—different disciplines concerned with the study of different types of texts and raising and exploring different types of questions. Nonetheless, for millennia, scholars, artists, and critics have engaged in an expansive interdisciplinary conversation regarding the relationship(s) between philosophy and literature, and this dialogue has only gained in substance, volume, and momentum over recent decades. In the process, the multifarious nature of this conversation has become dizzying, broad, and unwieldy, with little more unifying the conversants than the terms *literature* and *philosophy*. In his 1983 American Philosophical Association Presidential Address, Arthur Danto exemplifies the diversity and ambiguity inherent in this interdisciplinary discussion, both through the substance of this lecture as well as by way of the unresolved part of speech with which he separates the terms in his title: “Philosophy *and/as/of* Literature.”¹ His presentation later serves as the introductory essay to a watershed collection of essays considering the many interesting intersections of these two broad

¹ Danto’s lecture was published the following year: Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1 (September 1984): 5-20, subsequently reprinted in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 3-23. Emphasis added.

disciplines. Perhaps, unfortunately, this collection never quite resembles the “roundtable discussion” for which editor Anthony Cascardi might have hoped. Rather, it consists of a number of “disparate voices,” most of whom, at best, engage only a few of the others, while the rest simply talk past one another, albeit in influential essays that explore the various combinations that might be constructed from Danto’s lecture title, running the gamut all the way from philosophy as a form of literature to literature as a form of philosophy.² While initially this may threaten to reflect poorly upon the editorship of the work, I believe that it need not be conceived of this way. Rather, the rich diversity of the work serves as a fitting testament to the overwhelming breadth inherent in any general and unrestrained exploration of literature and philosophy. In this dissertation, I too shall not attempt to clarify the nature of the relationship(s) between literature and philosophy so broadly conceived. Rather, I shall attempt to narrow my focus to only a small portion of this discussion: an exploration of the role that literature might play in and/or as a form of moral philosophy.³

² Anthony J. Cascardi, “Introduction,” in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), ix.

³ Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I will use the terms *moral philosophy* and *ethics*, as well as *moral* and *ethical*, somewhat interchangeably. Of course, I realize that some thinkers have taken a great deal of care to carefully distinguish these terms from one another. For example, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams states that *morality*, as he uses it, “should be understood as a particular development of the ethical, one that has special significance in modern Western culture.” Thus, for Williams, “‘ethical’ . . . [shall be] the broad term” in his discussion, encompassing “narrower” conceptions of “‘morality.’” See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 6. Of course, such distinctions remains somewhat fluid and subject to the discretion of the thinker. In “On Literature and Ethics,” Michael Eskin elaborates the common etymological roots of the two words in part to demonstrate that to not conceive of them as relatively interchangeable might be to muddle larger and more important issues. See Michael Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 573-94. Ultimately, for my purposes, it remains less important to assert the validity of one form over another than it is to attempt to state, as clearly as possible, what I mean by such terms when I use them. I will do this below when I discuss the way in which I mean

In a review of Iris Murdoch's *The Fire and the Sun*, in which Murdoch explores Plato's positions regarding the philosophical value of classical Greek literature, Martha Nussbaum elaborates some of the traditional intellectual distinctions that remain embedded in Western thought and continue to separate popular conceptions of literature and philosophy:

Pressed to articulate our intuitions, we might observe that literature tells stories that may or may not be true, while philosophy demands the truth; that literature aims at pleasure, while philosophy aims at understanding; that literature is particular, while philosophy is universal; that literature plays on the emotions, while philosophy addresses itself to reason alone; that literature simply presents scenes from life, while philosophy demands that writing give an account of itself, and reach its conclusions by acceptable modes of argument.⁴

Of course, this adumbration of the qualities unique to these disciplines seems unduly, and perhaps simplistically, or even ironically, biased in the favor of philosophy as the purer, more intellectually valuable of the two. Although Nussbaum derives this characterization from her understanding of Plato, and it is not one with which she would necessarily sympathize, similar positions linger and remain quite pervasive still today. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that such stances wield some sort of intellectual hegemony, for then, as well as today, there were/are many others who maintain that philosophy and literature are not as different, separate, or mutually exclusive as such positions as that

to use the term *ethics*, which will bear significantly upon the remainder of my argument. Otherwise, all other things being equal, I will incline more toward the use of *moral (philosophy)* rather than *ethical* or *ethics* merely because *ethical* already possesses strong connotations in the medical realm, from which I hope to deviate.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, review of *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, by Iris Murdoch, *Philosophy and Literature* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 125.

articulated above presume and that, in fact, there exists a great deal of overlap between the two subjects. These thinkers maintain that, at least in certain capacities, philosophy and literature are actually concerned with similar questions, wondering about the nature of knowledge, ethics, and “the great and small truths of human existence.”⁵ Michael Eskin conveys a similar sentiment in his essay “On Literature and Ethics,” in which he describes both moral philosophy and literature as “fundamentally concerned with the variegated domain of what could be called . . . ‘the human person in all of its relations, facets, and intricacies.’”⁶ Although the terms according to which these questions are raised might vary, as might their methodologies or their perceptions of ways of knowing, there remain commonalities that some suggest demonstrate how much closer the two disciplines actually are than is typically presumed. In fact, according to Nussbaum, it was not until Plato distinguished philosophy from literature, on his way to banishing the poets from his ideal state ruled by philosopher-kings, that the two disciplines were even conceived of as separable. Prior to that, philosophy, or more specifically moral philosophy, had been the province of the tragic poets, who explored the moral qualities and quandaries of human existence by way of their poetry.⁷ I shall explore this dispute between Plato and the tragic poets in greater detail below, but I introduce it here in order

⁵ Ole Martin Skilleas, *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 6-7.

⁶ Eskin, 585.

⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 15. All subsequent references to *Love's Knowledge* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *LK*, followed by the page number.

to acknowledge the legacy of the tension between philosophy and literature that pervades our intellectual history.

For many commentators, in philosophy as well as in literature, these tensions remain, and the suggestion that literature might have anything to do with moral philosophy, or vice versa, remains at best an open question and at worst a controversial and disturbing slander. Of course, there are certainly hard-line members of the philosophical establishment who maintain that literature cannot do moral philosophy, that it is neither systematic nor rigorous enough, that it is far too rooted in idiosyncratic particularity, and that it does not possess sufficient methodology to make it philosophically sound. Members of this camp remain stolidly in league with the above-described Platonic position and insist that the introduction of literature into the work of moral philosophy would make “all ethical evaluation . . . irretrievably subjective” (*LK*, 231). Then there are others who possess a slightly more ameliorative position, still convinced of moral philosophy’s undisputed hegemony over any systematic and conclusive attempt at moral discourse, yet open to the possibility that literature might play a role, however small, in such discourse. According to Peter Levine, members of this camp believe that literature might make philosophy clearer by exemplifying independently developed philosophical principles: “Many philosophers have argued that stories, if they are valuable at all, gain their value through their correspondence to general truths that they encapsulate or exemplify in concrete form. Since philosophers can know

these general truths directly, fiction and history are inferior to philosophy.”⁸ Levine goes on to cite Kant as a philosopher who maintained just such a position: “‘Imitation . . . finds no place at all in morality, and examples serve only for encouragement, i.e., they put beyond doubt the feasibility of what the law commands, they make visible that which the practical rule expresses more generally, but they can never authorize us to set aside the true original which lies in reason, and to guide ourselves by examples.’”⁹ Cora Diamond cites a similar, albeit less extreme, statement from the contemporary moral philosopher D. D. Raphael: “‘If someone says that literature feeds moral philosophy, he may mean that characters or situations in a work of literature can be used as evidence for some issues in moral philosophy. This is the most obvious, the richest, and the most satisfying way in which literature and moral philosophy are connected.’”¹⁰ Although Raphael seems to happily concede this exemplary role to literature, he simultaneously asserts that this ought to be the limit of any conception of literature in moral philosophy.

On the other, more literary side of this dichotomy, a similarly extreme stance regarding the role literature might play in moral thought exists. However, this time it is the staunch literary scholar, artist, and/or critic accusing the philosophical crowd of trespassing upon what ought to be considered the sacred ground of the aesthetic and, thereby, denigrating literature by misusing it for something for which it was not intended.

⁸ Peter Levine, “*Lolita* and Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Philosophy and Literature* 19, no. 1 (April 1995): 32.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cora Diamond, “Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is,” *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 166.

According to Nussbaum, many allege that “any work that attempts to ask of a literary text questions about how we might live, treating the work as addressed to the reader’s practical interests and needs, and as being in some sense about our lives, must be hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality” (*LK*, 21). Instead, such critics maintain that literature ought to be evaluated according to its artistry alone, according to its aesthetic qualities and contributions, and they advocate for “the proper separation of genuine aesthetics—a concern for form and beauty and structure—and ‘didactic matters.’”¹¹ For these aesthetes, as described by Nussbaum, the application of literature to philosophical ends corrupts art and diminishes its value (*LK*, 231). Further, some, like Helen Vendler, argue that such a practice is not even prudent, as most, if not all, artists ought not be valued “for making arguments, for their theological or moral or political” positions: “Seeing . . . Dante and Conrad as moral examples is rather like seeing someone using a piece of embroidery for a dishrag with no acknowledgment of the difference between hand-woven silk and a kitchen towel.”¹² For Vendler, “treating fictions as moral pep-pills or moral emetics is repugnant to anyone who realizes the complex psychological and formal motives of a work of art.”¹³ Finally, many of these aesthetic opponents to ethical criticism decry the practice, not because they believe it to be impossible, but rather

¹¹ Wayne C. Booth, “The Ethics of Teaching Literature,” *College English* 61, no. 1 (September 1998): 45.

¹² Helen Vendler, “The Booby Trap,” *New Republic* 215, no. 15 (October 7, 1996): 36-38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

because they believe it might be dangerous, “dogmatic and simplistic, measuring the literary work by a rigid normative yardstick,” and, at its most moralistic, potentially leading to various forms of censorship (*LK*, 231).

Of course, some of the generalizations regarding the place of literature in moral philosophy might be more meaningful if commentators took more care to define the terms and boundaries of their discussions. In her Introduction to *Commitment in Reflection*, a collection of essays on literature and moral philosophy, Leona Toker stresses the importance of “precision in the handling of ethical concepts and distinctions, as well as . . . the kind of responsibility in interpretation which valorizes the unique specificity of each text above its usefulness in arguing one’s position.”¹⁴ To expound too generally about philosophy and literature sometimes means not saying much of anything at all. Thus, any useful elaboration of one’s position on the matter requires conversants to be more specific and to refrain from overgeneralizing about, for example, the possibility or impossibility of literature’s making a unique contribution to moral thought. According to Diamond, adequate clarity and specificity about the nature of one’s concern for the moral or ethical is of the utmost importance:

[A]ny specification of the sphere of morality, of the phenomena of interest to moral philosophy, in terms of action and choice is a limited and limiting one. How we define the sphere of the moral bears in several way on the relation of literature to moral philosophy. . . .

¹⁴ Leona Toker, Introduction, in *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Leona Toker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), xvi.

It bears first of all on the question of *where* in works of literature a moral philosopher can see an exploration of something of moral significance. . . . It may also lead to crude views of the moral implications of literary works. . . .

Secondly, if we say that the sphere of the moral is not limited to action but includes thought and imagination, the moral significance of works of literature is not reducible to their connection, direct and indirect, with action, but includes also what kind of thought and imagination they express and what they invite. . . .

There is a third point. Any discussion of a practical issue, of what to do, exhibits thought or thoughtlessness. Regardless of the right or wrong of what is argued for, the thought itself may be criticized. If we limit the sphere of morality to action, we leave no room for criticizing thought about action except insofar as it involves mistakes of reasoning or premises against which some rational argument may be brought. . . . Here the significance of works of literature for moral philosophy is that we may learn from our reading of such works, and from reflection on them, terms of criticism of thought applicable to discussions of practical issues and to moral philosophy itself.¹⁵

Thus, according to thinkers like Toker and Diamond, matters like the methodology according to which one engages in moral inquiry and the constituents of one's sense or view of morality bear significantly upon one's resultant conception of the possibility of any relationship between literature and moral philosophy. And it is exactly this careful elaboration that is sometimes, though not always, missing from those accounts that immediately dismiss the possibility of a significant role for literature in moral philosophy. Although some conceptions of traditional Kantian moral theory regard literature as merely a vehicle through which to exemplify principles already articulated by theory, it does not follow that this conception of morality is necessarily right and/or universally accepted. In fact, it is with this position that Hilary Putnam begins his

¹⁵ Diamond, 164-65.

“Literature, Science, and Reflection,” in which he describes the Kantian-type of morality, which “dictate[s] a duty to us in every conceivable circumstance,” as “unlivable.”¹⁶

Putnam goes on to carve out room for literature to contribute to moral inquiry, but only after having carefully articulated his conception of morality and the ways in which it differs from the other more universalist approaches:

[T]he fact is that once we see that moral reasoning does not take place in a Cartesian vacuum, that it takes place in the context of people trying to answer criticisms of their character, and in the context of people trying to justify their ways of living to other people, trying to criticize the ways of life of other people, etc., by producing reasons that have some kind of general appeal, we see that the question of the objectivity of ethics arises in an entirely new way or appears in an entirely new light.¹⁷

Thus, it is not until one has made clear and compared the conceptions of ethics/morality in question that one can then move on to consider the role that literature might play in such a conception. Until then, one cannot know whether the conceptions of ethics in question are compatible enough to make their comparison even possible.

It is here then, upon a rearticulation of the scope of moral inquiry, that the more collaborative conceptions of ethics and literature might occur, in which literature might provide a unique and valuable contribution to matters of moral concern such as those elaborated by Toker, Diamond, and Putnam. Of course, significant diversity remains regarding the ways in which and degrees to which literature might complement moral

¹⁶ Hilary Putnam, “Literature, Science, and Reflection,” *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 483.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 483-84.

philosophy, but this debate centers on *how* ethical criticism ought to be conducted, its focus, its method, its depth and care, “the specific site and force of the ethical in the literary,”¹⁸ not *whether* literature might have some unique and valuable role to play. According to Levine, “narrative is an autonomous form and a rival of philosophy, capable of carrying moral meanings that are not subject to philosophical paraphrase.”¹⁹ Eskin echoes this assessment, asserting that “[l]iterature translates ethics into ‘perhaps a more developed [more ‘capacious,’ more universal *and* concrete] sign’—into a medium and a context in which ‘philosophical conceptuality’ . . . is transformed, developed into something that can ‘make us *see* and *feel* . . . in a way no philosophical treatise can.’” Thus, “ethics *needs* literature.”²⁰ For Nussbaum, not only is the contribution that literature might make invaluable, but it is also one that is underappreciated, even by philosophers who would grant literature a role as example:

[A] whole tragic drama, unlike a schematic philosophical example making use of a similar story, is capable of tracing this history of a complex pattern of deliberation, showing its roots in a way of life and looking forward to its consequences in that life. As it does all of this, it lays open to view the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of actual human deliberation. If a philosopher were to use Antigone’s story as a philosophical example, he or she would, in setting it out schematically, signal to the reader’s attention everything that the reader ought to notice. He would point out only what is strictly relevant. A tragedy does not display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated; it shows them searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active. 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

¹⁸ Eskin, 576.

¹⁹ Levine, 32.

²⁰ Eskin, 588.

reassessment in a way that the example does not. To invite such material into the center of an ethical inquiry concerning these problems of practical reason is, then, to add to its content a picture of reason's procedures and problems that could not readily be conveyed in some other form.²¹

I will attend to the many nuanced and variable ethical critical positions in much greater detail below. Here, I mean only to make brief reference to them in order to demonstrate the great diversity inherent in this conversation on literature and ethics. However, before moving on to discuss the contemporary practice of ethical criticism and its relevance to medical education in greater depth, I will briefly explore the historical trajectory of the practice of ethical criticism, as I believe it is essential to situate the debate historically before examining it critically. Thus, in the following paragraphs, I will go back to the ancients, with whom the ethical critical debate originated, before moving on to more contemporary players and Nussbaum's central contribution to this discourse.

PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND THE TRAGIC POETS

As I alluded to above, much of the long history of the dispute between philosophy and literature can be traced back to ancient Greece, with the tragic poets, Plato, and Aristotle. More specifically, it is also in the ancients that one finds the origins of the

²¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 14. All subsequent references to *The Fragility of Goodness* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *FG*, followed by the page number.

debate about the possibility and utility of ethical criticism, rooted in discourse about the nature of ethical deliberation and, therefore, the sources of insight relevant to that enterprise. In the *Republic*, Plato describes an “ancient quarrel” that had long existed between poets and philosophers, but, according to most subsequent commentators, it is actually in and through Plato that this quarrel came to be realized (*LK*, 10).²² Prior to Plato, “the tragic poets [had been] widely regarded as [the] major sources of ethical insight,” which they conveyed through both the form and the content of their writings (*FG*, xv). Further, not only did the tragic poets explore the moral matters that would later preoccupy such thinkers as Plato, but they also established the context within which such matters would be considered:

Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Aeschylus, to name only a few, constituted a prephilosophical moral tradition which presumably provided Socrates, Plato, and their successors with the basic themes (and their paradigmatic artistic treatment) of what we have come to call ethics: how we ought to live and act so as to live a (variously conceived) good life.²³

Thus, it cannot be said that Plato did not appreciate the efforts of the tragic poets to conceive of and reflect upon a conception of human excellence (*FG*, 13); rather, he merely regarded this conception of ethics as inadequate to deal with what he perceived to be the unacceptable vicissitudes of human being and life. It is important to acknowledge here that, with regard to Plato, I do not mean to overgeneralize or set him up as a straw

²² See also Cascardi, x.

²³ Eskin, 575.

man. Of course, Plato's position is significantly more complicated than the single- and closed-minded desire to banish all literature from the philosophers' state. In fact, in *Philosophy and Literature*, Skilleas makes a compelling case that the *Republic*-era Plato was not necessarily opposed to the role of some literature in moral education. Rather, according to Skilleas, it was *imitativity* to which he was opposed—"the desire and ability to imitate whatever, independent of its moral worth, and without the proper attitude."²⁴ Although this is by no means the traditional or consensus reading of the *Republic*, it does raise important considerations regarding the validity and strength of some of the criticisms of Plato's ethical stance. Further, Nussbaum, who reads the *Republic* and some of Plato's other earlier works more traditionally than does Skilleas, insists that one must also consider the evolution of Plato's thought over time when assessing his philosophical positions. In this light, one encounters a very different, much more ameliorative Plato when one reads the late period *Phaedrus* as opposed to the middle period *Republic* (FG, 200-33). I do not intend any of this to suggest that the above-mentioned arguments that set Plato up against the tragic poets (or those later that set Aristotle against Plato) are invalid or necessarily flawed. Rather, they are relatively typical, and consistent with much of the literature I have read that comments upon this era and this debate. However, here I mean only to emphasize my awareness of the danger of intellectual exaggeration or caricature and to stress my commitment to guard against it as much as possible.

²⁴ Skilleas, 24.

Plato's break from the ethical tradition that preceded him was rooted primarily in his disagreement about the course of right human conduct in the face of *tuche*, or luck, which all parties understood to be an essential part of human life:

Plato's attack on the poets . . . can ultimately be traced to his attack on *tuche*. He attacked the poets not because they saw *tuche* as definitive of the human condition; he agreed with this. He attacked them because they thought that we were stuck with this condition and hence that we must seek the good life within the limits of our exposure to *tuche*. The tragic poets tried to tell us, however indirectly, that if we find a good life we must do so within this exposure.²⁵

Rather than condone something like *tuche* as both inevitable and, therefore, acceptable, Plato sought, by way of his *techne* philosophy, to elaborate a means by which human moral well-being might flourish independently of the considerations of luck inherent in a contingent world. Accordingly, this mission became the driving motivation behind much of Plato's philosophical project: "the aspiration to make the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason" (*FG*, 3). Rather than live at the whims of *tuche*, Plato sought instead to transcend *tuche*, to live a life that could not be assailed by *tuche*, to "learn to live as gods and thus above the effects of *tuche*."²⁶ It was this desire that led him to his philosophy of the forms, which postulated the existence of "an ideal world beyond what we can sense," a "realm of non-perceptible objects which are variously called 'ideas' or 'forms,'"²⁷ a world beyond this contingent one in which

²⁵ Ronald L. Hall, *The Human Embrace: The Love of Philosophy and the Philosophy of Love: Kierkegaard, Cavell, Nussbaum* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 187.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Skilleas, 19.

such an impure and unreasonable force as *tuche* was condoned and permitted such a significant role. Accordingly, “the best human life” was that of the philosopher, who modeled his soul upon the nature of the eternal forms he contemplated: “pure, hard, single, unchanging, unchangeable” (*FG*, 138). Such a person sought to see beyond the “barbaric slime” that coated this world in order to gain a more objective vision of the true nature of reality (*FG*, 138):

[K]nowledge of the good, attained through pure intellect operating apart from the senses, yields universal truths—and, in practical choice, universal rules. If we have apprehended the form, we will be in possession of a general account of beauty, an account that not only holds true of all and only instances of beauty, but also explains why they are correctly called instances of beauty, and grouped together. . . . Such understanding, once attained, would take priority over our vague, mixed impressions of particular beautifuls. It would tell us how to see. (*FG*, 190)

Thus, Plato’s attack on, and subsequent banishment of, the poets was rooted in a fundamental disagreement with them regarding the nature of the ethical life. However, his stance was also strongly influenced by an irreconcilable difference regarding the methods of proper ethical inquiry: the tragic poets believed their work provided an accurate depiction of the world and the human condition, while, for Plato, such poetry merely perpetuated the traditional conflation of this world with the real one. For Plato, poetry was merely an imitation of the world of appearances, and an inferior one at that.²⁸

Instead of poetry, Plato sought his *techne* in the study and pursuit of mathematics and, especially, philosophy, the only “studies that permit the correct apprehension and

specification of ethical ends themselves.”²⁹ Literature, on the other hand, conveyed “its own irreducible plurality with regard to reality” and refused to offer a “privileged voice to explain the deep unity of reality.”³⁰ It complacently depicted the world of the senses as the actual and only world, and even then offered only a “poor copy” of the world of the senses, leaving people “ever further from reality.”³¹ Further, beyond its inaccuracy, poetry also deviated from Plato’s ethical theory through its method of inquiry, appealing not to pure reason, but instead to the emotions, which Plato believed to be volatile and nonrational. Surely such emotions could not enable one to transcend the limits of the world of the senses and truly apprehend the world of the forms. Rather, “emotions mess things up, and are diverse and unruly, while reason is unitary.”³² The tragic poets relied on such emotions, and especially pity and fear, as “sources of insight about the good human life” (*FG*, xv). However, for Plato, these emotions merely revealed the shackles that bound humanity to the world of appearances, demonstrating just how tied people could be to insignificant things that should not matter. Emotions were evidence of humanity’s “focus on existence, on life in the world,” diverting “attention from reality,

²⁸ Margaret Gertrude Holland, "The Quality of Moral Consciousness: Ethics in the Writing of Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1991), 27.

²⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Historical Conceptions of the Humanities and Their Relationship to Society,” *Applying the Humanities*, ed. Daniel Callahan, Arthur C. Caplan, and Bruce Jennings (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 16.

³⁰ Skilleas, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

the eternal forms.”³³ They were legacies of our humanness, demonstrating just how far such people were from becoming the gods they ought to be aspiring to be. Instead of facilitating one’s transcendence of humanity, emotions exhibited for Plato the very reason for his turn to the world of the forms: they were evidence of the pervasive influence and force of *tuche*, which he was so determined to overcome.

Through his promotion of philosophy and his denigration of literature, Plato claims repeatedly that his ethical theory is rooted in its concern for and supply of practical wisdom for human living, “a *techne* of detachment from the natural world, a detachment that enables us to be free from anxiety, free from disturbance, free from natural contingency; it is a *techne* that enables us to master contingency and secure our fragile human lives.”³⁴ Further, more than just a *techne* of withdrawal, Plato’s also purports to be one of “forethought, planning, and prediction; . . . concerned with the management of need and with prediction and control concerning future contingencies” (*FG*, 95). Only when *tuche* has been stalled sufficiently by the rational application of Plato’s somewhat ascetic *techne* will human lives really be fully moral. However, this “ethical other-worldliness” exists in sharp contrast to the “non-reductive humanism” espoused by Plato’s pupil Aristotle.³⁵ Although both philosophers express a deep commitment to philosophy with a practical orientation, it seems that their respective

³³ Hall, 184.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

³⁵ Simon Haines, “Deepening the Self: The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature,” in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and History*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.

senses of the meaning of practical could not be more different. For Aristotle, any attempt to root a practical philosophy beyond the scope of lived humanity makes little sense and defies the very commitments it claims to value. Further, according to Nussbaum, Aristotle would have found Plato's "struggl[e] . . . for an unconditional vantage point outside the appearances . . . both futile and destructive: futile, because such a vantage point is unavailable . . . to human inquiry; destructive, because the glory of the promised goal makes the humanly possible work look boring and cheap" (*FG*, 258). Thus, disagreeing with his mentor and seeking to root a practical philosophy in the everyday lived life of actual human beings, rather than seeking to gain the vantage point and detachment of the gods, Aristotle sought to reinstate literature and its capacity for ethical work:

[T]he function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. . . . For this reason poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals. . . . The *universal* is the kind of speech or action which is consonant with a person of a given kind in accordance with probability or necessity; this is what poetry aims at, even though it applies individual names.³⁶

In dismissing Plato's ethical theory, and, subsequently, his claims about literature, Aristotle sought to restore poetry to the lofty place that he, and the tragic poets before him, believed it ought to occupy in the pursuit of (practical) wisdom. Once again, at least according to Aristotle, tragedy and "lived practical reason" shared a common overriding concern (*FG*, 5).

Unlike Plato, Aristotle could not conceive of an ethical theory that was not rooted in the humanness of people. Rather he maintained that “[t]heory must remain committed to the ways human beings live, act, see—to the *pragmata*, broadly construed” (FG, 247), for, there are “three features of ‘the matter of the practical’ that show why practical choices cannot, even in principle, be adequately and completely captured in a system of universal rules: . . . mutability, indeterminacy, particularity” (FG, 302). Thus, primary to Aristotle’s revision of Platonic ethical theory was his descientization of Plato’s conception of practical deliberation. Unlike Plato, Aristotle insisted that *tuche* should not be considered a force to overcome and/or ignore in the conduct of the good life. Rather, *tuche* was an inextricable and therefore essential part of the life of human beings. Any conception of the good life must consider both the givenness of *tuche*’s existence as well as the way in which people respond to *tuche* over the course of a life. Thus, any useful conception of practical reason should not be considered a *techne*, designed to overcome *tuche*. Such a conception was necessarily mistaken, seeking to combat something random and unique in its effects with rules derived deductively from essentialist universals, existing beyond the human condition.³⁷ *Tuche* could not be countered this way, or in any way, for that matter, and, thus, a conception of practical reason necessarily required a “more ‘yielding’ and flexible conception of responsive perception,” “concerned with the apprehending of concrete particulars, rather than universals” (FG,

³⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 16.

³⁷ Hall, 191.

291, 300). For Aristotle, “an epistemology of value and an account of the vulnerability of . . . valuable things go hand in hand” (*FG*, 291).

Moreover, Aristotle’s perceptive faculty necessarily involved far more than the Platonic conception of pure rationality entailed. In order to truly and accurately apprehend one’s circumstances, Aristotle argued that such perception would have to be the culmination of cognitive *and* emotional abilities:

Perception *is* a complex response of the entire personality, an appropriate acknowledgment of the features of the situation on which action is to be based, a *recognition* of the particular. As such, it has in itself non-intellectual components. To have correct perception of the death of a loved one . . . is not simply to take note of this fact with intellect or judgment. If someone noted the fact but was devoid of passional response, we would be inclined to say that he did not really *see, take in, recognize*, what had happened; that he did not acknowledge the situation for what it was. (*FG*, 309)

One of the means by which Aristotle asserted that one might refine the nonintellectual, or emotional, part of perception was through the experience of literature like that created by the tragic poets, the very works that Plato had deemed futile, even dangerous. For Aristotle, encounters with such works provided an opportunity both to practice one’s perceptive abilities as well as to appreciate better the complexity of these depictions of life, thereby improving one’s own capacity for practical reason and ability to pursue a good life. Literature attains this capacity for edification by way of the fundamentally human capacity for mimetic engagement and the concomitant experience of the two tragic emotions, fear and pity (*FG*, 383): “‘Everyone . . . when listening [or watching] imitations is thrown into a corresponding state.’ Thus, tragedy’s ‘fearful and pitiable’ . . .

events find their responsive correlate in the audience's 'horror and pity.'"³⁸ For Aristotle then, such experiences were a route to self-knowledge: "[T]ragedy contributes to human self-understanding precisely through its exploration of the pitiable and the fearful. The way it carries out its explanatory task is by moving us to respond with these very emotions. For these emotional responses are themselves pieces of recognition or acknowledgment of the worldly conditions upon our aspirations to goodness" (*FG*, 390). Aristotle defines this tragic emotional conditioning as *catharsis* and esteems it as an essential component of the practices of perception and, therefore, practical reasoning. This *catharsis* plays an invaluable role in refined human ethical deliberation:

[W]hen the audience responds to the depicted events of a play with the emotions of pity and fear, they think and learn, and they come to draw appropriate judgments concerning the moral issues and problems presented in the play. . . . In general, . . . catharsis provides a broad sort of emotional/intellectual "clarification concerning who we are . . . [and] an appropriate practical perception of our situation."³⁹

Through his conception of practical moral philosophy, Aristotle engineered a nearly complete reversal from the ethical stance and practices initiated by Plato.

In this brief portrait of the ethical theories of two of our most important philosophers, I have attempted to foreground the primary philosophical positions that persist throughout much of what will follow in the history of ethical criticism. Much of

³⁸ Eskin, 579-80.

³⁹ Cynthia A. Freeland, "Plot Imitates Action: Aesthetic Evaluation and Moral Realism in Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 122.

the debate seems to regard how broadly and humanly one seeks to ground a conception of ethics relevant to people, and much of the history of moral philosophy to follow Plato and Aristotle continues along these same lines. I will return to the debate between Plato and Aristotle later in this dissertation, in chapter 3, as I introduce the conception of ethical criticism championed by Martha Nussbaum. However, next, I shall continue my brief exploration of the historical trajectory of ethical criticism, in an attempt to provide some context for the work most recently done by Nussbaum and her contemporaries.

THE DEMISE OF HUMANISTIC ETHICAL CRITICISM⁴⁰

Since Plato and Aristotle, the debate concerning the role of literature in moral decision making has not diminished in intensity. Rather, members of the literary, philosophical, and larger cultural communities continue to regard literature variably, ranging from wholehearted embrace to skepticism and outright ridicule. Regardless, the conception of literature as “a distinctive mode of thought about being human” persists and, until recently, had grounded the predominant manner of literary criticism for several

⁴⁰ I realize that the timeline I present over the course of the next several pages, and even into the next chapter(s), is neither as linear nor as discretely explicable as my argument suggests. The history of ethical criticism is significantly more fluid, and I merely hope that my account might serve as a sort of heuristic, charting the general intellectual historical trends and making this history slightly easier to follow. Booth conducts a similar articulation of the historical ebb and flow of ethical criticism in Wayne C. Booth, “‘Of the Standard of Moral Taste’: Literary Criticism as Moral Inquiry,” in *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 152-57.

hundred years.⁴¹ Bernard Harrison labels this the “humanist”⁴² conception of literary criticism, which considers “the discourse of narrative fiction . . . [to be] extra-textually referential, . . . convey[ing], at least to the competent or instructed reader, knowledge in the shape of ‘insights’ about life which exercise . . . ‘the kinds of profound concern – having the urgency of personal problems, felt as moral problems, more than personal – that lie beneath . . . art.’”⁴³ This is the brand of literary thinking to which I have been referring as *ethical* criticism,⁴⁴ and which, according to Wayne Booth, has recently fallen “on hard times.”⁴⁵ In the following paragraphs, I will reiterate and expand upon some of the arguments against the employ of literature in ethical criticism that have contributed to its recent, albeit transient, falling out of favor. Once I have completed this last bit of the history of ethical criticism, I will be able to move on to explore some of the reasons for and noteworthy contributors to ethical criticism’s relative resurgence, ultimately culminating in an elaboration of Nussbaum’s conception of ethical criticism.

⁴¹ Haines, 21.

⁴² According to Booth, “[a] full history of the decline of a theoretically coherent and confident ethical criticism of narratives, from the time of Samuel Johnson through Coleridge and Arnold to high modernism, would require almost as many volumes as have been devoted to other better-known cultural revolutions. . . . In principle it would include every major critic and every major philosopher (since they all deal with ethical questions.” In Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 26.

⁴³ Bernard Harrison, *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 2.

⁴⁴ Although, in this context, these terms possess similar meanings and may be used somewhat interchangeably, I believe that *ethical* is a better descriptor for this brand of criticism. For, although it necessitates a careful and explicit expression of *ethical*’s intended meaning, this term seems more germane to the work for which ethical criticism is intended, allying it closely to the already pervasive *ethics* and suggesting that the two are cooperative or complementary.

⁴⁵ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 25.

Philosophical and literary scholars and critics have proposed a variety of theories to explain the demise of ethical criticism during the twentieth century, most of which seem to be generally consistent with the reasons provided by Booth in *The Company We Keep*.⁴⁶ Booth's first idea concerns widespread fears within the Western intellectual cultural milieu regarding the potential censorship that might result from an excessively moralistic reading of literature. Toker echoes this concern in her Introduction to *Commitment in Reflection*:

[A] surface reason for the eclipse [of ethical criticism] has been the suspicion (not unjustified in some societies) that the dead metaphor, which the word "criticism" has by now become, could still turn out to be aggressively quick and that the "critical" edge of moral censorship might threaten to amputate large segments of cultural life if a translation of ethical evaluations into legal or political acts were to take place.⁴⁷

Although the givenness of censorship need not be automatically assumed, as it depends significantly upon the specific way ethical criticism is conducted, such fears are not unwarranted given that "[e]ven liberal democracies exhibit long histories of efforts, more or less successful, to suppress this or that brand of literature."⁴⁸ These fears also seem consistent with "the triumph of theories of art as abstract form," another of Booth's explanations for the turn away from ethical criticism.⁴⁹ This intellectual position, a

⁴⁶ Ibid., 26-37.

⁴⁷ Toker, xi.

⁴⁸ Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 36.

branch of which was called New Criticism, rapidly became very popular among literary scholars, critics, and writers who insisted upon “the purity of intrinsic literary analysis.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, literary analysis could not, and indeed should not, yield anything of practical or moral value, but instead could comment only upon the aesthetic features of the text itself and its relationship to other literary texts (*LK*, 231). Together, parties fearing the threat of censorship and abiding by tenets of the New Criticism sought to keep ethical and aesthetic judgments separate from one another in order to protect the artistic freedom and integrity of the literary artist as well as to ensure that literary art not be exploited by or for extra-aesthetic causes.

The other general explanation for the intellectual move away from the practice of ethical criticism is that there occurred a broad philosophical shift away from the traditional modes of inquiry that would derive moral knowledge from literature. One cause of this was the recent spate of historical events that had thrown the traditional set of Western values and the possibility and/or worth of such value education into question. Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack attribute “the demise of modern humanism” to its “failure in the face of two world wars, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the horror of genocide and holocaust, and the oppression of peoples whose narratives somehow fell outside the bounds of an Anglo- or Eurocentric point of view.”⁵¹ As a result of such events, there occurred “widespread disillusionment with the traditional moral values” and

⁵⁰ Toker, xi.

⁵¹ Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, “Preface: Reading Literature and the Ethics of Criticism,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), ix.

“resentment against the classical literature of the past, especially humanist literature, for not helping either to prevent man-made mass disasters or to prepare its audience for the possibility of their occurring.”⁵² Despite centuries of our best efforts, evil still existed in the world and/or in people, making either these values and/or efforts at their education futile. Also, the continued global expansion of Western civilization, and the resulting repeated encounters with non-Westerners with different and seemingly incompatible value systems thrust our Western conception of morality and the possibility of shared moral values into further disarray, reasserting “the historically and culturally contingent basis of formulations like ethics and the so-called literary canon, which therefore cannot be unproblematically conceived of as timeless or universal.”⁵³

Simultaneously, concerns about the relative and/or subjective nature of ethics had begun to spring up from movements within philosophy as well, with the rise of post-structuralism and, especially, deconstruction.⁵⁴ Like the New Critics described above, many of the poststructuralists “doggedly and determinedly sought to place distance between themselves and any mention of an ethical or moral perspective in their work.”⁵⁵ In fact, David Parker regards the attitude of poststructuralism to ethical criticism as

⁵² Toker, xiii.

⁵³ David Parker, “Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s,” in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and History*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

⁵⁴ I shall not spend much time here on the deconstructionist movement, as to do so would require significant space and would deviate substantially from the course of my argument. Rather, I mean only to comment briefly upon deconstruction and acknowledge its integral place in any conversation regarding the relationship between literature and philosophy in the twentieth century.

⁵⁵ Davis and Womack, ix.

downright “antipathetic,” seeking to eliminate any concern for the moral from the study of literature:

Deconstruction ruled out such moral interest in at least two ways. First, it has insisted that literary meaning is finally undecidable, so the very notion of determinate ‘moral questions’ or ‘dilemmas’ is defeated in the end by the instabilities within language itself. Secondly, deconstruction has presented the inner life of moral deliberation, intentionality and choice not as something prior to language but as a mere effect of language.⁵⁶

Further, by way of this enthusiasm for the instability of language, some deconstructionists sought to explode any discernable general conceptual difference between literature and philosophy by disproving the ontological possibility of any such separation.⁵⁷ Thus, for the deconstructionists, without any defining features to distinguish the two, literature and philosophy collapse into two somewhat indistinguishable types of texts. Although deconstructionist and other poststructuralist schools of thought still exist today (in fact, it is probably impossible to escape their lingering influence), such positions are no longer as pervasive as they once were, and, at least according to some, literature and philosophy have moved beyond the poststructuralist shadow, taking ethical criticism with them. In the next chapter, I will discuss the contemporary revival of ethical criticism.

⁵⁶ Parker, 8.

⁵⁷ Eskin, 577-83.

CHAPTER 2: THE LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL RENAISSANCES OF ETHICAL CRITICISM

Since the advent and subsequent waning of such intellectual movements as the New Criticism and deconstruction, ethical criticism has undergone a relative resurgence in both literary and philosophical realms. One commentator, James Phelan, relates this “ethical turn” in literature to a “general reaction against the formalism of . . . deconstruction.”¹ Another, Michael Eskin, makes a similar claim of philosophical circles, interpreting the “literary turn in contemporary . . . philosophy . . . as a homologous response to the putative formalism of analytical moral theory in favor of a more Aristotelian—eudaimonistic and aretaic—approach to human existence as it is played out by singular persons in specific situations, which are . . . best illuminated in and through works of literature.”² Eskin also attributes this turn, at least in part, to a gradual realization by scholars and critics of an unfulfilled promise of such conceptual systems as deconstruction, which could never fully extricate themselves from the ethical ideas and commitments against which they had been conceived.³ Rather, as David Parker affirms, such theories merely offered an alternate conception of *the right way* to consider and/or approach things: “some [particular] picture of human character, some [particular] vision

¹ James Phelan, “Sethe’s Choice: *Beloved* and the Ethics of Reading,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 107.

² Michael Eskin, “Introduction: The Double ‘Turn’ to Ethics and Literature?” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 558.

³ *Ibid.*, 559.

of human flourishing,” thereby conveying an implicit ethical stance in contradiction to their explicit intentions.⁴ Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons, which are multiple and resist simplistic delineation, ethical criticism has experienced a “contemporary revival,” which Eskin suggests originated with the 1983 publication of “*New Literary History*’s pioneering special issue ‘Literature and/as Moral Philosophy.’”⁵ Of course, as I have elaborated, the conception of literature as fundamentally related to ethics is not a new one, dating back to ancient Greece, and, for some thinkers, never escaping their critical paradigm.⁶ However, regardless of the purported age of ethical criticism, the resurgent enthusiasm with which it has been embraced over the past few decades should not be ignored nor diminished. More than a mere rejection the “putative formalism” of poststructuralism, the ethical critical renaissance has entailed a renewed embrace of literature as a way of knowing, “as [a] site . . . of the culture’s deepest moral questioning.”⁷ Eskin acknowledges that moral philosophy may not wield the cultural hegemony over Western moral education and discourse that it would have people believe: “Nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives perused from early

⁴ David Parker, “Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s,” in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and History*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

⁵ Eskin, “Introduction: The Double ‘Turn’ to Ethics and Literature?” 557.

⁶ Such literary critics as F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling, both of whom I shall discuss in greater detail below, are frequently acknowledged for having never forgotten the role of ethics in their critical work. Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21. See also Wayne C. Booth, “‘Of the Standard of Moral Taste’: Literary Criticism as Moral Inquiry,” in *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155.

⁷ Parker, 15.

childhood have been supposed to ensure, more or less successfully, the formation of the variously conceived good person.”⁸ Marshall Gregory echoes this argument, and Aristotle’s for that matter, linking literature’s potential ethical contributions with its mimetic capacity, providing readers with supplementary experiences to model: “Narratives exert influence on human ethos by holding up models for conduct and attitude, by guiding our responses to various human predicaments, by scripting the various moral and ethical judgments that we might make about other people’s behavior, and so on.”⁹ However, Gregory also expands upon this link between literature and moral education, asserting not only that people do learn by way of their contact with stories, but also that this is indeed how people are supposed to learn. Within his argument, there is an implicit psychological claim about the way human beings reason: “[s]tories constitute one of human beings’ primal strategies for organizing the world into meaningful patterns.”¹⁰ The way of knowing provided by literature is inextricably linked to the narrative structure of human cognition. Thus, the primary reason for this revival of interest in ethical criticism cannot be easily isolated, but instead reflects the confluence of a number of intellectual developments, not only in literature and philosophy, but in such disciplines as human psychology as well.

Before I proceed to explore the potential meaning of ethical criticism for medicine and medical ethics, it is important to understand that this resurgent interest in

⁸ Michael Eskin, “On Literature and Ethics,” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 574.

⁹ Marshall Gregory, “Ethical Engagements over Time: Reading and Rereading *David Copperfield* and *Wuthering Heights*,” *Narrative* 12, no. 3 (October 2004): 284.

ethical criticism did not occur naively, without consideration of some of the concerns and criticisms that have limited the practice in the past. Of primary concern to many ethical critics has been to assure skeptics that ethical criticism need not seem incompatible with the aims of contemporary moral philosophy and “its desire to replace old-fashioned moral prescriptivism . . . with descriptive accounts of what we do care about.”¹¹ Rather, it is precisely within this descriptive capacity that ethical critics assert literature might contribute most significantly. In fact, according to Todd Davis and Kenneth Womack, this focus on description as one of literature’s unique epistemological contributions has also helped to shield ethical criticism from concerns regarding the potential for prescriptive moralism within any unsophisticated or careless union of literature and ethics: “[I]f there is any single defining characteristic in the ethical turn that marks contemporary literary studies, it resides in the fact that few critics wish to return to a dogmatically prescriptive or doctrinaire form of reading. Our past failures make such hubris unattractive. Instead, ethical criticism appears to be moving . . . toward a descriptive mode.”¹² Thus, although the practice of ethical criticism remains diverse, with ethical critics varying significantly in their particular juxtapositions of literature and ethics, there remain commonalities, like the commitment to this descriptive mode, that

¹⁰ Ibid., 281.

¹¹ Catherine Wilson, “On Some Alleged Limitations to Moral Endeavor,” *Journal of Philosophy* 90, no. 6 (June 1993): 287-88.

¹² Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, “Preface: Reading Literature and the Ethics of Criticism,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), x.

unite most ethical critics and serve to assure detractors of ethical criticism's desire to avoid the sins of the past. However, regardless of their concerns about theoretical and methodological legitimacy, one position remains unwavering and unapologetic: that literature promises unique and essential contributions to any rich conception of moral inquiry. In the following chapter, I will explore some of the various ways literature's contributions have been conceived by some of these critics, culminating in a review of the ethical critical theory of Martha Nussbaum. By way of this exploration, I hope to illuminate both the general similarities as well as the particular differences of some of the most important early contributors to this dialogue. Only then will I have approached a sufficient appreciation of ethical criticism's past to be able to understand its present and contemplate its future.

ETHICAL CRITICISM AND ITS LITERARY RENAISSANCE

Of course, the turn to ethics in literature did not occur in a discrete moment or with some easily identifiable or isolable turning point. Rather, it was gradual, taking place slowly as critical concern for ethics reemerged from the exile to which it had been sentenced with the ascendance of such movements as deconstruction. However, even this description of a sort of theoretical ebb and flow, of an intellectual waxing and waning, oversimplifies the matter, for, as I suggested above, there were some literary critics who never lost sight of the importance of ethics in literature as well as in their critical work, despite such a rapidly changing and highly volatile intellectual climate. Chief among

these was F. R. Leavis, who is widely considered an ethical critical stalwart of sorts, representing both the end of the traditional humanist criticism of the past, exemplified by such thinkers as Matthew Arnold and Dr. Samuel Johnson, as well as the beginning of the twentieth-century ethical critical revival I discuss throughout this chapter. I turn briefly to Leavis here, not to undertake a comprehensive overview of his conception of ethical criticism, which I am afraid would draw me too far afield, but rather to acknowledge his legacy and place in the history of this discourse as well as to emphasize those problematic aspects of the old *humanist* criticism against which much of the ethical critical history to follow might be understood as a reaction.

F. R. Leavis

In his book *The Great Tradition*, Leavis explores the work of the four novelists who represent, for him, the pinnacle of the tradition of English prose literature: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. He describes these artists as *great* and makes it evident from the outset that this adjective is no mere aesthetic descriptor. For Leavis, *great* implies moral as well as aesthetic achievement, acknowledging such artists' ability to tap into the fundamental *human* potential resting within the best-created literature. Accordingly, such novelists, and their novels, are *great* "in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote;

awareness of the possibilities of life.”¹³ Thus, for Leavis, it is their concern for the possibilities of *both* the art as well as the life contained therein that sets these great novelists, and their novels, apart. One must attend to the aesthetic, but one must also never lose sight of the human depicted in and through such artistry. In other words, in order to write *great* fiction, one must appreciate the essential inextricability of both form *and* content to one’s work. In his discussion of the work of George Eliot, Leavis elaborates his conception of this union:

[H]er interest in “composition” is not something to be put over against her interest in life; nor does she offer an “aesthetic” value that is separable from her moral significance. The principle of organization, and the principle of development, in her work is an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones. . . . She is intelligent and serious enough to be able to impersonalize her moral tensions as she strives, in her art, to become more fully conscious of them, and to learn what, in the interests of life, she ought to do with them. Without her intense moral preoccupations she wouldn’t have been a great novelist. (*GT*, 7)

Leavis’s explicit union of form and content remains one of his most significant contributions to the contemporary practice of ethical criticism. Another of Leavis’s legacies is his recognition of the essential value, at least to a degree, of a great novelist’s perceptive attendance to the particulars fundamental to an accurate depiction of humanity. According to Leavis, this is the moral realm in which such novelists as Henry James reign supreme: “[James’s] registration of sophisticated human consciousness is

¹³ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (New York: G. W. Stewart, 1948), 2. All subsequent references to *The Great Tradition* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *GT*, followed by the page number.

one of the classical creative achievements . . . [and is of] great human significance. He creates an ideal civilized sensibility; a humanity capable of communicating by the finest shades of inflection and implication” (*GT*, 16). Although such fine “shades of inflection and implication” are essential to James’s artistry, the aesthetic accomplishment of this technique cannot be separated from its valuable rendering of the subtleties of human moral life. For Leavis, as for James, form and content are essential features of any great work of literature, and one necessarily contributes to and affects the other.

However, regardless of the lasting legacy of this union of form and content, it is also by way of this formulation that Leavis oversteps his critical bounds and relegates himself to an era preceding the contemporary ethical critical revival. For Leavis, the creation of art that is concerned with human being is only great if both of these attributes coincide with Leavis’ own predetermined conception of what moral and aesthetic greatness ought to be. This critical position leaves him vulnerable to a sort of moral prescriptivism that separates him from the *descriptive* aspirations of contemporary ethical critical practice. Perhaps this insidious moralism is best demonstrated through his critical view of the work of Gustave Flaubert, who, according to Leavis, ignores life in order to flaunt his art. Leavis concurs with D. H. Lawrence, who asserts that Flaubert “stood away from life as from a leprosy,” and argues that, for Flaubert, “‘form’ and ‘style’ are ends to be sought for themselves” (*GT*, 8). Leavis goes on to contrast Flaubert from the constituents of his *Great Tradition*, insisting that they, “far from having anything of Flaubert’s disgust or disdain or boredom, . . . are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity” (*GT*,

9). Of course, Leavis may be justified in contrasting Flaubert from his favored artists, but he neglects to consider the possibility that Flaubert's is merely a different, though potentially equally viable, vision of life. Rather, according to Leavis, Flaubert's deviation from the human view articulated within *The Great Tradition* marks him as morally and, therefore, literarily flawed. As Richard Lansdown argues, "[t]he possibility that it was Flaubert's intention to demonstrate the human and moral paucity of his subject is not something Leavis considers."¹⁴ Instead, Leavis merely characterizes his work as second-rate, concerned solely with art-for-its-own-sake and demonstrating an inferior moral vision. It is this rigid and judgmental moral *and* aesthetic position that has limited Leavis' continuing influence. Although elements of his early brand of ethical criticism remain implicit in and essential to contemporary discourse, his preference for the prescriptive over the descriptive has limited his legacy and consigned him to the outmoded humanist critical tradition of the past.

Lionel Trilling

In *The Liberal Imagination* Lionel Trilling tackles topics similar to those discussed by Leavis and alluded to above with regard to other ethical critics. However, of all of them, Trilling's approach to and goals for the ethical criticism of literature might have the most in common with those of Nussbaum, which will be discussed in

¹⁴ Richard Lansdown, "People on Whom Nothing Is Lost: Maturity in F. R. Leavis, Martha Nussbaum, and Others," *Critical Review* 38 (1998): 117.

significantly greater detail below. Although he does not deal as explicitly with the ambiguous relationship between moral philosophy and ethical criticism, he, nonetheless, is “perfectly able to speak of the ethical content of literature and the ethical expressiveness of literary forms,” both of which are fundamental to Nussbaum’s thesis in *Love’s Knowledge*.¹⁵ For the most part, Trilling appears to be more explicitly interested in the contributions that literature might make to the civic lives of citizens, but this inevitably bleeds into concerns about their ethical development as well:

Ever since men began to think about poetry, they have conceived that there is a difference between the poet and the philosopher, a difference in method and in intention and in result. These differences I have no wish to deny. But a solidly established difference inevitably draws the fire of our question; it tempts us to inquire whether it is really essential or whether it is quite so settled and extreme as it at first seems.¹⁶

Inasmuch, and like Nussbaum, there are several intellectual misconceptions that Trilling attempts to dispel by way of the ethical criticism of literature. First, he calls upon “literature and its forms in order to subvert oversimple moralisms” and “reductive theories,”¹⁷ to exemplify just how complex any conception of morality and moral life must be in order to be worthwhile: “(L)iterature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty”

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 190.

¹⁶ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 272. All subsequent references to *The Liberal Imagination* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *LI*, followed by the page number.

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 22.

(*LI*, xiii). In fact, Trilling goes on to assert that the open acknowledgment of such variousness and possibility ought not be thought of as an intellectual and/or moral failure. Rather, it is this unique capability of novels to tolerate such ambiguity that constitutes their authority and relevance: “[T]his negative capability [of certain modern novelists], this willingness to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, is not . . . an abdication of intellectual activity. Quite the contrary, it is precisely an aspect of intelligence, of their seeing the full force and complexity of their subject matter” (*LI*, 289). Thus, this essential complexity, which again Nussbaum will later emphasize, is a fundamental and unique contribution of literature. Form/style then is as important as and inseparable from content: “In literature style is so little the mere clothing of thought . . . that we may say that from the earth of the novelist’s prose spring his characters, his ideas, and even his story itself” (*LI*, 14).

However, Trilling’s arguments for literature as edificatory do not end there, as he also takes time to dispute the claims of those in the literary critical establishment who would assert that *real* literature ought not, indeed cannot, traffic in notions of intellectual and/or philosophical import. He specifically refers to T. S. Eliot, who claimed at various times that such luminaries as Dante, William Shakespeare, and Henry James ought not to be praised for any intellectual or philosophical notions that might have permeated their works (*LI*, 275). Eliot asserts, as cited by Trilling, “I can see no reason for believing that either Shakespeare or Dante did any thinking on his own. The people who think that Shakespeare thought are always people who are not engaged in writing poetry, but who are engaged in thinking, and we all like to think that great men were like ourselves” (*LI*,

275). On James, he quips, “Henry James had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it” (*LI*, 276). That is to say, according to Eliot and those of his ilk, the study of literature with a mind, in whole or even in part, to glean ethical or any other intellectual instruction “violates” what ought to be considered as art and only art. Trilling, of course, finds positions such as Eliot’s and others’ ridiculous, as stated, for he argues that such intellectual content is an essential, indeed inextricable, component of the work of art as a whole. He does then acknowledge that there is a danger that some readings or interpretations might “intellectualize . . . out of [life and literature] all spontaneity and reality” (*LI*, 276). However, instances of egregious misreading ought not destroy any and all conceptions of literature as intellectual. In fact, according to Trilling, it may be exactly the intellectual content of such novels, when they are read appropriately, that makes them such aesthetic achievements as well: “The aesthetic effect of intellectual cogency . . . is not to be slighted” (*LI*, 280).

Finally, Trilling’s conception of the relationship among the emotions, literature, and ethical intelligence is noteworthy and similar to, though less developed than, that later described by Nussbaum. He suggests that the typical rationalist depiction of the emotions as whimsical, unruly, and unreliable is flawed: “(T)he extreme rationalist position ignores the simple fact that the life of reason, at least in its most extensive part, begins in the emotions. What comes into being when two contradictory emotions are made to confront each other and are required to have a relationship with each other is . . . quite properly called an idea” (*LI*, 288). Thus, according to Trilling, one would be unwise to rashly and prematurely marginalize the value of the emotions to imagination

and moral intelligence. In this, he sides with John Stuart Mill, who “understood from his own experience that the imagination was properly the joint possession of the emotions and the intellect, that it was fed by the emotions, and that without it the intellect withers and dies, that without it the mind cannot work and cannot properly conceive itself” (*LI*, xi). Moreover, Trilling argues, it is through novels that the emotions and the moral imagination can be educated:

For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. It was never, either aesthetically or morally, a perfect form and its faults and failures can be quickly enumerated. But its greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it. It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety. It was the literary form to which the emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous, as if by definition of the form itself. (*LI*, 215)

With his explicit investigation of the relationship between literature and the relevance of the emotions to ethical intelligence, Trilling demonstrates his fundamental, and perhaps even visionary, contributions to the evolution of ethical criticism. I will elaborate his relationship to other ethical critics, and especially Nussbaum, in greater detail below.

Northrop Frye

Northrop Frye retains a significant place in this introduction to the literary side of this history of ethical criticism, not only because he provides a unique perspective regarding the role and relevance of ethical criticism, but also because, like Leavis and

Trilling, he is widely recognized as one of the most important literary critical voices of his time. In what may be his most important work, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye conducts a systematic examination of literary criticism, which, in general, he believes has grown far too soft and lackadaisical:

The first step in developing a genuine poetics is to recognize and get rid of meaningless criticism, or talking about literature in a way that cannot help to build up a systematic structure of knowledge. This includes all the sonorous nonsense that we so often find in critical generalities, reflective comments, ideological perorations, and other consequences of taking a large view of an unorganized subject.¹⁸

On the surface, such a statement seems to reflect a relatively narrow and/or formalistic conception of literary criticism and its relevance to questions outside the typical purview of literary studies. Further, there is certainly ample material in *Anatomy of Criticism* to support at least some ambivalence, on Frye's part, regarding literature and criticism and their extra-literary applicability. He approaches very cautiously any critical tendency that appeals to literature to do work of which it is not capable, believing such attempts to be errant and deterministic:

It would be easy to compile a long list of such determinisms in criticism, all of them, whether Marxist, Thomist, liberal-humanist, neo-Classical, Freudian, Jungian, or existentialist, substituting a critical attitude for criticism, all proposing, not to find a conceptual framework for criticism within literature, but to attach criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it. The axioms and postulates of criticism, however, have to grow out of the art it deals with.

¹⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 18. Again, as before, I shall not conduct a comprehensive overview here of Frye or *Anatomy of Criticism*, but instead discuss his work only insofar as it relates to my discussion of the historical development of ethical criticism. All subsequent references to *Anatomy of Criticism* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *AC*, followed by the page number.

The first thing the literary critic has to do is to read literature to make an inductive survey of his own field and let his critical principles shape themselves solely out of his knowledge of that field. Critical principles cannot be taken over ready-made from theology, philosophy, politics, science, or any combination of these. . . . To subordinate criticism to an externally derived critical attitude is to exaggerate the values in literature that can be related to the external source, whatever it is. It is all too easy to impose on literature an extra-literary schematism, a sort of religio-political color-filter, which makes some poets leap into prominence and others show up as dark and faulty. . . . If criticism exists, it must be an examination of literature in terms of a conceptual framework derivable from an inductive survey of the literary field. (*AC*, 6-7)

Thus, Frye's primary problem with the "sonorous nonsense" that constitutes much literary criticism is that it is not sufficiently faithful to the artistic work itself and, instead, derives much of its substance elsewhere, seeking to do more than the literary work itself can handle or will allow. His qualm coincides with another misguided temptation to which some overly ambitious literary critics frequently succumb: the "intentional fallacy." According to Frye, critics commit this when they interpret literary work as an expression of artist's extra-literary intent: "[T]he 'intentional fallacy' [relates to] the notion that the poet has a primary intention of conveying meaning to a reader, and that the first duty of a critic is to recapture that intention. . . . [A] poet's primary concern is to produce a work of art, and hence his intention can only be expressed by some kind of tautology" (*AC*, 86). This does not mean that such poetry might not possess some meaning of which the critic or reader might take note or make use, only that this ought not be regarded as the artist's intent: "Poetry is a vehicle for morality, truth, and beauty, but the poet does not aim at these things, but only at inner verbal strength" (*AC*, 113). Thus, for Frye, it is only when would-be critics become overzealous and try to make a

work and/or an author do too much that he believes the practice of criticism begins to stray from its functional capabilities.

Alternatively, once critics heed these established limitations and treat literature conscientiously, there remains a great deal that literature might provide and/or reveal, including the above-mentioned “morality, truth, and beauty.” In fact, according to Frye, such extra-literary value ought to be one of the chief goals of the critic, for “[w]hatever is of no use to anybody is expendable” (*AC*, 3). Given that Frye spends nearly four hundred pages in his *Anatomy of Criticism* outlining his conception of intelligent and responsible literary criticism, it is clear that he does not believe it to be expendable. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that literature’s potential value in the lives of its readers ranks among the most significant of its potential contributions:

What good is the study of literature? Does it help us to think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life than we could without it? What is the function of the teacher and scholar, or of the person that calls himself, as I do, a literary critic? What difference does the study of literature make in our social or political or religious attitude? In my early days I thought very little about such questions, not because I had any of the answers, but because I assumed that anybody who asked them was naïve. I think now that the simplest questions are not only the hardest to answer, but the most important to ask.¹⁹

Thus, it falls to critics sufficiently versed in the appropriate critical methods to discern and translate this literary property. Frye describes ethical criticism as one such form of practical criticism: “[T]he goal of ethical criticism is transvaluation, the ability to look at

¹⁹ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 13-14. All subsequent references to *The Educated Imagination* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *EI*, followed by the page number.

contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture” (AC, 348). Literature, then, becomes an invaluable source of these “possibilities” from which one might develop this “infinite vision.” Frye takes great care to recommend that such vision not go unchecked, asserting that responsible ethical criticism requires historical criticism and a sense of historicism in order to be practiced responsibly: “An exclusive devotion to [ethical criticism], ignoring historical criticism, would lead to a naïve translation of all cultural phenomena into our own terms without regard to their original character” (AC, 24-25). Nonetheless, given sufficient attention to the cautions and safeguards he elaborates, Frye maintains that ethical criticism is an essential component of a liberal education, ultimately resulting in the moral improvement of those who undertake this practice: “What does improve in the arts is the comprehension of them, and the refining of society which results from it. It is the consumer, not the producer, who benefits by culture, the consumer who becomes humanized and liberally educated” (AC, 344).

For someone who seems so cautious in parts of *Anatomy of Criticism* not to make exceedingly general and grand claims on behalf of literature, such statements regarding the moral improvement that can accompany one’s exposure to literature might seem grandiose and unfounded, even hypocritically so. However, Frye spends much of *Anatomy of Criticism*, as well as *The Educated Imagination*, seeking to support such claims. Frye’s primary argument for literature as moral educator has already been alluded to: good literature possesses the capacity to provide its readers with increasingly rich and varied vision, by way of its particular depiction of culture and its accumulated

historical traditions. However, Frye does not stop here, with vision and its relationship to culture in general: literature can also improve one's vision of the other and can subsequently foster the development of tolerance (*EI*, 77). Further, Frye asserts that literature can broaden human horizons, providing a sort of vicarious experience that people might not otherwise receive: "Literature gives us an experience that stretches us vertically to the heights and depths of what the human mind can conceive, to what corresponds to the conceptions of heaven and hell in religion. . . . No matter how much experience we may gather in life, we can never in life get the dimensions of experience that the imagination gives us" (*EI*, 101). Contra Leavis and even Wayne Booth, whom I will discuss in greater detail below, Frye focuses on this descriptive and experiential capacity of literature and avoids any tendency to prescriptive moralism. In fact, as Frye describes it, literature is largely *amoral*: "Novels can only be good or bad in their own categories. There's no such thing as a morally bad novel" (*EI*, 94). Thus, even the worst novels, depicting the most graphic violence or employing the most obscene language, are merely alternative descriptions to be assessed against other such experiences:

Literature keeps presenting the most vicious things to us as entertainment, but what it appeals to is not any pleasure in these things, but the exhilaration of standing apart from them and being able to see them for what they really are because they aren't really happening. The more exposed we are to this, the less likely we are to find an unthinking pleasure in cruel or evil things. . . . [L]iterature refines our sensibilities. (*EI*, 100)

Frye argues that after one reads something, one undertakes a "conscious, critical response" in which "we compare what we've experienced with other things of the same

kind, and form a judgment of value and proportion on it. This critical response, with practice, gradually makes our pre-critical responses [those less reflective responses that occur as we experience a work] more sensitive and accurate, or improves our taste” (*EI*, 104). Thus, according to Frye, it is through this dialectic between experience and critical reflection that one refines one’s moral imagination. As I emphasized above, and as Frye stresses repeatedly throughout *Anatomy of Criticism*, this brand of ethical criticism is not exclusive and it remains merely one possible avenue for the sophisticated critic might explore. However, it is important, even essential: “Literary education should lead not merely to the admiration of great literature. . . . The ultimate aim is an ethical and participating aim, not an aesthetic one, even though the latter may be the means of achieving the former.”²⁰ Of course, Frye’s position is not uncontroversial, even amongst the more descriptively inclined ethical critics I will discuss in the pages that follow. Nonetheless, his argument is a substantive and complex contribution to the ethical critical conversation and deserves critical scrutiny.

Wayne Booth

Perhaps more than any other literary critic, Wayne Booth has been fundamental to the resurgence of ethical criticism that has occurred in recent decades, both within his

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), 47.

own field of literary criticism as well as in the general intellectual culture as a whole.²¹ He occupies the place of a sort of forefather for this contemporary ethical critical movement, and *The Company We Keep* remains a foundational work in the ethical critical canon and one of the sources to which many thinkers turn upon their introduction to and/or navigation of the discipline of ethical criticism. However, if one had described this vision of his future to Booth early on in his scholarly career, he probably would not have believed such a story. In fact, at the outset of Booth's career, ethical criticism still lurked in the shadows of *true* scholarship, too unpopular to be taken seriously by most *real* critics of the time, excepting, of course, such touchstone figures as Leavis and Trilling. Instead, most critics still disregarded ethical criticism, believing it to be irresponsibly subjective, biased, and potentially dangerously moralistic. For most of his early career, Booth would likely have agreed with such an account, and it was only upon confronting a respected colleague's *ethical* reaction to a canonical text that Booth began to entertain the idea of a legitimate, even scholarly, conception of ethical criticism. Only then did Booth acknowledge that "if the powerful stories we tell each other really matter to us—and even the most skeptical theorists imply by their *practice* that stories do

²¹ At times, Booth's influence seems to have extended beyond what even he might have imagined. Consider, for example, Booth's address at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the Society for Health and Human Values. Although Booth had been invited to give the plenary address, which would seem to reflect his relevance and importance at such a meeting, he makes clear in his introductory comments that he remains somewhat uncertain about the relationship between his work and the sorts of medical ethical subjects discussed at such a conference. See Wayne C. Booth, "Literary Criticism and the Pursuit of Character," *Literature and Medicine* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 97-108.

matter—then a criticism that takes their ‘mattering’ seriously cannot be ignored.”²² Over the decades that followed, Booth began to explore critically the particular ways that such texts *mattered*, revitalizing the tradition of ethical criticism and making significant contributions to this evolving literature. Although his ethical critical theory is far too expansive for me to be able to treat it both adequately and comprehensively, in the paragraphs that follow, I will briefly explore Booth’s conception of ethical criticism and elaborate upon some of his most important contributions to its practice.

In his “Preface” to *The Company We Keep*, Booth articulates his “aims” for the book, which mirror the conception of ethical criticism he elaborates throughout the remainder of the work:

The book . . . aims, first, to restore the full intellectual legitimacy of our common-sense inclination to talk about stories in ethical terms, treating the characters in them and their makers as more like people than labyrinths, enigmas, or textual puzzles to be deciphered; and second, it aims to ‘relocate’ ethical criticism, turning it from flat judgment, for or against supposedly stable works to fluid conversation about the qualities of the company we keep—and the company that we ourselves provide. (CK, x)

With this vision, Booth corroborates the aforementioned “double turn,” advocating for a broader, more inclusive conception of literary criticism than had recently been embraced. In doing so, Booth seeks both to legitimate ethical inquiry as a viable activity for literary critics and to reinforce a conception of literary criticism as rigorous and dynamic, seeking

²² Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 4. All subsequent references to *The Company We Keep* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation CK, followed by the page number.

and resulting in far more than merely critical judgment for its own sake. Fundamental to this vision, then, of a viable and useful ethical criticism is a sufficiently broad conception of ethics to provide the foundation for this critical practice: “[O]ne reason no progress is made in our battles [among critics who debate the possibility of ethical criticism] is that too many reduce both terms [ethical and moral] to the narrowest possible moral codes. The essential issue for critics . . . is not whether some part of a given story violates this or that moral code; rather it is the overall effect on the *ethos*, the *character*, of the listener.”²³ For Booth, only an ethical criticism grounded in such a character-driven conception of ethics can make adequate use of the unique goods that literature might provide. An ethic manifested in and derived from literature must transcend such “limited moral standards” as “honesty, . . . or decency or tolerance” (*CK*, 8), shifting its attention to more fundamental and specific concerns regarding “the quality of the imagination wrought by this book” and “the quality of the effects, in us as readers, of reading this book in what *seems to us* to be its own terms” (*CK*, 400). Thus, Booth’s *broadened* ethical criticism emphasizes careful and critical reading rooted in the text itself and is wary of any top-down conception of ethics that would look to literature merely instrumentally. Implicit within this conception of ethics is the toleration, and even active encouragement, of a “plurality of [ethical] goods” (*CK*, 115). In *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, Andrew Gibson corroborates and elaborates upon this description of Booth’s ethical criticism:

²³ Wayne C. Booth, “Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack

Booth's account of fictional ethics in *The Company We Keep* is by intention both pluralist and pragmatist. As Connor puts it, Booth's "conviction of the irreducible plurality of human experience and of ways of understanding it lead him throughout to be suspicious of definitions that prematurely generalize" or give expression to supposedly foundational principles. . . . Booth argues, instead, that ethical value is generated "through acts of continuing conversation, in which judgments about literary texts are tested by and against other judgments, and judgments of other texts."²⁴

Thus, Booth's conception of ethical criticism remains staunchly committed to an ethical pluralism that is both stimulated and scrutinized through an ongoing conversation with other readers and inquirers. Moreover, the pluralist goal of such conversations is not the achievement of some sort of consensus, for "the worth of any project in ethical criticism in no way depends on our ability to come to consensus on any one ethical appraisal or to produce a single harmonious scheme of narrative values" (*CK*, 207). Rather, such conversations seek merely to broaden the perspectives of those engaged. Booth terms this conversational model *coduction*, and it remains one of his most important contributions to this larger, ongoing ethical critical conversation.

Reminiscent of some of the work done by Gadamer and others in the hermeneutical tradition, Booth's *coduction* is the complex process by which one arrives at any sort of critical judgment in one's engagement of a literary work:

[W]e arrive at our sense of value in narratives in precisely the way we arrive at our sense of value in persons: by *experiencing* them in an immeasurably rich context of others that are both like and unlike them. Even in my first intuition of

(Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 18.

²⁴ Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1999), 9.

‘this new one,’ whether a story or a person, I see it against a backdrop of my long personal history of untraceably complex experiences of other stories and persons. Thus my initial acquaintance is comparative even when I do not think of comparisons. If I then converse with others about their impressions . . . the primary intuition (with its implicit acknowledgement of value) can be altered in at least three ways: it can become conscious and more consciously comparative . . . ; it can become less dependent upon my private experience . . . ; and it can be related to principles or norms. . . . Every appraisal of a narrative is implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and what we have known before. (CK, 70-71)

Thus, in one sense, coduction operates implicitly, even passively, in the way people consider and evaluate literary works. However, coduction also works through a more explicit and active component, in which one consciously compares one’s critical evaluation to that of others, thereby improving the depth and quality of one’s critical perspective merely through the consideration of others’. According to Nussbaum, coduction represents a viable and valuable form of practical reason “in which principle, concrete experience, and advice from one’s friends interact over time to produce and revise judgments.”²⁵ Conceived this way, there can be little doubt that coductive ethical criticism is a *rational* process, even though, according to Booth, it is “by no means logical in any usual sense of the word” (CK, 72). Being neither “deduction from clear premises, even of the most complex kind, nor induction from a series of precisely defined and isolated instances,” Booth’s coduction nonetheless aspires to at least approach the standard of rationality implicit in these other conceptions of reason (CK, 71). Though not objective, coduction certainly transcends the traditional subjective and/or relativistic

²⁵ Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 234.

labels by way of its appeals both to normative principles as well as to the shared and cumulative judgment(s) of an “implied community” garnered through the accumulation of a common tradition, rooted in education and experience (CK, 104). Again, it is important to remember that this coductive approach does not seek consensus as an arbiter of its legitimacy or rationality; rather, it is coduction’s commitment to and toleration of a plurality of ethical goods that marks its value in critical evaluation. Coduction provides a somewhat unique contribution to a conception of ethical criticism, grounding the practice in far more than the critical evaluations of individuals and celebrating such diversity. According to Booth, this commitment to multiple ethical perspectives is essential to a rich and responsible conception of ethical criticism, for no one critic can claim to “‘extract’ the full value of any great story if working utterly alone, unaffected by an exchange of criticism with other readers or listeners.”²⁶ Thus, Booth’s ethical criticism not only welcomes, but necessarily relies upon the coductive contributions provided by tradition and other readers for any sense of legitimacy.

However, Booth’s commitment to eliciting and respecting “the quality of the effects, in us as readers, of reading this book in what *seems to us* to be its own terms” is not an invitation to conduct a haphazard reading of a text. Any viable approach to reading and criticism must necessarily attend to *both* the form *and* the content of the work in question. According to Booth, this includes careful consideration of the variety of voices operative in any particular work:

²⁶ Wayne C. Booth, “Why Banning Ethical Criticism Is a Serious Mistake,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22, no. 2 (October 1998): 372.

[H]e urges readers, as they ask questions about a literary work, to distinguish three voices that are too frequently run together: the *narrator* (the character who tells the story); the *implied author* (the sense of life or the outlook that reveals itself in the structure of the text taken as a whole); and the *writer* (the real-life person, with all her or his lapses of attention, trivial daily pursuits, and so forth). Although Booth has interesting things to say about the reader's relationship to all these figures, ethical criticism is concerned, above all, with the relationship between the reader and the implied author. Good ethical criticism, then, does not preclude formal analysis, but actually requires it. Style itself shapes the mind; and these are effects that a good ethical critic discerns.²⁷

Booth focuses upon the implied author in order to create space for a reader to attend to the form and content of a particular text. It allows the reader to dissociate, at least as much as possible, the work itself from the *human* author who created it, and it also provides room within the text for the reader to separate what the story says from the way it is told. Thus, for example, a work that trades in depictions of graphic violence, written by an author who is both a drunk and an adulterer, might still be considered an edifying piece of art, depending upon how it is written and the way it treats such issues as violence: "The only way the work can escape our charge is through demonstration that somehow the injustice is effectively criticized by the work itself: the implied author does not speak for injustice but against it. . . . [T]he injustice is committed by *characters within the work* but not by the implied author" (CK, 390). Thus, by way of this delineation, Booth attempts to circumvent the tendency to superficial moralism to which texts depicting evil, for example, might be susceptible. However, this formulation of implied authorship also allows for the possibility of Booth's somewhat anthropomorphic

²⁷ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 233.

conception of literary works as potential friends to begin to take shape. Booth likens the reception of readers to various texts to the way people receive other people, and especially their friends. In the best and fullest literary friendships, which Booth relates to the Aristotelian “friendship of virtue,” one encounters friends “who demonstrate their friendship not only in the range and depth and intensity of pleasure they offer, not only in the promise they fulfill of proving useful to me, but finally in the irresistible invitation they extend to live during these moments a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own” (CK, 223). Booth goes on to describe friendships one might form with books more fully:

Unlike “real” people, you are an idealized version of the writer who created you, the disorganized, flawed creature who in a sense discovered you by expunging his or her duller times and weaker moments. To dwell with you is to share the improvements you have managed to make in your “self” by perfecting your narrative world. You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams seem petty and absurd. You finally show what life can be, not just to a coterie, a saved and saving remnant looking down on the fools, slobs, and knaves, but to *anyone* who is willing to work to earn the title of equal and true friend. (CK, 223)

Thus, for Booth, the quality of the friendship one establishes with literature, or with people for that matter, is highly contingent upon the ethical value contained therein. Furthermore, it is by way of this conception of friendship as it relates to the voices contained within a work of literature that Booth strengthens his case against the need for literature to appeal to particular ethical traditions for its moral value: “Booth shows that

by thinking about texts in terms of questions about the company we keep, we do not need abstract principles as grounds for their worth because we have clear personal measures. . . . We do not determine who our friends are because of the conditions they satisfy; rather we determine who we are in terms of the quite concrete company we choose, and the company we reject.”²⁸ Thus, for Booth, the reading of literature becomes a fundamentally moral activity:

[It provides practice] in how to read moral qualities from potentially misleading signs. . . . [O]ur best narrative friends introduce us to the practice of subtle, sensitive moral inference, the kind that most moral choices in daily life require of us. The reader . . . comes away from reading Henry James, or Jane Austen, or Shakespeare, emulating *that kind* of moral sensitivity—not so much the sensitivity of any one character . . . but, rather, that of the author who insists that I *see* what these people are doing to each other. (CK, 287)

According to Booth, the ethical criticism of literature is an essential form of ethical education and development. Without the guidance provided by the company of literature as well as other coductive readers, one cannot fully understand life, nor attempt to live it fully morally.

²⁸ Charles Altieri, “Lyrical Ethics and Literary Experience,” in *Mapping the Ethical Turn: A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory*, ed. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 37.

ETHICAL CRITICISM AND ITS PHILOSOPHICAL RENAISSANCE

In addition to literary critics, several influential philosophers have also turned to literature in their philosophical work over the past few decades, including Iris Murdoch,²⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer,³⁰ Richard Rorty,³¹ Martha Nussbaum,³² Alasdair MacIntyre,³³ Charles Taylor,³⁴ and Stanley Cavell,³⁵ just to name a few.³⁶ In the pages that follow, I shall not attempt a comprehensive overview of all of the philosophers who have articulated a place for literature in their conceptions of philosophy, as such a pursuit would deviate significantly from my intention in this section as well as from my goals for

²⁹ Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy* 30 (1956): 32-58; *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970). All subsequent references to *The Sovereignty of Good* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *SG*, followed by the page number.

³⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989); *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

³¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). All subsequent references to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *CIS*, followed by the page number.

³² Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.

³³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

³⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

³⁶ This is not to say that all of these philosophers would consider themselves as ethical critics, although some might, but instead that their philosophical work is conducive to potential contributions from narrative, art, and/or literature.

this work in general; rather, I will briefly examine three of these thinkers, Murdoch, Gadamer, and Rorty, whose work has had particular influence upon the conception of ethical criticism that I have begun to explore.

Iris Murdoch

Of the three philosophers I shall discuss in this section, Iris Murdoch might be the most traditional, at least with regard to her conception of philosophy and its relationship to literature. However, this is not to suggest that Murdoch's stance on these issues was uncomplicated or simplistic. Far from it, Murdoch was one of the few philosophers, in history perhaps, to be esteemed both as an academic philosopher as well as as a literary novelist. On the surface then, Murdoch's position might appear somewhat obvious: for how could one be celebrated as both a philosopher as well as an artist without conceiving of some inextricable union between the two? Surely for someone to do two such things so well they must be related. And yet, according to Murdoch, at least some of the time, to make such an assumption would be an egregious error, conflating two disciplines that she asserts ought to be kept separate. However, this position is not a consistent one throughout her philosophical scholarship, in which, at times, she describes what she conceives to be a necessary union between the two. According to Nussbaum, such seeming contradiction represents typical behavior for Murdoch: "For most of this time, Murdoch opposed any effort to connect her two careers. . . . [She] had a constant desire to

mystify and to prevent people from finding her where she was.”³⁷ In an interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch explicitly describes her understanding of the respective work of philosophy and literature writ large:

Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim. . . . Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing. . . . Of course philosophers vary and some are more “literary” than others, but I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice.³⁸

Thus, as characterized by Peter Johnson, Murdoch comes across as “a philosopher unwilling to discard *all* separation between philosophy and literature.”³⁹ However, “all” may be the keyword in Johnson’s assessment, for, as I shall show in the paragraphs that follow, to conclude an analysis of Murdoch’s position with this rigid separation of philosophy and literature would be to ignore much of what constitutes and distinguishes her philosophy. Murdoch’s vision is far more complex, exemplifying the ambivalence

³⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, introduction to *The Black Prince*, by Iris Murdoch (New York: Penguin, 2003), xii.

³⁸ Bryan Magee, “Philosophy and Literature: Dialogue with Iris Murdoch,” in *Men of Ideas*, ed. Bryan Magee (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 264-65.

³⁹ Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel: A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5. Emphasis added. All subsequent references to *Moral Philosophers and the Novel* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *MPN*, followed by the page number.

that, seemingly necessarily, shrouds much of the historical discussion concerning the relationship between philosophy and literature.

From early in her philosophical career, Murdoch expressed frustration with the “current” moral view, which she labels variously as “British empiricist,” “behaviorist, existentialist, and utilitarian” (*SG*, 1, 4, 8). Although she levied numerous charges against this current view of philosophy, one of her most significant arguments centers around the dominant conception of morality espoused by thinkers who conceive of ethics as *action*-based, occurring in singular moments during which one exhibits *ethical* decision-making.⁴⁰ For Murdoch, such a model is overly simplistic and underdeveloped, requiring significant enrichment to suffice as a viable conception of morality. First of all, according to Murdoch, any functional view of ethics can not be conceived of and/or evaluated according to such discrete events as single decisions or choices: “The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is crucial” (*SG*, 36). Thus, for Murdoch, “[m]oral tasks are characteristically endless” and any viable conception of morality ought to account for the fluidity in moral vision and action. Secondly, and perhaps even more significantly, Murdoch also finds fault with the external, action-based element of this theory, asserting that this narrow view neglects the contributions of the “inner life” of a person to his or her ethical well-being (*SG*, 9):

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 151; Nussbaum, introduction to *The Black Prince*, xi.

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their *total vision of life*, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the *texture of a man's being* or the *nature of his personal vision*.⁴¹

This vision metaphor pervades Murdoch's philosophy and exemplifies the paradigm shift she tries to effect for the current view of moral philosophy. According to Murdoch, only such a notion as vision can cope with the "ambiguity and paradox" inherent in life:

"There are . . . moments when situations are unclear and what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify the facts, but a fresh *vision* . . . which is able to deal with what is obstinately obscure, and represents a 'mode of understanding' of an alternative type."⁴²

Clearly, Murdoch believes that there is more to morality than the mere memorization of philosophical imperatives and principles and their application during discrete moments of decision and action. Instead, morality requires vision, and it is in focusing this vision that Murdoch conceives of a role for literature in philosophy. According to Murdoch, as cited by Nussbaum, "the novel is itself an ethical form, dedicated to true vision."⁴³ Further, Murdoch's metaphorical conception of morality goes

⁴¹ Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," 39. Emphasis added.

⁴² Ibid., 51. Emphasis added.

⁴³ Martha Nussbaum, "'Faint with Secret Knowledge': Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*," *Poetics Today* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 692.

beyond vision and the above-mentioned texture to include metaphors of attendance and struggle, which can also be refined by the investigation of literature: “Innumerable novels contain accounts of what such struggles are like” (*SG*, 22). Thus, according to this conception, Murdoch asserts that it is literature’s descriptive capacity that contributes to moral vision: “[T]he most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations” (*SG*, 33). She goes on to describe “great art as an educator and revealer. Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist’s just and compassionate vision” (*SG*, 63-64). Thus, for Murdoch, ethics would be incomplete without the insight provided by literature, which serves ethics as both an accessory through which one can focus one’s own moral vision as well as an elaborate exemplar of highly refined moral vision itself: “Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give.”⁴⁴ Literature enriches ethics, providing both an invaluable addition as well as an essential corrective to the narrow and short-sided current view.

Thus, although she occasionally asserts otherwise, Murdoch has carved out a significant place for literature within her moral philosophy. By and large, she advocates a cooperative role for literature:

⁴⁴ Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” 50.

One of the great merits of the moral psychology which I am proposing is that it does not contrast art and morals, but shows them to be two aspects of a single struggle. The existentialist-behaviourist view could give no satisfactory account of art; it was seen as a quasi-play activity, gratuitous, “for its own sake” (the familiar Kantian-Bloomsbury slogan), a sort of by-product of our failure to be entirely rational. Such a view of art is of course intolerable. In one of those important movements of return from philosophical theory to simple things which we are certain of, we must come back to what we know about great art and about the moral insight which it contains and the moral achievement which it represents. Goodness and beauty are not to be contrasted, but are largely part of the same structure. (*SG*, 39-40)

There are even times when Murdoch goes so far as to esteem literature as even more valuable than philosophy: “For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all” (*SG*, 74). In light of such seemingly contradictory statements regarding the place of literature as it relates to ethics, one might be tempted to declare Murdoch inconsistent and, therefore, unworthy of much attention. However, perhaps a fairer assessment would merely consider her conflicted, like so many others regarding the nature of this relationship. Although at times she seems to soften the force with which she has made some of these claims, her position that literature does contribute something important seems steady and relatively consistent. In this light, all that varies is the established place for this contribution within an intact moral theory. Murdoch alludes to this more general claim later in her interview with Magee: “[T]hough they are so different, philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities. They are cognitive activities, explanations. Literature . . . involves exploration,

classification, discrimination, organized vision. . . . Art is cognition in another mode.”⁴⁵

Perhaps this more general claim is as specific as she needs to be about the relationship between literature and moral philosophy.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer was a pioneer of philosophical hermeneutics, which derives from the thought of his mentor Martin Heidegger, who “laid the ground” for this perspective with his revision of the conception of *understanding* elaborated by his modernist predecessors.⁴⁶ For Heidegger, according to Ole Martin Skilleas, “understanding is not a question of a chosen methodology which is designed to reveal the truth. Rather, understanding is a fundamental mode of being since we are always engaged in our being, thrown, as we are, into a concrete situation we interpret according to our life and the possibilities it contains.”⁴⁷ Thus, operating from Heidegger’s conception of understanding entails a shift from a model less general and timeless to one more practical and historically situated. This turn away from the essentialist aspirations of Enlightenment philosophy and science represents a fundamental contribution of

⁴⁵ Magee, 269.

⁴⁶ I will not spend much time here on philosophical hermeneutics in general, as to do so would both distract and deviate significantly from my intended purpose. Rather, I will focus primarily upon Gadamer’s contributions to the evolving discussion regarding the role of literature in moral inquiry and fill in the gaps with general information regarding philosophical hermeneutics when necessary.

⁴⁷ Ole Martin Skilleas, *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 93.

philosophical hermeneutics and a primary intellectual preoccupation of Gadamer's. In *Truth and Method*, his magnum opus and a seminal text in the development of philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer decries the "objectifying tendencies in the humanities which try to recreate an original meaning in its proper historical context. For Gadamer, this is all wrong, since to understand something historically is to overlook its possible truth *for us*."⁴⁸ *Truth* then, for Gadamer, is a valuable concept of great importance, so long as it not rendered obsolete by theories which relate it solely to such constructs as Plato's *world of the forms*. Rather, Gadamer regards truth as contingent, and, according to Gerald Bruns, the process by which it is conceived more closely resembles Aristotle's *phronesis* than Plato's *techne*:

[*P*]hronesis is a condition of moral knowledge at the level of particular situations—call it a mode of responsiveness to what is singular and irreducible and therefore refractory to rules, categories, models, advanced pictures of the good life, and the whole idea of totality or an order of things as such. Beneath knowing what something is for or how to make something, there is knowing what a situation calls for in the way of right action, even when the situation is so complex and unprecedented that one experiences the shortfall of one's principles, beliefs, or patterns of conduct, or even one's sense of how things should go if they are to go right. As Gadamer says, "we are already in the situation of having to act," but courses of action (unlike rules for conceptual construction or the production of goods) are never given in advance. . . . *Phronesis* is reason at home in the anarchy of complex systems—reason that shows itself in timeliness, improvisation, and a gift for nuance rather than in the rigorous duplication of results.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁹ Gerald Bruns, "The Hermeneutical Anarchist: *Phronesis*, Rhetoric, and the Experience of Art," in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arswald, and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 47-48.

Thus, according to Richard Bernstein, Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics presents “‘an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth’ . . . which is not exhausted by the achievements of scientific method.”⁵⁰ Rather, it seeks “to give an account of the rationality of everyday life”; the pursuit of truth and knowledge is practical inquiry, necessarily rooted in the work of *phronesis*.⁵¹

Implicit in Gadamer’s critique of the essentialist conceptions of knowledge and truth propagated by the Enlightenment project is his extreme discontent with what he perceives to be modern philosophy’s marginalization of the contributions that art and aesthetics might make to moral inquiry. In the first part of *Truth and Method*, entitled “The Question of Truth as It Emerges in the Experience of Art,” Gadamer explores and offers a critique of “‘the subjectivisation of aesthetics in the Kantian critique.’”

According to Richard Bernstein, “the questions that preoccupy Gadamer here are these”:

How are we to account for the typically modern denigration of the idea of the truth of works of art? How are we to deal with the modern embarrassment in even speaking about truth in works of art? What is the source for the deep prejudice that the appreciation of art and beauty has nothing to do with knowledge and truth? . . . Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but equally certainly is not inferior to it? And is it not the task of aesthetics precisely to provide a basis for the fact that artistic experience is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind?⁵²

⁵⁰ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 151.

⁵¹ Bruns, 45.

⁵² Bernstein, 118, 120.

For Gadamer, art and, especially, literature provide an essential contribution to the brand of knowledge that hermeneutical inquiry seeks to provide. Thus, in *Truth and Method* as elsewhere, he seeks to revive the philosophical acceptance of this truth-providing capacity of art, which had been diminished by the Enlightenment project. However, according to Mary Devereaux's reading of Gadamer, that "art provides an experience of the truth" is only part of the claim he makes for art. He goes on to assert that "'truth is experienced through a work of art that we cannot attain in any other way,' which 'constitutes [art's] philosophical importance.'"⁵³ For Gadamer then, it is the aesthetic qualities of art that distinguish its contributions from other rational or empirical ways of knowing. Thus, Kant's error regarding art and aesthetics did not occur in his recognition of this difference, nor in his appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of art for their own formalist sake. Rather, for Gadamer, Kant's fundamental error occurred with his assertion that these formalist qualities comprised the extent of art's potential contribution to humanity and his subsequent segregation of art and reason as two distinct enterprises:

In *Truth and Method and The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer argues that with Kant aesthetics took a wrong turn. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant divorces aesthetic experience from conceptual thinking. Aesthetic pleasure is defined as a purely nonintellectual satisfaction. In consequence, Gadamer holds Kant to blame for severing art's links with truth. The purist aesthetic which results opens a gap between aesthetic experience and the rest of life. . . . This diminished conception of the aesthetic Gadamer terms "alienated consciousness," . . . and he contrasts it with an authentic experience of art, . . . [in which] we recognize and respond *not only* to the aesthetic qualities of the work but to the claim which the work makes upon us. An artwork, on this view, is not a self-contained object of formalist appreciation. The artwork overflows its frame. . . .

⁵³ Mary Devereaux, "Can Art Save Us? A Meditation on Gadamer," *Philosophy and Literature* 15, no. 1 (April 1991): 62.

First, it speaks of the whole world of past experience which it brings with it, and second, it insists that we open ourselves to its truths. Alienated consciousness, on the contrary, severs the artwork from its world and simultaneously denies its claims upon us, . . . equat[ing] art's value with its formal rather than epistemic properties.⁵⁴

For Gadamer, Kant's overly simplistic and reductionist view of the properties and value of art ultimately isolates art from its most humanistic qualities. Of course, art's aesthetic qualities are significant and unique, but to set them apart as self-contained and valueless robs art of the effects it frequently has upon people, necessarily as a result of these same aesthetic qualities. Thus, Kant's separation actually diminishes art, shackling it with the promise of an intellectual space of its own.

Gadamer, on the other hand, wants to rescue art from this aesthetic quarantine, asserting that, of course, art possesses unique "emotive and expressive functions," but "deny[ing] that these exhaust art's functions."⁵⁵ They merely make possible the experience of the truth that art may provide. However, he is not content to rest with this epistemological claim for art. By way of his "reformulation of the concept of the aesthetic" as well as his "critique of a positivist theory of truth," Gadamer goes on to assert a role for art in "moral education."⁵⁶ Accordingly, "[a]rt functions reflectively as a mode of self-understanding," rooted fundamentally in his hermeneutic conception of interpretation as a form of interaction between the text, or work of art, and the reader, or interpreter:

⁵⁴ Ibid., 64-65. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 62.

Here meaning is not *in* the text but accumulated by it. The interpreter's task is to engage the work in *its present and past* terms. Interpretation involves bridging the gap between our world and that presented by the text, creating "a fusion of horizons." . . . As we can only understand the past from our present perspective, there is no "original" meaning of the text to recover. . . . [I]n reading a text, we enter a world not of our making. . . . Hence, in making a world of our own, we open ourselves to transformation, of however modest a sort. . . . In describing this encounter with art as a self-encounter, Gadamer asserts more than that art often brings us face to face with a type of experience not readily available in everyday life. Novels and other narrative arts easily transport us to worlds removed by geographic and temporal distance. . . . And admittedly, these imaginative travels may expand the self's boundaries in morally valuable ways. Yet, Gadamer's answer to the question of art's contribution to self-understanding exceeds this modest account. The artwork for him is not a relic from a past age. It is contemporary with each age in which it is understood. Hence, in encountering the artwork, it is the truth of our own world which we come to recognize. Art provides an excursion not into another world but into our own.⁵⁷

For Gadamer then, art possesses a great deal of potential that remains untapped according to modernist conceptions of aesthetics and epistemology. It yields invaluable epistemological and moral goods that depend upon its unique aesthetic qualities. Thus, more than Murdoch, Gadamer is willing to blur or overlap the boundaries that have traditionally separated philosophy and literature. Of course, each possesses properties that keep it distinct from one another, but, when their inquiries overlap, he has no difficulty conceding that literature, and even art in general, might provide unique contributions of which *philosophy* alone would not be capable. In Gadamer then, one can see the origins of Rorty's contributions to this conversation. The boundaries between

⁵⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

philosophy and literature may remain intact, but they have become significantly more permeable.

Richard Rorty

Unlike Murdoch or even Gadamer, Rorty maintains that the disciplinary boundaries separating philosophy and literature ought to be leveled completely.⁵⁸ While he recognizes that each of these disciplines possesses distinct properties, he asserts that their differences ought not to affect consideration of their potential contributions to philosophical, and especially moral, thought. However, perhaps at least as much, if not more, of Rorty's fervent critique of contemporary conceptions of philosophical inquiry is rooted in his discontent with current views of "the nature of philosophy itself" as it is in his open mindedness to the epistemological value of literature.⁵⁹ According to Bernstein, Rorty disdains the widely accepted foundationalist view that holds philosophy as the penultimate arbiter of all knowledge, truth, and goodness:

Richard Rorty has . . . argued that the real scandal of philosophy is that we are still taken in and mesmerized by the conception of philosophy that . . . assume[s] that there is such a thing as the "proper object" of philosophy; that philosophy identifies philosophic problems that are to be solved once and for all; and that there is "a systematic methodology" for doing all this. According to Rorty, if we really want to overcome the scandal caused by "philosophy's lack of a systematic

⁵⁸ Again, as I have stated before, my goal here is not to achieve a comprehensive overview of the philosophical work of Richard Rorty, or even to achieve comprehensiveness regarding his conception of the relationship between literature and philosophy. I mean only to look cursorily at part of his work in order to articulate both his significant place within and his distinctive contributions to this dialogue.

⁵⁹ Bernstein, 181.

methodology,” then what is needed is a form of philosophic therapy that will rid us of the illusion and the self-deception that philosophy is or can be the foundational discipline of culture. We need to abandon the very idea that philosophy is a form of inquiry that *knows* something about knowing, language, or thought that nobody else knows, and frankly admit that at its best, philosophy is just another voice in the conversation of mankind.⁶⁰

By way of this call for a less exclusivist conception of philosophy, Rorty summons a cultural “paradigm shift,” from the “culture of positivism” to a “culture of pragmatism,” in which ““literature and the arts help ethics do its [job].””⁶¹ For Rorty, it is only by way of such a shift, “a general turn against theory and toward narrative,” that any useful conception of moral philosophy might be preserved (*CIS*, xvi). On the surface, Rorty’s ideas about the contributions that narrative, and especially literature, might make to moral philosophy sound similar to some of those proposed by other advocates seeking to unite the two disciplines. According to Johnson, Rorty considers the novel as “an invitation . . . to think” and a corrective “to the essentialism [in philosophy] that [he] finds so oppressive.” For Rorty then, “[m]oral 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” (*MPN*, 17).

However, upon further examination, Rorty’s aim, to foster a reconceptualization of moral inquiry by way of literature, is a great deal more ambitious than much of what

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁶¹ Parker, 14-15.

had been previously articulated. His pragmatism inclines him to a great deal more than the mere marriage of two static and self-sufficient disciplines; rather, for Rorty, the only reasonable and adequate solution is a stark revision of traditional conceptions of philosophy and literature: “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” (*MPN*, 128). Thus, it is just this skepticism regarding the autonomous nature of philosophy and literature that sets him apart. He conceives of this traditional stance of the *metaphysician* as the manifestation of a fundamental misunderstanding of moral reasoning that pervades the history of philosophy. Rorty terms his corrective formulation *liberal irony* and characterizes this “figure whom . . . [he] call[s] the ‘liberal ironist,’” and compares him or her to the traditional metaphysician, as follows:

I borrow my definition of “liberal” from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use “ironist” to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. . . . For liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question “Why not be cruel?”—no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible. Nor is there an answer to the question “How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?” . . . Anybody who thinks that there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question—algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort—is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities. (*CIS*, xv)

Fundamental to Rorty's conception of liberal irony is the idea that each liberal ironist possesses a *final vocabulary*, which he or she refines by way of the process of *redescription*. Rorty defines "a person's 'final vocabulary'" as follows:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise for our friends, and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. (CIS, 73)

By *final*, Rorty means only that, consistent with the stance of liberal irony, one's vocabulary cannot be checked or proven or modified by way of an appeal to any transcendent source of values, such as *Knowledge* or *Truth* or the *Good* (CIS, 73). He does not intend for *final* to be interpreted as static or unchanging. Rather, the work of the liberal ironist's moral life is exactly this refinement of one's final vocabulary, and he enlists texts and experiences as the resources for one to enlist when conducting this comparison and modification. This absence of a fixed corpus of available resources for consultation serves as another of the significant distinctions between liberal ironists and metaphysicians:

Ironists take the writings of all the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had talent for redescription—Pythagorus, Plato, Milton, Newton, Goethe, Kant, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Darwin, Freud—as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill. The metaphysicians, by contrast, want to start by getting straight which of these people were poets, which philosophers, and which scientists. They think it essential to get the genres right—to order texts by reference to a previously determined grid which, whatever else it does, will at least make a clear distinction between knowledge claims and other claims upon our attention. (CIS, 76)

Thus, for Rorty and the liberal ironist, concerns over rigid genre distinctions and the types of claims one can derive from various texts are obsolete and forms of wasted energy. What matters is whether the text in question contributes to one's alignment with the values consistent with liberal irony and its inherent repugnance of cruelty.

Nonetheless, although Rorty makes room for texts of all varieties to affect the liberal ironist's final vocabulary (he includes scientists and philosophers in the above quotation and is a philosopher himself), he carves out a special place and a specific role for literature in this process. This is because fiction, by way of features unique to its form, typically possesses qualities that are ideally suited to the task of redescribing one's final vocabulary: "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" (*MPN*, 131). The alternate vocabularies provided by authors confront and provoke liberal ironists and even provide illustrations of these vocabularies at work. Ultimately, these works edify, by making liberal ironists better able to conceive of the circumstances of the other, and thereby of themselves:

This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended. Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves. That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually

but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principle vehicles of moral change and progress. (*CIS*, xvi)

Of course, Rorty is aware of the danger of too broadly valuing the work of the poets and novelists and replacing traditional philosophy with liberal ironist literature, claiming that “there would be little point for pragmatism to dethrone numerous metaphysical false gods if in the end it determined to ‘set up an altar to Literature’” (*MPN*, 131). Yet, he insists that one can avoid this danger if one’s use of literature is appropriately narrow and one refrains from forcing it to do more work than it can: “He approaches the novel not as a windowpane that gives a sight of reality that otherwise remains opaque, but as a contrived—sometimes brilliantly contrived—collection of re-descriptions that work for different purposes on different occasions” (*MPN*, 131). For Rorty, literature does not reveal essential truths about the nature of the universe or human conduct, but it can provide insight about particular people in particular situations and, subsequently, one’s own conception of and/or interaction with others situated in similar circumstances. Thus, by way of his conception of literature’s role in moral inquiry, Rorty joins the ranks of the ethical critics and, like Murdoch and Gadamer before him, asserts that literature plays an invaluable role in moral education: “[A] moral education is not a matter of learning a universal vocabulary, but rather of noticing what people are experiencing when they are humiliated . . . or treated cruelly. What a close acquaintance with literature achieves is, in effect, a more inclusive recognition of moral possibilities” (*MPN*, 146).

CHAPTER 3: THE ETHICAL CRITICISM OF MARTHA NUSSBAUM

Although many theorists and critics, including most of those described above, acknowledge literature's potential value in ethical deliberation and education, Martha Nussbaum elevates this discussion to another level of importance and complexity. In fact, perhaps more than any other, she embodies the above-described double turn to ethics and literature and, in her book *Love's Knowledge*, achieves a remarkable synthesis of literature and ethics. Trained as a classicist and a philosopher, Nussbaum grounds her conception of ethical criticism in moral philosophy, sharing a great deal in common with the above philosophers, and especially Iris Murdoch. However, of these, only Nussbaum brings to her work as significant a concern for the integrity of literature and the practice of literary criticism, which she insists must remain rooted in the specific and particular nature of the text itself. As a result, from a literary perspective, she strongly resembles some of the literary critics who preceded her, including, especially, Leavis, Trilling, and Booth. However, here too, she demonstrates her unique place in this dialogue, acknowledging that these "major thinkers of past theory with whom I link my proposal . . . seem to have been perfectly able to speak of the ethical content of literature and the ethical expressiveness of literary forms without bringing moral philosophy into the picture."¹ This is not possible for Nussbaum, for, although she respects and draws

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 190. All subsequent references to *Love's Knowledge* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *LK*, followed by the page number.

significantly upon the work done by these thinkers, she maintains that such an approach does not accomplish as much as it might if this concern for literature were linked more explicitly with moral philosophy. Thus, for Nussbaum, it is this explicitly symbiotic connection between literature and moral philosophy that provides her conception of ethical criticism with its specific authority to “clarify . . . just what it is that works of literature offer to our sense of life” (*LK*, 190). However, in making this claim, Nussbaum takes care not to overstate her argument for ethics and literature. Although she believes, for example, that literature might make unique, even invaluable, contributions to a practical conception of moral philosophy, Nussbaum balances this statement with the caution that it might be a mistake to assume that *all* literature possesses this edificatory capacity. Rather, she means to suggest only “that *certain* literary texts . . . are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient, but sources of valuable insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete” (*LK*, 23-24; emphasis added). Moreover, with this coupling, Nussbaum does not mean to diminish the intrinsic value of either ethics or literature, and, indeed, she cherishes the uniqueness of each. Rather, she insists only that together, regardless of their other independent capacities, literature and moral philosophy possess the unique ability to make essential contributions to any functional conception of moral life. In her “Preface,” Nussbaum provides a succinct summation of the work she hopes the essays of *Love’s Knowledge* will accomplish:

The[se] essays explore some fundamental issues about the connections between philosophy and literature: the relationship between style and content in the

exploration of ethical issues; the nature of ethical attention and ethical knowledge and their relationship to written forms and styles; the role of the emotions in deliberation and self-knowledge. The essays argue for a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain amount of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules. They argue that this conception, rather than being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in the relevant sort of precision. They argue, further, that this ethical conception finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical—and if we wish to take it seriously we must broaden our conception of moral philosophy in order to include these texts inside it. (*LK*, ix)

I will spend the remainder of this chapter elucidating and expanding upon the wealth of concepts articulated in this thesis statement, turning first to Nussbaum's arguments about the significance of form and style as they relate to the standard texts of moral philosophy. In doing so, I will explore Nussbaum's place in the historical development of ethical criticism in significantly greater depth than I have afforded any of the critics in previous sections, as I believe that her unique integration of literature *and* philosophy is sufficiently important to warrant such attention and indeed might yield unique possibilities for medical ethical inquiry as well.

PROBLEMS WITH PHILOSOPHY

That there exists an “organic connection” between the form and content of any text, be it a work of literature or philosophy, is one of Nussbaum's primary points of emphasis and exploration in *Love's Knowledge* (*LK*, 4). She begins her formulation of a practical conception of ethical criticism with a critique of traditional moral philosophy's

failure to acknowledge this connection. Although she identifies herself, first and foremost, as a proud member of the philosophical community, Nussbaum regards the traditional discourse of moral philosophy as fundamentally flawed, in both its intellectual as well as its stylistic commitments. Regarding content, Nussbaum decries contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy for its typical focus on abstract esoterica that she asserts has little to do with day-to-day human living. Instead, she seeks to recalibrate moral philosophy to better accommodate the practical needs of living people: “I propose, therefore, that we begin with the very simple Aristotelian idea that ethics is the search for a specification of the good life for a human being. This is a study whose aim . . . is not just theoretical understanding but also practice” (*LK*, 139). In so doing, Nussbaum advocates a marked paradigm shift from the predominant conception of contemporary moral philosophy: “Philosophy has often seen itself as a way of transcending the merely human, of giving the human being a new and more godlike set of activities and attachments. The alternative I explore sees it as *a way of being human and speaking humanly*” (*LK*, 53; emphasis added). It is in this transition from “transcending humanity” to “being human” that Nussbaum believes the repair of traditional moral philosophy ought to begin:

Any view of deliberation that holds that it is, first and foremost, a matter of intuitive perception and improvisatory response, where a fixed antecedent ordering or ranking among values is to be taken as a sign of immaturity rather than of excellence; any view that holds that it is the job of the adult agent to approach a complex situation responsively, with keen vision and alert feelings, prepared, if need be, to alter his or her *prima facie* conception of the good in light of the new experience, is likely to clash with *certain classical aims and assertions of moral philosophy, which has usually claimed to make progress on our behalf*

precisely by extricating us from this bewilderment in the face of the present moment, and by setting us up in a watertight system of rules or a watertight procedure of calculation which will be able to settle troublesome cases, in effect, before the fact. Philosophers who have defended the primacy of intuitive perception . . . have . . . concluded . . . that moral theory cannot be a form of scientific knowledge that orders the “matter of the practical” into an elegant antecedent system; and they have also naturally turned to works of literature . . . for illumination concerning practical excellence. (LK, 141; Emphasis added)

It is this aspiration to practical excellence, the understanding, integration, and demonstration of the Aristotelian conception of living “the good life,” that grounds Nussbaum’s modified conception of contemporary moral philosophy.

However, Nussbaum’s criticism of the dominant strains of contemporary moral philosophy does not end there, for she finds fault with the discipline’s typical stylistic commitments as well. According to Nussbaum, the style according to which *any* text is written necessarily contributes to its intellectual content: “Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (LK, 3). As such, philosophy’s pervasive use of “an abstract theoretical style makes . . . a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not” (LK, 7). Nussbaum continues, describing “the conventional style of Anglo-American prose” as “a style correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically-pallid, a style that seem[s] . . . to be regarded as a kind of all-purpose solvent in which philosophical issues of any kind at all [are] . . . efficiently disentangled, any and all conclusions neatly disengaged (LK, 19). Such a style, though consistent with the ends of some philosophers, strikes Nussbaum as

far too sterile and disconnected from vicissitudes of daily life to be of any real practical use, attempting to systematize or scientize that which, by nature, defies such order. She calls upon Ludwig Wittgenstein to support her estimation of this tendency: “Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This . . . leads the philosopher into complete darkness” (*LK*, 36). Thus, for Nussbaum, this practical reorientation of moral philosophy endeavors to correct some of these shortcomings, to guide moral philosophy out of this darkness and back into the light, and into life. And it is here that literature might begin to play some role in ethical inquiry, for “[i]f philosophy is a search for wisdom about ourselves, [then] philosophy needs to turn to literature” (*LK*, 290).

THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVE

As I described in chapter 1, this question about the role that literature might play in any sufficiently rich conception of ethical inquiry has a long and tortuous intellectual history, dating all the way back to ancient Greece, when Plato attempted to wrest ethics from its roots in traditional tragic poetry and make it solely the property of philosophy. For Plato, a functional conception of ethics was abstract, systematic, and unchanging, existing above and beyond the ephemeral realm of humanity. Work like that of the tragic poets, in which ethics seemed to be as susceptible to unforeseen circumstance as anything else in human life, diminished the almost salvational authority with which the philosophers would have liked to imbue it. While Plato and his ilk regarded the

ontological, epistemological, and ethical exploration undertaken by the poets as dilettantish and ultimately corrupting, the tragedians maintained that such impermeable boundaries between philosophy and literature were “unnatural and unilluminating.” To the contrary, they believed that “there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions. . . . Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live” (*LK*, 15). Nussbaum regards this conception of ethics, derived from the work of the tragic poets, and later Aristotle, as a model worthy of emulation in the contemporary ethical arena:

Before Plato came on the scene the poets (especially the tragic poets) were understood by most Athenians to be the central ethical teachers and thinkers of Greece, the people to whom, above all, the city turned, and rightly turned, with questions about how to live. To attend a tragic drama was not to go to a distraction or a fantasy, in the course of which one suspended one’s anxious practical questions. It was, to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection, and feelings with respect to important civic and personal ends. . . . To respond to these events was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life—and a way of life, we should add, that prominently included reflection and public debate about ethical and civic matters. . . . To respond well to a tragic performance involved both feeling and critical reflection; and these were closely linked with one another. The idea that art existed only for art’s sake, and the literature should be approached with a detached aesthetic attitude, pure of practical interest, was an idea unknown in the Greek world. . . . Art was thought to be practical, aesthetic interest a practical interest—an interest in the good life and in communal self-understanding. (*LK*, 15-16)

It is from the legacy of this classical symbiosis, adapted to fit within an Aristotelian paradigm focused on practice, that Nussbaum finds the inspiration for her proposed marriage of philosophy and literature.

Beginning with Aristotle's practical and human definition of ethics as the study of how one ought to live, Nussbaum argues that literature deserves an explicit place in moral philosophical inquiry, given its ability to contribute substantively to this pursuit. In fact, she goes so far as to describe these literary contributions as essential and singular, asserting that "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms of the narrative artist" (*LK*, 5). Thus, for Nussbaum, to consider literature as merely illustrative or enriching is to ask far too little of it, neglecting the unique and invaluable riches contained therein. Rather, her conception of literature's role in moral philosophical thinking is far more substantive. First, Nussbaum claims that even to be able to conceive of a rich account of ethical human values requires the descriptive capacity inherent in the best narrative literature, without which the enterprise of moral philosophy would remain abstract, short-sided, and shallow:

[T]here are candidates for moral truth which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which [novels such as] *The Golden Bowl* express . . . wonderfully. Insofar as the goal of moral philosophy is to give us understanding of the human good through a scrutiny of alternative conceptions of the good, this text and others like it would then appear to be important parts of this philosophy. (*LK*, 142)

Literature, by way of its depiction of the myriad varieties of lived life, presents readers with invaluable alternatives that might not otherwise have been conceived. Moreover,

literature also provides its readers with an ideal forum in which to explore, to live out, these alternative conceptions of the good. According to Nussbaum, the exploration and evaluation of competing theoretical claims ought not, indeed cannot, “be accomplished in isolation from the practical aspect, for the working-through of the alternative theoretical conceptions is itself a Socratic process, which demands the active engagement of the interlocutor’s own moral intuitions and responses” (*LK*, 139). This is a contribution to philosophical thought and understanding that only literature can provide.

However, it is not only the content of the literature, and the opportunity it provides to see this content lived out, that contributes to this unique form of ethical exploration and evaluation. At least as important, and inextricably linked, is the particular way the content of literature is presented, the form or style of a thoroughly human, life-centered narrative form:

[An understanding] of the world and how one should live in it . . . [requires a form] that emphasize[s] the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident—but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises, that our task, as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing. If these views are serious candidates for truth, views that the search for truth ought to consider along its way, then it seems that this language and these forms ought to be included within philosophy. (*LK*, 3-4)

Nussbaum cherishes literature for its vivid, rich, surprising, complex, and beautiful depiction of the world and human life and declares that such superlative features are, in fact, fundamental to its ability to contribute to moral philosophy: “By showing the mystery and indeterminacy of ‘our actual adventure,’ . . . [novels] characterize life more richly and truly—indeed, more precisely—than an example lacking those features ever could; and they engender in the reader a type of ethical work more appropriate for life” (*LK*, 47). Examples like the hypothetical cases that frequently accompany traditional philosophical writing cannot compare to the treatment that the same issue might receive in a piece of literature, for the latter are situated within the context of a life and not manufactured by the machinery of some philosophical jigsaw. This leads Nussbaum to challenge the traditional separation of ethics and aesthetics, given that the quality of a piece of literature’s aesthetic representation and rendering of life is so frequently commensurate with the efficacy of its potential ethical contribution. Accordingly, it must be the aesthetic quality of the vision of life portrayed by the best literature that contributes to its edificatory potential. This is not necessarily to say, as Wittgenstein does, that “ethics and aesthetics are one,”² but they are certainly related. Further, according to Nussbaum, it is through an aesthetic appeal to the emotions of the reader, which I will discuss in greater detail below, that the best literature provides another essential way of knowing that traditional philosophy might not even solicit:

² Quoted from Charles Altieri, “From Expressivist Aesthetics to Expressivist Ethics,” in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 142.

The claim that only a novel can convey psychological truth is not just the claim that it can get around certain impediments more cleverly than a philosophical text; it is the claim that there is at least some knowledge, some important human knowledge, that it provides just in virtue of its being a novel, that is to say a work that leads its reader into laughter and into suffering, that cannot even in principle be provided in another more intellectual way. (*LK*, 256)

Unlike much philosophy, literature can tap into other, different and important forms of knowledge that one ought to have at one's disposal in the best forms of moral inquiry. It can improve the accuracy of this inquiry by allowing, and indeed facilitating, the exploration of alternate ways of acting or being than most traditional moral philosophy will allow. Thus, according to Nussbaum, these *other* ways of knowing are essential, for, without them, any understanding of morality would be incomplete.

Finally, having examined literature's descriptive capacity and contrasted it to the stereotypical, and frequently sterile, case examples of traditional moral philosophy, Nussbaum moves on to compare the experience of literature with that of real-life. For, if it is the quality of the vision of life proffered by a work of literature that determines its value, then ought not a life lived provide similar, or even greater, value, given its roots in reality and its consistency with the Aristotelian commitments to the empirical and the practical? In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum acknowledges the seeming logic of this position while ultimately refuting it, insisting that, regardless of experience, we still *need* literature in our philosophy. First of all, she asserts that "we have never lived enough" to yield sufficient practical experience to compare with that provided by literature for use in moral inquiry (*LK*, 47). Further, regardless of the length of life lived, literature provides its readers with a unique experiential perspective that is significantly more expansive than

that which one might attain in life: “[I]n the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived” (*LK*, 47). It is the imaginative yet hypothetical nature of the literary experience that allows one to step outside the bounds of reality yet still remain cognizant of its essential properties and able to assess such experiences ethically. While many critics of this position assert that it is this imaginative and/or emotive engagement with a text that introduces the bias and subjectivity that ultimately corrupts ethical inquiry, Nussbaum counters that it is exactly this engagement, with its incumbent effects, that provides some of the most valuable, if paradoxical, contributions to ethics: “[E]ven if the novel does, up to a point, implicate its readers in [a sort of] . . . partiality of vision, still it does so in a way that permits them always to retain a keen awareness of what the characters lose from view; and so in this way the novel remains always inside the ethical stance” (*LK*, 51). This position bears a great deal of resemblance to Booth’s account of the implied author, as a voice distinct from that of the narrator’s. Accordingly, it is possible for a reader to identify with and adopt a novel’s particular vision of life while remaining simultaneously critical of it. Literature, then, possesses the unique ability to provide an experiential perspective that is at once idiosyncratic and individual, as well as universal. One can be immersed, even as one can ethically criticize. Thus, literature improves upon the lessons taught by both the philosophical treatise as well as by life. By immersing us, and simultaneously distancing us, literature allows its readers to experience emotion, while at the same time allowing

them to consider such emotions, to determine their potential relevance for ethical inquiry. While any of these reasons alone would corroborate literature's essential complement to moral philosophy, the multifarious nature of literature's contribution only strengthens this claim. Of course, it is important to remain mindful of Nussbaum's commitment to the project of moral philosophy as she conceives it. By no means does she suggest that literature is superior to and/or sufficient as philosophy: she means only to bolster the abilities of moral philosophy, to rescue it from its antiquated and insufficient methods and to make it *useful* again. According to Nussbaum, because this "practical activity [that is or ought to be ethics] . . . can be evoked in no other way" (*LK*, 290), "moral philosophy *needs* literature" (*LK*, 193; emphasis added).

PLURAL AND NONCOMMENSURABLE VALUES

One of the invaluable contributions that Nussbaum asserts literature might make to a richer, more Aristotelian conception of moral philosophy is its commitment to the description and appreciation of the noncommensurability of valuable things, maintaining that "the values that are constitutive of a good human life are plural and incommensurable."³ Other philosophical perspectives, whether classical Platonic philosophy or the more modern formulations of utilitarianism and Kantianism, frequently

³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 294. All subsequent references to *The Fragility of Goodness* in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation *FG*, followed by the page number.

fail to account for the inevitable diversity of moral goods and the intractable difficulty inherent in choices between them. Instead, each of these theories recommends itself with the opposite assumption, that the perceived differences between moral goods are merely differences of degree of value, and, subsequently, all that remains is for one to evaluate and rank such goods according to the appropriate criteria. Thus, according to this perspective, the attainment of *the* right answer ought to and can only result from ethical inquiry, and the primary difficulty in deciding rests in the right application of the appropriate differentiating criteria. Nussbaum, like Aristotle before her, attributes this desire to reduce moral value determinations to quantitative distinctions to philosophy's traditional scientific tendencies. Somewhat understandably, the goal of much philosophy has been, then as now, to generalize and systematize the standards according to which determinations of value are made:

Such a "science of measurement" . . . was motivated by the desire to simplify and render tractable the bewildering problem of choice among heterogeneous alternatives. Plato, for example, argues that only through such a science can human beings be rescued from an unendurable confusion in the face of the concrete situation of choice, with its qualitative indefiniteness and its variegated plurality of apparent values. Plato even believed, and argued with power that many of the most troublesome sorts of human irrationality in action were caused by passions that would be eliminated or rendered innocuous by a thoroughgoing belief in the qualitative homogeneity of all the values. (*LK*, 56)

Thus, although Plato acknowledges the intractable difficulty inherent in much moral choice, he maintains that philosophy can defuse such volatile matters through the development of a workable system with which people might transcend their interminable humanness. Although Aristotle disagrees quite emphatically with such attempts to

homogenize all conceptions of value, he does not disapprove of Plato's desire to universalize decision making. Rather, it is the means by which Plato attempts to achieve this universality, conflating universality and generality, that Aristotle disputes: "Aristotle rejects . . . the 'science of measurement,' defending a picture of choice as a quality-based selection among goods that are plural and heterogeneous, each being chosen for its own distinctive value" (*LK*, 56-57). Aristotle even goes on to assert that, contrary to Plato, this vision of deliberation ought not be considered irrational, for to regard deliberation as "either quantitative or a mere shot in the dark" is to operate according to a false dichotomy. Rather, deliberation can be qualitative, and therefore rational, "based upon a grasp of the special nature of the items in question" (*LK*, 60, 61). According to Nussbaum, literature's unique contribution to moral inquiry results from its depiction of the special nature of valuable goods. By way of its careful examination of the variable nature of moral choice, which typically requires the reconciliation of at least two, and frequently more, conflicting, though nevertheless valuable, courses of action, literature not only demonstrates the potential difficulty of such choices, but it also provides essential, though not necessarily sufficient, practice in making such determinations.

However, with this alternative conception of human value and its incumbent focus upon description and the noncommensurability of valuable things, the act of moral choice takes on additional complexity and responsibility, for the moral weight of such decisions rests not only in *what* decisions are made, but also in *how* one makes them. In *The Fragility of Goodness* and *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum reflects upon a fragment of Aeschylus' drama *Agamemnon* in order to illustrate this additional aspect of moral

decision making. Very briefly, in the play, Agamemnon is forced to make a terrible decision, to choose either to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia or to defy the gods and commit “an impiety that would bring in its wake the death of all concerned,” including Iphigenia (*LK*, 63). Eventually, upon deliberation, Agamemnon chooses that which he perceives to be the lesser evil, the sacrifice of his daughter, who would die anyway, to save the lives of many. Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons for his choice, however justifiable they may be, it remains that Agamemnon has still, actively, called for the murder of his daughter. Although he may have made the best decision possible, within the given circumstances, the horrible gravity of his choice remains. Thus, when, subsequent to the execution of his decision and his daughter, Agamemnon does not grieve but instead revels in the glory of a decision well made, one begins to feel that Agamemnon has indeed acted immorally. His easy acquiescence to the supposed propriety of his decision marks a moral misstep, for which the chorus, and the audience/reader, inevitably hold him accountable: “What they impute to Agamemnon himself is the change of thought and passion accompanying the killing, for which they clearly hold him responsible” (*FG*, 36). Thus, contra Plato and much modern philosophy, a sort of ethical arithmetic with which one can assess problems, calculate values, and make *rational* decisions is not sufficient, for, as Aeschylus’ depiction of Agamemnon’s story illustrates, morality is not limited merely to the decision itself. According to Nussbaum and Aristotle, far more is required to yield what might truly be described as a moral decision. Once one has determined and accepted that one cannot assign value according to a single standard of measure, the question of how it is then that

such value determinations might be made remains. For this, Aristotle and Nussbaum turn to the faculty of perception and its incumbent focus upon the particular.

PERCEPTION AND PARTICULARITY

For Nussbaum, another of literature's potential contributions to the practice of moral philosophy is its ability to refine the perceptions of its readers, through their exposure to the rich particularity at work in literature. She derives her understanding of and appreciation for perception from the conception of practical wisdom that Aristotle develops in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Aristotle, "practical wisdom is concerned with the . . . particular, which is the object not of scientific knowledge but of perception."⁴ Thus, perception is "the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one's particular situation," and, when exercised proficiently, it will help one to become a more sensitive ethical agent, able to transcend "the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on general rules" (*LK*, 37). Of course, this is not to suggest that Aristotle or Nussbaum believe that ethics would be better off without general rules and principles. To the contrary, they maintain that, for several reasons, general rules and principles are essential to any working conception of ethics:

Rules and general procedures can be aids in moral development, since people who do not yet have practical wisdom and insight need to follow rules that summarize the wise judgments of others. Then too, if there is not time to formulate a fully

⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 148.

concrete decision in the case at hand, it is better to follow a good summary rule or a standardized decision procedure than to make a hasty and inadequate contextual choice. Again, if we are not confident of our judgment in a given case, if there is reason to believe that bias or interest might distort our particular judgment, rules give us superior constancy and stability. . . . Even for wise adults who are not short of time, the rule has a function, guiding them tentatively in their approach to the new particular, helping them to pick out its salient features. (*LK*, 73)

In other words, according to Nussbaum and Aristotle, general rules, principles, and procedures possess the potential to ground perception, preventing it from becoming “dangerously free-floating” (*LK*, 165). Thus, at its best, this Aristotelian model of practical wisdom is balanced, operating by way of an active “dialogue between perception and rule” (*LK*, 157). However, at the same time, it is also important to remember that these general rules or principles do not always necessarily share equal footing with cultivated perception and responsiveness, for implicit in this state of cultivation is an ability to discern when a certain rule or principle does or does not apply. To become too beholden to principle and its potential contributions to practical wisdom would “represent . . . a falling off from full practical rationality, not its flourishing or completion” (*LK*, 73). Nussbaum likens perception to Aristotle’s metaphor of the “Lesbian Rule,” which he employs to illustrate this notion of “ethical flexibility” (*LK*, 69). According to Aristotle, “a person who makes each choice by appeal to some antecedent general principle held firm and inflexible for the occasion is like an architect who tries to use a straight ruler on the intricate curves of a fluted column.” In such architectural circumstances, what is needed is a Lesbian Ruler, which ““bends to the shape of the stone and is not fixed””; likewise, in ethics, one requires rules that

accommodate the particular properties of the matter at hand, “responsively and with respect for complexity” (*LK*, 70). Nussbaum also likens this sense of flexible accommodation to particular circumstances through perception to the practice of artistic improvisation frequently employed in acting and jazz:

[T]he actress who improvises is *not* free to do anything at all. She must at every moment . . . be responsively alive and committed to the other actors, to the evolving narrative, to the laws and constraints of the genre and its history. . . . [T]he jazz player, actively forging continuity, must choose in full awareness of and responsibility to the historical traditions of the form, and must actively honor at every moment his commitments to fellow musicians, whom he had better know as well as possible as unique individuals. . . . [T]he case for moral improvisation shows an even deeper role for obligation and rule than do these artistic cases. (*LK*, 155-156)

By way of such comparisons to the Lesbian Rule and the practice of artistic improvisation, Nussbaum develops her complex notion of ethical flexibility, which remains rooted in her understanding of Aristotelian practical wisdom and its dependence upon a person’s perceptive discernment of relative particulars: “Practical wisdom, then, uses rules only as summaries and guides; it must itself be flexible, ready for surprise, prepared to see, resourceful at improvisation” (*FG*, 305).

However, it is at this point that Aristotle’s and Nussbaum’s conceptions of practical wisdom and perception begin to diverge slightly. For, while “Aristotle stresses that the crucial prerequisite for practical wisdom is a long experience of life that yields an ability to understand and grasp the salient features, the practical meaning, of the concrete particulars,” Nussbaum maintains that it is in fulfilling this experiential requirement that literature might, again, become invaluable (*FG*, 305). In fact, as I alluded to briefly

above, Nussbaum, even asserts that literature's potential contributions to the development of a person's perceptive capacity might be more valuable than those provided by life experience:

And now we see another way in which novels can play an important role in the articulation of an Aristotelian morality. For novels, as a genre, direct us to attend to the concrete; they display before us a wealth of richly realized detail, presented as relevant for choice. And yet they speak to us: they ask us to imagine possible relations between our own situations and those of the protagonists, to identify with the characters and/or the situation, thereby perceiving those similarities and differences. In this way their structure suggests . . . that much of moral relevance is universalizable. (*LK*, 95)

Throughout *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum explores a number of literary works, including several of the novels of Henry James as well as a short story by Ann Beattie, in order to concretize such claims regarding the utility of literature, mining both the content as well as the form of these works in order to demonstrate their potential contributions to particularized ethical formulations. In her analysis of *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum examines Maggie's moral development as it occurs over the course of the pages of the novel, discovering, with Maggie, as with James, that the successful ethical agent is one who is "finely aware and richly responsible"; . . . 'a person on whom nothing is lost'" (*LK*, 84). Of course, it is possible that such talents might be acquired over the course of a life, but, according to Nussbaum, literature possesses the capacity to provide such discerning abilities to a person more rapidly and richly. With the help of literature, one might be better able to engage life and practice more ethically. However, this does not

conclude Nussbaum's interest in literature as ethical education, for literature can also be elemental in the education of the emotions.

ETHICAL DELIBERATION AND THE EMOTIONS

Nussbaum's final proposal for the improvement of the dominant strains of traditional moral philosophy concerns the revision of moral philosophy's pervasive but flawed conception of the emotions. According to Nussbaum, most of the forefathers of contemporary moral philosophy, including Plato, Kant, and the Utilitarians regarded the emotions, or passions, as they were frequently termed, as inherently irrational, representing the diametrical opposite of the rationality to which moral philosophy ought to aspire:

Plato repudiated emotion and appetite as corrupting influences, insisting that correct practical judgments are reached only by encouraging the intellect to go off "itself by itself," free from their influence as far as possible. . . . For Kant, the passions are invariably selfish and aimed at one's own states of satisfaction. . . . [A]n action will have genuine moral worth only if it is chosen for its own sake; and given his conception of the passions he cannot allow that action chosen only or primarily because of passion could be chosen for its own sake. The Utilitarian believes that a passion like personal love frequently impedes rationality by being too parochial: it leads us to emphasize personal ties and rank the nearer above the further, obstructing that fully impartial attitude toward the world that is the hallmark of Utilitarian rationality. (*LK*, 76)

Nussbaum maintains that such positions exhibit a fundamental misunderstanding of the true nature of deliberation and the emotions, upholding the flawed dichotomy that pits

cognition against emotion. She advocates instead for an Aristotelian reimagining of the emotions and their relationship to ethical inquiry:

[T]he passions . . . [are] responsive and selective elements of the personality. Not Platonic urges or pushes, they possess a high degree of educability and discrimination. Even appetitive desires for Aristotle are intentional and capable of making distinctions; they can inform the agent of the presence of a needed object, working in responsive interaction with perception and imagination. . . . Their intentional object is “the apparent good.” Emotions are composites of belief and feeling, shaped by developing thought and highly discriminating in their reactions. They can lead or guide the perceiving agent, “marking off” in a concretely imagined situation the objects to be pursued and avoided. In short, Aristotle does not make a sharp split between the cognitive and the emotive. Emotion can play a cognitive role, and cognition, if it is to be properly informed, must draw of the work of the emotive elements. (*LK*, 78)

By way of this reconception, it becomes apparent that emotions might play a significant role in moral inquiry. For it is, in part, through such feelings that one might begin to arrive at some sort of knowledge: “We discover what we think about . . . events partly by noticing how we feel; our investigation of our emotional geography is a major part of our search for self-knowledge” (*FG*, 15). In this way, emotion is actually linked to perception, helping one’s perceptive faculties become even more discerning (*LK*, 79). However, according to Nussbaum, even this view of the emotions as a potential tool for the development of practical wisdom does not go far enough, for one’s “emotional response . . . [is] not just a *means* to practical knowledge, but a constituent part of the best sort of recognition or knowledge of one’s practical situation” (*FG*, 15-16). In other words, “the passional reaction . . . [is] itself a piece of practical recognition or

perception, . . . a partial constituent of the character's correct understanding of his situation as a human being" (*FG*, 45). Of course, by imbuing human emotion with such an important and authoritative role, Nussbaum does not mean to suggest that people ought to just follow and/or act upon such feelings whimsically. Rather, like one's other perceptive faculties, the emotions require education, or training, before they can be trusted to provide reliable knowledge. Here again Nussbaum turns to literature for the provision of this invaluable service to moral inquiry.

According to Nussbaum, stories are the primary repositories of human emotions, and it is only through their encounters with stories, including works of literature, that people can begin to educate and test their emotional capacity:

[E]motions are not feelings that well up in some natural and untutored way from our natural selves, . . . they are, in fact, not personal or natural at all, . . . they are, instead, contrivances, social constructs. We learn how to feel, and we learn our emotional repertoire. We learn emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs—from our society. But emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories. Stories express their structure and teach us their dynamics. These stories are constructed by others and, then, taught and learned. But once internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks. . . . Indeed, it seems right to say . . . not only that a certain sort of story shows or represents emotion but also that emotion itself is the acceptance of, the assent to live according to, a certain sort of story. Stories, in short, contain and teach forms of feeling, forms of life. (*LK*, 287)

Of course, this position strongly resembles the above discussion regarding the narrative structure of certain neuropsychological conceptions of cognition, but, more importantly, it also calls for a sea change from moral philosophy's standard view of the emotions and their educability. Beyond merely some innate passional reaction, emotion, like

knowledge and beliefs, derives from the inundating influence of the surrounding culture, which communicates primarily through narrative. Moreover, according to Nussbaum, this narrative education of the emotions is essential to a person's appropriate emotional development, for these stories are not merely representational or evocative, but instead "their forms are themselves the sources of emotional structure, the paradigms of what, for us, emotion *is*" (LK, 296). Thus, through the experience of Agamemnon's dilemma, described briefly above, one not only perceives the emotional content conveyed by the text and experiences such emotion oneself, but one also comes to understand the real nature of such matters as loss, grief, and callous self-righteousness. A reader's experience of these matters fundamentally modifies and/or refines his or her pre-existing emotional definitions, ultimately yielding new emotions. In other words, "we could not acquire the rich information we seek by simply adding to abstract theoretical treatises a few examples of emotion and a few emotive appeals: for the whole story of an emotion, in its connections with other emotions and forms of life, requires narrative form for its full development" (LK, 296). Thus, yet again, Nussbaum makes a case for the inviolability of literature in any viable conception of practical ethics and ethics education. She possesses grand hopes for the potential "role of poetic or 'literary' texts in moral learning", which she articulates midway through *The Fragility of Goodness*:

Certain truths about human experience can best be learned by living them in their particularity. Nor can this particularity be grasped solely by thought 'itself by itself'. . . . [I]t frequently needs to be apprehended through the cognitive activity of imagination, emotions, even appetitive feelings: . . . through putting oneself inside a problem and feeling it. But we cannot all live, in our own overt activities, through all that we ought to know in order to live well. Here literature, with its

stories and images, enters in as an extension of our experience, encouraging us to develop and understand our cognitive/emotional responses. (*FG*, 186)

Thus, for Nussbaum, literature, in concert with the more abstract and theoretical ways of moral philosophy, becomes foundational for moral education.

CHAPTER 4: RICHARD SELZER AND ETHICAL CRITICISM

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF LITERATURE TO MORAL MEDICINE

In an unpublished essay titled “Not Quite a Humanist,” Richard Selzer writes “[t]hese are hard times for a Humanist in Medicine. In a discipline where only statistics and equipment are chic, the humanist becomes a curiosity.”¹ Although such laments have become increasingly commonplace amidst the rampant change that has transformed the medical profession in recent history, Selzer’s observation is made especially poignant by the fact that he uttered it more than two decades ago. In the years since, such sentiments have become only more frequent and apropos, driven by the growing influence of such forces as those referred to by Selzer, evidence-based medicine and medical technology. However, today, one could just as easily cite the managed care and pharmaceutical industries as similar potentially dehumanizing forces whose influence on the practice of medicine continues to grow, gradually but steadily applying pressure to the practice of medicine and limiting the ability of doctors and patients to regulate the medical relationship. Of course, such sweeping generalizations about the ever-changing

¹ Richard Selzer, “Not Quite a Humanist,” Unpublished. Cited in Charles I. Schuster, “Passion and Pathology: Richard Selzer’s Philosophy of Doctoring,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 65. All subsequent references to “Passion and Pathology” in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation “PP,” followed by the page number.

practice of medicine necessarily oversimplify matters that are significantly more complicated. Nonetheless, there remains a steadily rising cacophony of voices, audible inside as well as outside the medical profession, decrying the gradual but continual erosion of medicine's humanity and, despite medicine's potentially improved efficacy, lamenting the significant flaws that continue to plague and pervade the medical profession. What remains missing, however, is a clear sense of either the true nature of such problems or workable solutions that might be developed to remedy them.

From its inception, the bioethics movement has been conceived of as a potential source of insight and resolution that might ultimately alleviate some of the problems plaguing modern medicine, including those identified by Selzer, and, over the years, it has made impressive strides, significantly influencing the development, education, and practice of modern medicine. However, missing from this depiction of the evolution of bioethics is some acknowledgment of the possibility that bioethics itself might have become one of these forces contributing to the dehumanization of the practice of medicine as a result of the former's tendency to reduce the moral problems and questions that pervade medical practice to their constituent parts and evaluate them *rationaly*, while failing to consider adequately the other available and valuable modes of evaluation that such thinkers might bring to bear on such human problems. In his appraisal of Selzer's work, Charles Schuster alludes to some of these other sources of insight and value as he describes one of Selzer's primary literary preoccupations:

In essence he addresses the issue of how medical practitioners can maintain their humanity amid the welter of tests, data, and quantitative measures. How do they

prevent themselves from being overpowered by the technology of their practice? It is this dehumanization that Selzer deplors most. His answer is a simple one which takes many forms throughout his books: doctors must reintroduce into their doctoring the imaginative and empathic qualities of art and humanistic thought. They must develop their sympathies. ("PP," 65-66)

While Schuster's primary concern here seems to be Selzer's proposed defense against the detrimental influence of "statistics and equipment," I believe that one could make even more ambitious claims than does Schuster in his elaboration of "Selzer's philosophy of doctoring," for there are other, perhaps even more significant, forces than the rapid rise of medical technology might have contributed to the dehumanization afflicting the practice of medicine today ("PP," 66). In fact, an argument very similar to Schuster's could be made by substituting the word *bioethics* for each of his references to statistics and technology. In his elaboration of this tension between bioethics and humanistic medicine, Michael Potts cites Ronald Carson to make this very point:

[T]he propositional discourse of contemporary bioethics, while necessary, should be supplemented by "narrative discourse, using the figurative language of fiction, drama, and poetry." . . . Propositional discourse ignores the role of imagination in linking sensibility and rationality, thereby artificially separating intellect and emotion. The "unruly abundance of deep feeling about life and death, suffering and healing" tends to be obscured. What is needed in bioethics . . . "is an infusion of imagination. Fewer propositions, more stories; not so many ethical arguments, more moral inquiry."²

He continues:

² Michael Potts, "Morals, Metaphysics, and Heart Transplantation: Reflections on Richard Selzer's 'Whither Thou Goest,'" *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 41, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 212.

Narrative can also uncover the important role symbols play as human beings contemplate human nature, life, and death. Thus narrative may point out moral and metaphysical nuances and ambiguities involved in the life and death issues of medical ethics more effectively than the abstract language of contemporary philosophical bioethics. This in turn can result in a rethinking and reformulating of our conceptual moral discourse to take account of these ambiguities revealed by the narrative.³

Thus, Potts, reiterating the work contributed by many others to the medical humanities dialogue over the years, has effectively called for the adaptation of the practice of ethical criticism to the work of medicine, insisting that there is a great deal more at stake in the practice of humanistic medicine than can be remedied by the mere elaboration and rational resolution of the constituent principles that may be in conflict in any given problem.⁴ Rather, what lacks from such attempts at resolution as those typical bioethics

³ Ibid., 213.

⁴ Of course, mine is by no means the first work to consider the potential relevance of literature to matters of biomedical ethics. Quite the contrary, the medical humanities movement, of which literature and medicine and narrative ethics constitute a substantial portion, possesses a history nearly as long as bioethics', and, from its inception, has sought to bring to bear the contributions of other disciplines than philosophy to the work of both bioethics and medicine. To delve even cursorily into the historical development of the medical humanities, or even, more specifically, literature and medicine and/or narrative ethics, would deviate significantly from my intentions in this chapter. However, listed below are some of the landmark works in literature and medicine to which interested readers might turn for more information. This list is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it is selective and meant to serve merely as a starting place: Tod Chambers, *The Fiction of Bioethics: Cases as Literary Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Rita Charon, "Narrative Contributions to Medical Ethics: Recognition, Formulation, Interpretation, and Validation in the Practice of an Ethicist," in *A Matter of Principles? Ferment in U.S. Bioethics*, ed. Edwin R. Dubose, Ronald P. Hamel, and Laurence J. O'Connell (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 260-83; Rita Charon et al., "Literature and Medicine: Contributions to Clinical Practice," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 122, no. 8 (April 15, 1995): 599-606; Rita Charon and Martha Montello, eds., *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Robert Coles, "Medical Ethics and Living a Life," *New England Journal of Medicine* 301, no. 8 (August 23, 1979): 444-46; Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Anne Hudson Jones, "Literature and Medicine: Narrative Ethics," *Lancet* 349 (April 26, 1997): 243-46; Anne Hudson Jones, "Literature and Medicine: Traditions and Innovations," in *The Body and the Text: Comparative Essays in Literature and Medicine*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), 11-24; Hilde Lindemann Nelson, ed., *Stories and their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

traditionally conceived is adequate attendance to the human elements inevitably inherent in any human practice and relationship. In an essay exploring “Literature and Narrative Bioethics,” David Tanner corroborates this assessment:

What most unites the proponents of narrative in bioethics is “the association of narrative properties (epiphany, multiple perspective, and textual tapestry) with emotional, psychological, and individual needs that are deemed absent from abstract moral principles and deductive reasoning.” . . . Opponents respond that textual complexity and interpretive uncertainty—the attributes that most distinguish narrative from principle-based reasoning—are the very reasons why narratives provide inadequate ethical guidance. But even the most skeptical of the philosophers . . . concede that narratives may supplement or enrich principlist reasoning.⁵

I agree with Tanner’s assertion that it is the absence of both these narrative properties as well as these human elements that contributes to the typical inadequacy of principlist bioethics. However, I am not willing to concede, as he seems to, that the mere *enrichment* of the work of principle-based bioethics might sufficiently conclude the contributions that narrative might make to a conception of ethics in humanistic medicine. I do not mean to suggest that such narrative contributions would necessarily be sufficient to do the ethical work of medicine, but I do believe them to be necessary, capable of providing unique insight that might not be readily attainable elsewhere and of demonstrating the need for a paradigm shift in the way that ethics is conceived in the practice of humanistic medicine. In *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum facilitates such a shift by reconsidering the prevailing model of ethical inquiry, asking not “What is

⁵ David E. Tanner, “Narrative, Ethics, and Human Experimentation in Richard Selzer’s ‘Alexis St. Martin’: The Miraculous Wound Re-Examined,” *HEC Forum* 12, no. 2 (June 2000): 150.

right?” or “How ought one to act in such a circumstance?” but rather “How should a human being live?”:

This question presupposes no specific demarcation of the terrain of human life, and so, *a fortiori*, not its demarcation into separate moral and nonmoral realms. It does not, that is, assume that there is, among many ends and activities that human beings cherish and pursue, some one domain, the domain of moral value, that is of special importance and dignity, apart from the rest of life. Nor does it assume, as do utility theorists, that there is a more or less unitary something that a good agent can be seen as maximizing in every act of choice. It does not assume the denial of these claims either; it holds them open for inquiry within the procedure—with the result that, so far, we are surveying everything that Aristotle surveys, that we do actually survey: humor alongside justice, grace in addition to courage.”⁶

Thus, by breaking down some of the boundaries that have separated the cognitive rationalism appealed to by traditional philosophical ethics and other potentially relevant “emotional, psychological, and individual matters,” Nussbaum broadens her conception of ethics sufficiently to encompass all of that which she asserts is relevant to the living of a life, thereby opening moral inquiry to potential contributions of literature that considers such matters as the experiences of persons, interacting with, affecting, and being affected by other people, things, and events. The alternative, which conceives of ethics as merely the identification and rational balancing of the general principles at work in the particular circumstances of particular people, ignores much of that which plays such an important role in both the practice of human life as well as the practice of human medicine. This is made particularly clear in the context of medicine, where an ethics rooted in an appeal to

⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

foundational philosophical principles neglects the “‘unruly abundance of deep feeling about life and death, suffering and healing’” inherent in the medical treatment of mortal human beings.⁷ Thus, it seems essential to maintain a sufficiently broad perspective that attends adequately to the many relevant ethical values at work in the practice of medicine.

ADAPTING ETHICAL CRITICISM TO MEDICINE

Of course, with regard to the matter of medical ethics and the conduct of moral inquiry within the context of the medical relationship, perhaps to tackle so broad a question as how one ought to live is excessively ambitious and beyond the scope of the typical moral matters encountered in the context of the medical relationship. According to Rolf Ahlzen, “what is relevant for the clinician is what contributes to her efforts to prevent and to treat diseases and to alleviate suffering caused by illness.”⁸ Of course, this is not to suggest that that which is relevant to ethics in medicine can be so simplistically conceived as the ability to prevent and resolve quandaries that might develop as a result of medical practice, for such “knowledge” remains a “‘mixture’ of . . . practical and theoretical . . . [and] will necessarily emanate out of acquaintance with many different

⁷ Potts, 212.

⁸ Rolf Ahlzen, “The Doctor and the Literary Text—Potentials and Pitfalls,” *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (July 2002): 154. All subsequent references to “The Doctor and the Literary Text” in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation “DLT,” followed by the page number.

areas of human activity” (“DLT,” 154). Instead, Ahlzen suggests that what may be necessary, and would be more appropriate and manageable, is a medical adaptation of Nussbaum’s organizing question, asking not “How should one live one’s life?” but instead “How should I live my life *as a clinician*” (“DLT,” 151; emphasis added)? However, despite this revision, literature remains Ahlzen’s resource of choice in efforts to answer to such a question:

The encounter with literary texts has . . . [the] potential to contribute to medical practice in *at least* the three following ways: (1) by increasing the openness to and knowledge of the multitude of human experiences, far beyond what might be acquired by “real life” encounters; (2) by stimulating ethical responsiveness and refining moral perception, through showing – emotionally and cognitively – the presence of incommensurable values in our lives and the conflicts between these values; (3) by paving the way for the acknowledgement of human ambiguity and fallibility, of paradoxical truths and of the inevitability of tragic choices. (“DLT,” 148)

These appeals to literature bear a striking resemblance to a number of those articulated above, in the chapters on ethical criticism, and particularly those put forth by Nussbaum. However, what may differ as a result of this clinical adaptation is the nature of the literary work to which one might turn for such contributions. According to Ahlzen, the question that immediately follows the question “How should I live my life as a clinician?” and the question that will be of primary interest for the remainder of this dissertation, is “What text could answer this question” (“DLT,” 151)? Ahlzen goes on to propose two potential answers:

Any, one might be tempted to answer. Any text that has anything to say about what it is to be a human being, however peculiar this segment of reality might be,

is of value for a doctor. The opposite answer is, of course, to say that only texts will do, which to some substantial degree deal with human illness and suffering due to illness, and doctors' ways of meeting and dealing with this. ("DLT," 151)

Of course, one might make a strong case for the former answer, maintaining that, regardless of the setting in which this literary ethical education takes place, any literature that is sufficiently good possesses potential ethical insight for the practicing physician.⁹ However, one significant problem with this answer is that it fails to account adequately for the revision of the guiding ethical question elaborated above. It may be true that *any* text could be "of value for a doctor" in the living of his or her life, but the value of interest in this particular circumstance specifically regards the conduct of that life in the clinic. Further, given the realities of medical education, with its incumbent scarcity of curricular space, its bias toward science, and its increasing skepticism regarding the value of pedagogical methods whose results cannot be readily and empirically validated, perhaps such a general position asks too much of curriculum committees and medical school educators who lack sufficient training for literary interpretation and education. Rather, the more pragmatic and effective position may be Ahlzen's latter one, which relies upon an implicit topical relationship between such literature and the practice of medicine as its primary source of pedagogical justification. Further, making use of

⁹ Of course, this matter of determining what qualifies as good literature and how to establish whether a certain work of literature is good enough is a significant problem in its own right and has likely received several dissertations and/or life's works worth of attention already. Suffice it to say that when I refer to good literature, I mean literature that fulfills many of the value criteria elaborated above. Ahlzen cites Nussbaum in his own attempt to clarify what he means by good fiction: "[G]ood fiction' can play the reflective role it does in our lives because of the 'particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy' of the text and also because of its capacity for 'making the reader a participant and friend'" ("DLT," 151).

explicitly clinically *relevant* material would likely appeal not only to those parties who develop and implement medical school curricula, but it might also minimize, at least as much as possible, the skepticism with which students regard such material and “increase the chances that even the ‘unresponsive’ reader learns” (“DLT,” 149). Therefore, according to Ahlzen, the integration of literature into medical and ethics education in medicine requires careful balancing between a work’s palatability, its seeming relevance, and the potential ethical contributions of its form and content:

Whatever a writer tries to tell me, it might just be impossible for me to take it in because the style of the book, its literary form, is alien to me. I might just not *stand* Henry James, and however much of Nussbaum’s wise commentaries I read, he is still just unbearable. Form is of importance in all texts, scientific also, but may be said to be even more crucial in the novel or the poem. The invitation of the literary text to involvement and expanded experience can also be an invitation to disgust, boredom, or alienation.

Given these considerations, some practical responses may be: more reflection on the nature of doctor-patient interaction, more knowledge of how literary texts work in relation to different readers and different goals and better knowledge of dialogue about texts as a means to expanding the “room of interpretation.” (“DLT,” 152)

Thus, there may be a number of reasons why initial attempts at literary ethics education in medical school might remain explicitly within the realm of medicine or illness, not the least of which may be the fact that the seeming relevance of the text will increase the appeal of the work and its study significantly. Richard Selzer is one writer whose work has been used in this capacity, in part because it frequently satisfies this relevance criterion for medical education. Much of Selzer’s literary corpus, and particularly his early work, when he maintained a full-time surgical practice, concerns the world of

illness and medicine. However, Selzer's seeming relevance to medicine education and practice is merely one, albeit important, reason why his work might be particularly apt for this role, for it also satisfies a number of the above-mentioned features that one might expect to a good literary work to contribute to ethical reflection. As expressed above, one of Selzer's explicitly acknowledged goals in and hopes for writing is to preserve the threatened humanity that he believes is fundamental to and inherent in the practice of medicine ("PP," 65-66). Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will elaborate upon the general nature of Selzer's literary work and expand upon the potential ways that I believe his work might safeguard this essential medical humanism.

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF RICHARD SELZER

Before I proceed to elaborate Selzer's potential contributions to humanistic medical education and practice, it seems important acknowledge and address one of Selzer's own misgivings regarding the use of (his) literary work in the investigation of medical ethical issues. In his introduction to a collection of conversations with Selzer regarding the relationship between medicine and the literary arts, Peter Josyph acknowledges Selzer's explicit consternation at what he perceives to be a careless conflation of art and ethics that frequently preoccupies so many of his readers and critics:

[I]f there are any gifted writers who can be read, and read well, without critical paraphernalia, Richard Selzer is one of them. Like most writers, he likes to see an author write well about his work, but when they come to *him* in order to see in the work the Selzer they need to see—the worst being those in quest of oracles on *the*

issues—“you know, medical ethics and all of *that*”—Richard’s brain turns blue trying to give them what they need in order to write what they intended to write to begin with and he can resume putting sentences into a plain spiral notebook until they conjure a few traces of the life he has lived and the world he has imagined.¹⁰

Such sentiments regarding the potential utility of literature in matters of moral deliberation seem to betray two distinct beliefs: first, that literature can only and will inevitably fail when asked to do the work of ethics, and second, that such a request actually inappropriately and misguidedly exploits art, which ought to possess sufficiently significant value in and of itself. Selzer’s misgivings sound a great deal like those put forth by opponents of an ethical role for literature, and yet, with his last sentence, Josyph makes possible the ethical use of Selzer’s work within the context of the Nussbaum’s ethical critical reconceptualization of ethics. An artist’s conjuring of “a few traces of the life he has lived and the world he has imagined” is exactly the reason one might turn to literature for ethical insight. In his Introduction to his collection titled *The Doctor Stories*, Selzer explicitly describes his own understanding of the role that ethics plays in his work as well as the role that his work ought to play in ethics: “Not a single thought of social purpose or morality crossed my mind in the writing of these pieces. They were meant to be told for their own sake.”¹¹ However, in the Introduction to a more recent collection titled *The Exact Location of the Soul*, Selzer’s comments suggest some softening or evolution of his position regarding ethics and his literature. The sentiment

¹⁰ Peter Josyph, *What One Man Said to Another: Talks with Richard Selzer* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), xvi.

¹¹ Richard Selzer, Introduction, in *The Doctor Stories* (New York: Picador, 1998), 15.

begins as the previous one ended: “Not a single thought of social or ethical purpose brought about any of these essays.” However, here Selzer departs from his previous words, concluding, “*But it happens that some of them do have relevance for society in that they confront such subjects as abortion, physician-assisted suicide, organ transplantation, AIDS, and the doctor/patient relationship.*”¹² Thus, despite his explicit rejection of the conception of art as *useful*, at some point Selzer perceives a relationship between topical relevance and the quality of the particular “world he has imagined.” Thus, one must be careful not to make any sweeping generalizations regarding Selzer and his position on the reciprocal contributions of literature and ethics to one another. In fact, for Selzer, as well as for most if not all of those ethical critics described above, the potential for literature’s contribution to ethical deliberation depends significantly upon the conception of ethics at work in such a formulation. For example, in a conversation with Mahala Stripling, Selzer elaborates his own conception of the type of positive contribution that literature might make to ethical deliberation:

Literature presents an ethical conundrum, allowing the reader to address the problem by examining a character to whom he or she has been introduced. We bring to the question all of our past upbringing, training, morality, and prejudices. There is also the enlargement of the spirit and the wisdom that comes from reading literature that can be applied to problem solving. In any number of my stories, the reader is confronted with an ethical dilemma. Usually it is couched in the story so as not to be intrusive, but there it is. It’s a big question.¹³

¹² Richard Selzer, “Introduction: The Making of a Doctor/Writer,” in *The Exact Location of the Soul: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 14. Emphasis added.

¹³ In a letter to the author dated January 26, 2005, Mahala Stripling shared this quotation from a conversation she had had with Richard Selzer regarding the role of the humanities in bioethics.

Thus, for Selzer, it is not the turn to literature in the practice of ethical reflection that is problematic, but rather the misguided mining and exploitation of literature for the resolution of ethical quandaries. Selzer has no problem allowing that literature might engage the deliberative faculties of its readers, so long as its potential contributions are conceived sufficiently broadly and remain faithful to the unique qualities of the particular text. Further, Selzer even acknowledges the existence of a substantial, explicit, and intentional pedagogical element in his work, though he insists that he means his work “to be revelatory rather than instructive.”¹⁴ In other words, through much of his work, he operates according to the descriptive agenda to “reveal . . . what it is to be a doctor.”¹⁵ In an interview with Schuster, Selzer insists, “I want to teach, which is incidentally an essential part of my writing. . . . I want these polished sentences to signify something. I don’t want them to just be surface dazzle” (“PP,” 66). Of course, implicit in this statement is an acknowledgement that an important quality of Selzer’s work is its *polish* and *dazzle*. However, it is the suggestion that dazzle is all he might contribute that troubles Selzer, for such dazzle constitutes a fundamental part of “Selzer’s philosophy of doctoring.” In his work, the previously elaborated union of form and content is tantamount, for neither Selzer’s form nor his content would contribute nearly as much, nor as meaningfully, without the other. Selzer expounds upon his conception of this union in his Preface to *Letters to a Young Doctor*:

¹⁴ Richard Selzer, Preface, in *Letters to a Young Doctor* (San Diego: Harvest, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Keiko Beppu and M. Teresa Tavormina, “The Healer’s Art: An Interview with Richard Selzer,” *Centennial Review* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 27.

I have roamed the imagination for metaphor, myth, and memory. These pieces are not, strictly speaking, factual in the way a medicine textbook is factual. Nor are they journalism or reportage. They are literary renditions of medicine meant to strike resonating chords in the reader's mind. They are as much concerned with how something is said as they are with what is said. Style, here, is as important as content. Still, because I have spent a lifetime in medicine, there is much accurate detail. I have tried for anatomical and physiological fidelity but often without supplying a fixed meaning. I much prefer to invite interpretation.¹⁶

Thus, Selzer combines this life knowledge with his particular literary style in order to arrive at something that is richer than the sum of its constituent parts, and it is in part because of the unique nature and high quality of this inextricable union that Selzer has become such a revered and effective teacher and revealer: "I've had medical students come up to me everywhere I go and say, 'I have to tell you that the reason I went to medical school was because I read your books.' Now you cannot imagine what that means to me. It's not the reason I write. But it's a dividend that any writer would die for. So in a sense I'm still teaching medicine."¹⁷

Thus, having attained a sort of implied consent from Selzer to consider and, therefore, criticize the potential ethical contributions of his work, I would like to elaborate some of the features, beyond his pedagogical intent and his essential union of form and content, that contribute to the potential ethical value of his work. First of all, in keeping with Ahlzen's elaboration of the contributions that a literary text might make to medical practice, the first two of which regarded "increasing the openness to and

¹⁶ Selzer, Preface, *Letters to a Young Doctor*, 5.

¹⁷ Dale Flynn, "Rituals of Writing: An Interview with Richard Selzer," *Writing on the Edge* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 63.

knowledge of the multitude of human experiences, far beyond what might be acquired by ‘real life’ encounters,” and “stimulating ethical responsiveness and refining moral perception,” one of the most significant features of Selzer’s writing is his refined and attentive observation of particular people, doctors and patients alike, in particular circumstances (“DLT,” 148). Selzer casts the unflinching “third eye” of the artist upon these people, frequently including himself, in order to depict such characters in as rich and truthful a reality as is possible within the bounds of his art.¹⁸ Of course, Selzer acknowledges that the possession and development of such refined perception might come at some cost, as it has the potential to make the physician even more vulnerable to the pain and suffering that pervades the practice of medicine and the experience of illness than he or she already is. Once one opens this eye and experiences all that it is capable of seeing, Selzer suggests that it might become impossible to close it, leaving one even more susceptible to “the terrible facts of this work.”¹⁹ Nonetheless, despite such potential suffering, Selzer insists that the improved perception that accompanied his own development as a writer ultimately made him a better doctor, and he writes with the understanding and hope that the same will prove true for his readers.²⁰ At the same time, the refined perception with which Selzer renders the experiences of particular people in particular circumstances might yield a great deal more, for, according to Charles

¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

¹⁹ Beppu and Tavormina, 32.

²⁰ Ibid.

Anderson, such exposure to the practice of medicine and the experience of illness allows for the immersion of the reader in the culture of medicine:

To read Selzer's work is to read the history and philosophy of medicine and to enter medicine's rhetorical situation through a singularly individual artistic consciousness, a consciousness that denies, dismisses, and violates the constraints of familiar categories of medical discourse in favor of the most intensely literary vision and language possible. Yet, because it is bound to the factuality of the surgical theatre, because it addresses crucially important issues of healing and of mortality, and because his patients are his characters, Selzer's writing argues that no matter how daring the conception, the arrangement, and the style, the facts are the facts—this is read, and it is important.

For Selzer's readers, this convergence of historical presence, artistic perception, and factual constraint produces a unique representation of surgical science presented in completely human terms through a language that at once shocks, repels, transports, invites, and, strangest of all, comforts those who open themselves to its workings and the lessons it teaches.²¹

In this description of Selzer's work and its likely effects on his readers, Anderson introduces an aspect of Selzer's writing that bears significantly upon Selzer's potential effectiveness as a teacher and revealer of ethics in medicine. Selzer's work is at once exceedingly literary at the same time as it attempts to remain faithful to the conceptions of fact and truth implicit in biological science and the practice of medicine. Thus, it is important to consider Selzer's particular fusion of fact and fiction in order to appreciate its contributions to the ethical value implicit in his work. Much of Selzer's corpus, and especially his early work, results from a unique amalgamation of a number of different styles, including essays and short fiction. Frequently, this blending occurs even within

²¹ Charles M. Anderson, *Richard Selzer and the Rhetoric of Surgery* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), xv-xvi.

the same piece. As Anderson remarks above, Selzer is able to combine “the most intensely literary vision and language possible” with “the factuality of the surgical field.” Elsewhere, Anderson reaffirms this observation, noting that in such works as *Letters to a Young Doctor*, the “distinctions between fact and fiction and the boundaries between traditional genres become even more blurred.”²² This is no easy feat, and it is Selzer’s overwhelming success with such blurring and blending that has garnered him such praise and adulation among his readers in the medical field while allowing him to mine something of transcendent human value from pieces that might otherwise read like somewhat mundane clinical tales. Through his works, to which I will refer most frequently as stories, Selzer plumbs some of the most interesting, difficult, troublesome, heartwarming, heartbreaking, enlightening, ennobling, ingratiating, amazing, and horrific aspects implicit in the practice of contemporary medicine, surgical and otherwise. According to Schuster, Selzer’s stories are indeed “mortal lessons” that “sweep us forward by the power of their subject, the artistry with which they are told, yet within them are expressed some essential aspects of Selzer’s philosophy of doctoring” (“PP,” 66). Thus, before moving on to conduct my critical analysis of two particularly interesting stories of Selzer’s, I would like to elaborate more fully upon this blurred or blended aspect of Selzer’s work that marks his fusion of form and content and makes his work both so unique and so valuable.

According to Selzer, as revealed in an interview with Schuster, this blending of

²² Ibid., 105.

factual content with literary technique comes somewhat naturally and unintentionally to him: "I don't think of it as fiction. I guess I'm in a murky place between the two, or maybe in a fortunate place since I can get nourished by them both. I don't know whether I am writing fiction or non-fiction at any given time. I just . . . I no longer try . . . these are *true* stories I am telling. That I know."²³ Despite even his uncertainty regarding the true nature of his writing, it is clear that he does not mind, and is even grateful for this confluence, as he believes that each of the elements contributes necessarily and uniquely to his work. According to Schuster, Selzer has come to depend upon this union, in part for the unique demands that it places upon his readers: "Of all the irreconcilable impulses colliding within Selzer's work, . . . perhaps the most significant from a formal point of view is his inability, his unwillingness, to separate the fictional from the nonfictional. His work has 'a central core of truth' even though he uses many 'fictional techniques' to recover it."²⁴ He constantly frustrates the desires of his readers to categorize his work in one realm or another and, as a result, "[c]ast loose between equally indistinct shores, readers must devise their own chart to steer by. They must become more willing to sustain doubt and ambiguity, more capable of supplying their own direction within the parameters established by the work itself."²⁵ Anderson corroborates Schuster's analysis,

²³ Charles I. Schuster, "Confessions of a Writer: The Art of Richard Selzer," *Rhetoric Review* 3, no. 1 (September 1984): 96. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Charles I. Schuster, "The Nonfictional Prose of Richard Selzer: An Aesthetic Analysis," in *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticisms, Pedagogy*, ed. Chris Anderson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1989), 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

asserting that Selzer's intention is "to disturb and to unsettle his readers by increasing the tension among their expectations, the literal view of scientific medicine, and his metaphoric representation of surgery so that he may move beyond the 'facts' of surgery toward its *meaning*."²⁶ Such strategies seem consistent with Selzer's overarching interest in education. In discussing his story "Impostor," an unambiguously fictional moral tale about a mysterious healer taken in by a village seemingly untouched by time or technology, Selzer acknowledges his pedagogical intent embedded in the story:

I couched it in fictional terms but the point is very definitely non-fiction because it was included in a book, *Letters to a Young Doctor*, and it was meant to instruct and inform and set an example for the reader. . . . I sought desperately to inform. I wanted to teach, which is incidentally an essential part of my writing. . . . I want these polished sentences to signify something. I don't want them to be just surface dazzle. I want them to inform and to have specific information at the core.²⁷

In other, less explicitly fictional examples of his work, Selzer's intent remains the same: to transcend that which is typically proffered by the acquisition of mere facts:

[Facts] are not valuable. They are given value by *perception*. . . . Language is the instrument by which civilization gains understanding of what is . . . real. . . . The use of plot, character, suspense, humor and the grotesque in a blend of fiction and non-fiction all serve to transform a mere fact into a *truth*. A truth is a fact plus its *significance* to mankind. Expressed in the language of literature a fact takes on the potential of truth.²⁸

²⁶ Anderson, 38. Emphasis added.

²⁷ Schuster, "Confessions of a Writer," 94-95.

²⁸ Anderson, 23. Emphasis added.

Through his skepticism regarding the value of mere “facts,” Selzer articulates a position similar to that expressed by many in literature, philosophy, and bioethics. Potts captures this scholarly articulation nicely:

Conceptual discourse alone cannot do justice to . . . feelings; narrative, whether it be nonfictional narrative about actual events or fictional narrative, can do a better job. Narrative does not ignore the wholeness of life. Stories, with their development of character, situation, and sense of historical time, give us a sense of the concrete particularity of experience, including particular feelings and situations.”²⁹

Also implicit within Selzer’s narrative concern for reality and the truth that lies beneath the facts is some conception of that which Nussbaum describes as the noncommensurability of valuable things and the inevitable moral costs that arise with any significant moral decision.³⁰ Ahlzen explores this particular feature of Selzer’s narrative work in his discussion of Selzer’s style:

How “unclean”, complex and precisely ambiguous some decisionmaking situations in clinical practice are. . . . Selzer’s stories . . . make plausible that medical practice is inevitably filled with tragic choices and that there exists no magic formula, no theoretical construction, that can save us from the painful realization that there may be moral loss—even if the choice was the best one possible. (“DLT,” 151)

Ahlzen continues this thread in his footnote to the previous sentence: “The point is to remind us that no magic bullet, no ‘ethical model’ or ‘ethical theory’, helps us makes

²⁹ Potts, 213.

³⁰ For further elaboration upon Nussbaum’s conception of the noncommensurability of valuable things, please see my discussion in chapter 3.

choices where nothing of moral value is lost—even if we make the best possible, or least bad, choice” (“DLT,” 155, n. 6). Schuster compares this awareness of and comfort with the ambiguity inherent in the moral life, and the practice of medicine, to the conception of *negative capability* developed by John Keats:

“*Negative capability* . . . is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” . . . The poet must be able to sustain the ambiguity of dream, the confusion of a sensibility over-charged by experience. The literal, the unitary and isolatable event, is denied by such a writer in order that he may express the complications of an unresolvable world. . . . “What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet.” . . . Selzer, too, is a “camelion Poet” to whom no action or event is so terrible as to be unreportable. His words and images pluck slices out of the profusion of life played out by him. That they are contrastive, contradictory, and at times wholly created by the occasion of the prose is part of Selzer’s expression of his negative capability.³¹

On the copyright page of *Taking the World in for Repairs*, Selzer writes that “[e]ach chapter of this book is a blend of fact and fiction.”³² With this explicit admission, Selzer makes clear that his conception of the inseparable union of form and content has become an implicit and pervasive part of his work. As a result of the success of this union, his works accomplish the third of Ahlzen’s potential contributions of literary texts to medical practice, “paving the way for the acknowledgment of human ambiguity and fallibility, of paradoxical truths and of the inevitability of tragic choices” (“DLT,” 148). In so doing, Selzer’s work becomes both explicitly and implicitly pedagogical, and it is this union that

³¹ Schuster, “The Nonfictional Prose of Richard Selzer,” 10.

³² Richard Selzer, *Taking the World in for Repairs* (1986; reprint, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), copyright page.

makes his work an exemplar and model for the practice of ethical criticism as it relates to medicine, providing a potential answer to the question of how one ought to live “as a clinician.”

SELZER AS HUMANIST

In his medical writing, Selzer presents a vision of the practice of medicine that is complex, multifaceted, and ambiguous. However, despite his expert understanding of the world of medicine, as well as the world in general, Selzer insists that he is “not a Humanist—not the genuine article, because [he does] not favor Reason over Intuition, but rather, by nature [is] drawn to the latter” (“PP,” 73). While such a statement may seem extraneous to the present discussion, I believe that it is both relevant and false, and that, despite Selzer’s claims to the contrary, *humanistic* is a particularly apt adjective to describe both Selzer as well as the potential contributions of his work to medical education and practice:

Intuition does play an important role in his conception of the doctor and the medical profession. But the key to Selzer’s philosophy is to perceive that, for him, humanism, intuition, science, and doctoring must all come together. According to Selzer, those in medicine must not only know but feel. They must be able to love and grieve over their patients even as they cure, and cut, and occasionally condemn. They must be willing to endure the ambiguity of being both exceedingly knowledgeable and simultaneously ignorant of so many fundamental human mysteries. None of this is easy, but for Selzer it is the only possible solution. It is the only way doctors can survive in the very profession that nurtures them. (“PP,” 73)

Thus, the validation for Selzer's claim that "some mysteries are not meant to be solved, they are meant to be deepened" rests implicitly within his work.³³ Selzer does not typically offer any clean resolution of the various ethical dilemmas that confront the characters in his works. Rather, he aspires merely to describe such matters as richly and deeply as possible, to allow them to speak for themselves in their full descriptive capacity. In contrasting his own work with that of his friend Lewis Thomas, Selzer himself acknowledges this dichotomy: "'His is an *intellectual* pursuit. Mine is a matter of touching and gazing, and being involved. . . . I'm not an intellectual. Just a simple sawbones. I don't have ideas.'"³⁴ In her commentary upon his quotation, M. Teresa Tavormina dismisses Selzer's "self-deprecating tone" and acknowledges the peculiar truth that Selzer, perhaps unintentionally, articulates with this comment: "These protestations are made in a humorous, self-deprecating tone, perhaps lighter than William Carlos Williams's 'No ideas but in things,' yet the position is similar: 'No ideas but in the body.'" ³⁵ Of course, Selzer sells short the intelligence (whether one might refer to this capacity as intellectual or not is another matter) that must be required to craft such rich works of art, but his point is well-taken. Selzer intentionally refrains from attempting to construct or provide any sort of intellectual argument to support the narrative events of

³³ Josyph, xviii.

³⁴ M. Teresa Tavormina, "Richard Selzer: The Rounds of Revelation, *Literature and Medicine* 1 (1982): 69. Emphasis added.

³⁵ Ibid.

his stories. He merely writes, creates, attempts, as he says, to “paste . . . [an actual human organ] to the page”:³⁶

I write stories that reach for privileged moments of revelation, as when a cleft lip, say, or an ingrown toenail, or a torn rag of flesh takes on a certain radiance. In such moments, flesh becomes the spirit. Unlike a CAT scan or an MRI, these stories don’t look for concrete answers. Their aim is more difficult to define; they are apt to be ambiguous. As a writer, I have learned that some life mysteries aren’t meant to be solved; they’re meant to make us wonder at them.³⁷

In other words, though Selzer intends his works to be “revelatory rather than instructive,” this does not diminish or contradict his proclaimed “pedagogical” inclinations.³⁸ It merely refines the nature of the teaching he perceives himself to be doing. For better or worse, his works describe the practice of medicine as he perceives it to be: human, flawed, demanding, painful, damaging, yet, nonetheless somehow transcendent. Selzer appears never to have lost his sense of wonder at what it is and means to be human. That one can live so long a life, while toiling away at the practice of surgery no less, and retain such wonder is a testament both to the man as well as to the art meant to share such wonder with his readers. Selzer titled his fifth collection of stories *Taking the World in for Repairs*, and, through Selzer’s depiction of the transcendence of ordinary human life, as well as his pervasive position that “flesh is spirit thickened,” I have come to

³⁶ Richard Selzer, “The Exact Location of the Soul,” in *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (1974; reprint, San Diego: Harvest, 1996), 15.

³⁷ Richard Selzer, “Writer with Scalpel,” in *The Writing Life: Writer on How They Think and Work: A Collection from the Washington Post Book World*, ed. Marie Arana (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 239.

³⁸ Selzer, Preface, *Letters to a Young Doctor*, 7, 5.

understand what he might have intended this title to mean.³⁹ By way of his written work, Selzer really has attempted to repair the world, and it is this enduring sense of wonder at the transcendent nature of being human that qualifies Selzer as a humanist, despite his protestations to the contrary. This same humanistic spirit pervades his work and provides his readers with an opportunity for revelation, should they be open enough to receive such a lesson. As a result, with Selzer's help, medical ethics education possesses the potential to teach students a great deal more than the resolution of moral quandaries; it has the potential to teach them how to live.

In the following chapters, I will examine two of Selzer's stories through an ethical critical lens in order to demonstrate the corrective potential possessed by such texts, not only for the shortcomings of a medical curriculum that has become excessively focused on biomedical science to the detriment of other essential humanistic exploration, but also for the predominant attempts at ethics education that have been developed and implemented in order to ameliorate such shortcomings. I selected these particular stories because they concern very familiar biomedical ethics issues, allowing me to consider explicitly and implicitly what these stories offer readers above and beyond that typical of biomedical ethical education. Building upon the foundation of the ethical critical scholarship I elaborated throughout the first half of this dissertation, I hope to demonstrate that it is in both the relevance of his subject matter as well as the artistry

³⁹ Ibid., 7.

with which he renders such topics that contributes to the invaluable and essential contributions Selzer's work might make to an improved and increasingly humanistic medical ethics education.

CHAPTER 5: “MERCY” AND THE ETHICS OF PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DEATH

Physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia remains one of the most controversial medical ethical issues under public scrutiny today. Like abortion and embryonic stem cell research, physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia raises questions regarding such fundamental matters as the value of life, the meaning of death, and the nature of the work of medicine. Because of these deep value considerations, such issues as euthanasia seem especially resistant to the achievement of any sort of resolution or cultural consensus, in part because a great deal more seems relevant to such deliberation than can be provided by mere objective rationalistic analysis. In their consideration of such matters, people bring significantly more to bear upon these questions, including emotional response, personal history, religious beliefs, personal morality, law, and so forth. On one side of this debate, there are those who support the possibility that physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia might be an ethical act, frequently asserting that the relief of pain and suffering is a fundamental part of the practice of medicine and that physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia is merely another, albeit somewhat extreme, of the various palliative measures at a physician's disposal. Others maintain a more conservative position, insisting that because human life is sacred, any intentional act committed by a physician that results in the death of a patient violates the long-standing ethical imperative to do no harm. Morally, one might reasonably maintain and justify either of these positions, depending largely upon one's conception of the sanctity of life and one's beliefs

regarding whether it is life's very existence or its quality that imbues it with value. In conversations regarding his position on the euthanasia controversy, Richard Selzer claims to support the idea of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia, maintaining that life ought not necessarily be conserved at all costs and that for a physician to contribute actively to the end of a person's life does not necessarily constitute doing harm to that patient. In an interview with Peter Josyph, Selzer elaborates upon his position regarding the propriety of euthanasia:

Have I ever committed euthanasia, is that what you mean? O yes, I have done that. I think that if more doctors dared to be candid about it they would certainly admit that they had helped the patient, upon request, to terminate their suffering. Of course it's always a secret, furtive act. . . . No one else knows, just the patient and the doctor. . . . [For a patient in the last stages of AIDS, w]hat's the point of prolonging such a misfortune? And I do believe the times are soon coming when euthanasia, in such cases, upon the request of the patient, will be an utterly acceptable thing to do, rather than to prolong this misery, which has the same inevitable conclusion. . . . Of course, there will be abuses, inevitably. I think they will be rare. It's a matter again of how to decide where the greater good lies. Should it be the greater good for the greatest number, that kind of thing, or should we stick to the letter of the law? I personally believe that the greatest good for the greatest number, and those rare instances where euthanasia shall have been murder, well, I think each case must be investigated and treated accordingly. But I know this is an imperfect world. I think it's a dilemma. But it's a lot easier to solve that one, I think, than to solve many of the other medical ethical issues.¹

Here Selzer conveys a seemingly well-considered argument in favor of a conception of euthanasia as ethical and legal, which he bases largely upon his own personal experience(s), as a practicing physician engaged with suffering patients, as well as his

¹ Peter Josyph, *What One Man Said to Another: Talks with Richard Selzer* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 166-67.

own seemingly rational understanding of the practice and the circumstances that might necessitate it. Interestingly, there are other nonfictional fora in which Selzer presents a significantly less decisive account of his own position regarding the ethics of euthanasia. In “A Question of Mercy,” Selzer charts his own experiences with physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia when he is asked by a friend to assist in ending that friend’s life.² The encounter ends badly, with the friend in the hospital on life support after having failed to die as planned, and, throughout, Selzer expresses his own extreme ambivalence regarding the morality of the matter and his own involvement in it. Of course, I do not mean to cast doubt on Selzer’s comments in his interview with Josyph but merely to demonstrate the significant divide that frequently separates abstract ruminations from concrete experiences. Regardless, it remains the case that most other people do not even possess such a resource as a long personal history to bring to bear upon their own evaluations of such matters as the ethics of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia. Instead, they must turn to a number of other resources, including many of those mentioned above. Ethics is one of these available resources, and, indeed, it is highly touted by many to be the only viable arbiter in such matters. However, for reasons I have elaborated throughout this dissertation and shall continue to explore, I do not believe that traditional ethics education is sufficient for rich exploration and deliberation about such matters.

As Michael Potts argues about the issue of organ transplantation, “[t]here exist [too many] fundamental human feelings and intuitions” swirling around the practice of

² Richard Selzer, “A Question of Mercy,” *New York Times Magazine* (September 22, 1991): 32-33, 36, 38.

physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia for any solely rationalistic discourse to do such a matter justice.³ Rather, what is needed is an elaboration of the various normative concepts at work in such a discussion, a literary rendering (or multiple literary renderings) of this value-laden enterprise in order to demonstrate the numerous human conflicts inherent in such a debate. Martha Nussbaum, with others, alleges that the traditional rationalistic approach employed by contemporary philosophy and, by extension, bioethics, even, or perhaps especially, when case-based, typically provides an excessively slight, underdeveloped sketch in which one can seldom, if ever, achieve any real human understanding of the problem. Such an approach employs criteria that are too general and superficial to provide any real, useful ethical guidance, instead merely skating shallowly along the top of what is ultimately a highly rich and complex matter.⁴ With “Mercy,” Richard Selzer has created a short story that draws readers deep into its exploration of the dilemma, providing an exemplar of the essential corrective that rich and well-considered narrative literature might provide to such ethical issues as physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will undertake a critical analysis of “Mercy,” paying careful attention to the relationship between the form and the content of the story, in order to better understand how this construction might affect one’s reading of the story and to elucidate some of the contributions that such a story might make to the seemingly irresolvable euthanasia debate. Because of the highly

³ Michael Potts, “Morals, Metaphysics, and Heart Transplantation: Reflections on Richard Selzer’s ‘Whither Thou Goest,’” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 41, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 214.

⁴ For more substantive development of this matter, please review my discussion of Nussbaum in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

particular nature of this unique conceptualization of this ethical dilemma, I shall not seek to derive any general rules regarding the right actions of physicians in such circumstances. However, I do not mean to imply that there is nothing of general worth to be accomplished by such deliberation. As Selzer writes, “Some mysteries are not meant to be solved; they are meant to be deepened,” and it is with the help of such stories as “Mercy” that such deep, dark mysteries might begin to be illuminated.⁵ In the story, Selzer’s surgeon briefly turns out the lights in the hospital room after he administers the lethal dose of morphine to his suffering patient. However, almost immediately, he realizes that “[i]n the darkness the contents of the bed are [only] theoretical” and turns them back on again, in order to appreciate the full and utter reality of the situation.⁶ Analogously, “Mercy,” by way of its rich and complex depiction of the last days of the life of a suffering patient and the doctor who attends to him, might begin to illuminate the dark ambiguity central to such controversial matters as euthanasia. Of course, this is not to suggest that such a story as “Mercy” provides all of the sufficient tools to deliberate about such matters. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate that it, and perhaps other stories like it, might provide a necessary lens through which one might come to see more clearly the numerous facets that pertain to such a matter. Only then might one be able to begin to contemplate the *ethical* issues at work in such matters.

⁵ Richard Selzer, “An Expostulation,” *Literature and Medicine* 10 (1991): 37.

⁶ Richard Selzer, “Mercy,” in *Letters to a Young Doctor* (1982; reprint, San Diego: Harvest, 1996), 73. All subsequent references to “Mercy” in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text.

CONTENT

Before moving on to scrutinize the particular way that Selzer constructs his story, I would first like to provide a brief plot summary of “Mercy,” both to acquaint those readers who have not read the story with some of the general details as well as to demonstrate the sort of contrast that frequently exists between such a work as it is conveyed in a plot summary and the richness of the form of the actual story. In “Mercy,” Selzer tells the story of a surgeon and his terminally ill pancreatic cancer patient whose pain can no longer be controlled by any traditional palliative means. After brief consideration, the physician, the patient, his wife, and his mother determine that death would be preferable to such a bleak life in pain and that the physician ought to administer a sufficient dose of morphine to alleviate his pain, knowing full well that such a dose will likely kill him.⁷ Shortly thereafter, the physician injects three syringes full of morphine into his patient and waits to see what will happen. As expected, the patient soon grows significantly more comfortable and his vital signs begin to wane. However, just as quickly as they fade, they recover and suddenly, for better or worse, the patient appears as though he will live after all. Having failed to terminally sedate his patient, the surgeon briefly entertains the possibility of asphyxiating him, certain that his still unconscious patient would never know the difference. However, ultimately the surgeon proves unable to carry out such an act, and he takes leave of the patient, sheepish at his failure to

⁷ In the story, it is not really clear whether the patient is aware of the situation and/or the course of action determined by the other involved parties. I will examine this important ambiguity in greater detail below.

accomplish that which he had set out to do. Upon exiting the room and apprising the family of their husband's/son's status, the patient's mother scolds the physician for his ineptitude and/or lack of resolve, for now her son will continue to live only to suffer.

Of course, this is by no means a value-neutral or objective rendering of Selzer's story. While I attempt to provide a reasonable and relatively comprehensive summary of the actions and events that take place in "Mercy," such a treatment inevitably neglects much of the nuanced detail and ambiguity that pervades this story and makes it both a compelling read as well as a potentially useful text. For, embedded within the form, within Selzer's particular way of framing and depicting these characters and the plot in which they are engaged, is a highly complex investigation of some of the issues fundamental to the ethical controversy surrounding euthanasia. Thus, in order to examine Selzer's treatment of such questions and issues, I will explore "Mercy" in greater depth and detail, analyzing not just the content of Selzer's story, but the very particular way in which the story is written in order to better understand Selzer's treatment of such issues in the context of a much more interesting story than that told above.

MORTALITY

Given that "Mercy" is a relatively short story, not quite five pages long, it is somewhat peculiar and certainly significant that Selzer spends almost an entire page, nearly a fifth of the story, describing the curious deaths of the cluster flies that populate the window sill of the Italian room in which he writes the story. However, embedded

within Selzer's account of these insects and the strangely recurrent back and forth that constitutes their slow deaths is a sort of foreshadowing or scene setting, through which Selzer introduces many of the important symbols and themes at work throughout this story:

It is October at the Villa Serbelloni, where I have come for a month to write. On the window ledges the cluster flies are dying. The climate is full of uncertainty. Should it cool down? Or warm up? Each day it overshoots the mark, veering from frost to steam. The flies have no uncertainty. They understand that their time has come. (P. 70)

In the first two sentences, Selzer lays the foundation for his meditation upon mortality. October falls late in the year, near the end of autumn and the beginning of winter, typically the time year when much of the natural world dies off or goes dormant. Leaves transform from their vital green to more earthy tones before withering and falling from their trees. The lives of many animals change as well, as they either seek some sort of refuge, migration or hibernation, or conclude their natural life cycles, like the cluster flies Selzer describes in this story. However, even as Selzer orients his readers to the natural order and life's inevitable death, he simultaneously tempers the certainty with which he imbues nature, calling into question the dependable regularity of the calendar and the biological life cycle. For Selzer, October represents a sense of active transition as much as it is a harbinger for the bleak winter to come. The climate is uncertain whether to persist in summer's warmth or to move on to winter's dreary cold, and, rather than decide, it chooses both, even during the same day. Interestingly Selzer attributes a sense of agency to the climate, over and above the inevitable cycle of nature, and holds it

accountable for its vacillating indecision, as though it possesses the capacity to decide in which direction it ought to move. In contrast, the cluster flies seem to remain aware of their place, knowing better than to defy the natural order.

However, as one reads on, one discovers that the case of the cluster flies is significantly more ambiguous as well, perhaps suggesting that the cycle of life is no more certain and predictable than the change in climate:

What a lot of energy it takes to die! The frenzy of it. Long after they have collapsed and stayed motionless, the flies are capable of spinning so rapidly that they cannot be seen. . . . They are like dervishes who whirl, then stop, and lay as quiet as before, only now and then waving a leg or two feebly, in a stuporous reenactment of locomotion. Until the very moment of death, the awful buzzing as though to swarm again. . . . Every morning I scoop up three dozen or so corpses with a dustpan and brush. Into the wastebasket they go, and I sit to begin the day's writing. All at once, from the wastebasket, the frantic knocking of resurrection. Here, death has not yet secured the premises. (Pp. 70-71)

Even as Selzer praises the cluster flies' willing acceptance of their determined place in the natural order, he simultaneously seems to suggest that there is more to matters of life and death than one's mere acquiescence to the inevitable end of one's life. Perhaps life possesses some autonomous will to its own perpetuation, and "the frantic knocking" of the cluster flies represents a sort of conflict between the life spirit of a being and an expectant nature. Charles Schuster subscribes to this interpretation, alluding to the "dying flies that refuse finally to give up life."⁸ Or perhaps nature is just not so well-ordered as one is led to believe. Either way, the climate and the flies both seem to

⁸ Charles I. Schuster, "Passion and Pathology: Richard Selzer's Philosophy of Doctoring," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 71.

disprove the inevitability of natural expectation, forcing one to acknowledge the possibility that order is as likely to be artificial or arbitrary as it is autonomous. Later in this story, a similar conflict arises in the case of a terminal and suffering patient who also will not die. However, before turning to recount the terrible ordeal suffered by this man, Selzer makes one more reference to the flies, now explicitly contrasting the manner of their deaths with that typical of humans and marveling at the seeming community of these lower life forms:

No matter the numbers slaughtered, . . . each evening the flies gather on the ledges to die, as they have lived, *ensemble*. It must be companionable to die so, matching spin for spin, knock for knock, and buzz for buzz with one's fellows. We humans have no such fraternity, but each of us must buzz and spin and knock alone. (P. 71)

Here, Selzer celebrates the mortal community of the cluster flies and laments the lonely isolation in which humans typically die. However, given the reversal described above, concerning the indecision of the seasons and the (not so) discrete deaths of cluster flies, it seems possible that here too Selzer might have overstated and/or artificially imposed the reality he describes. As I shall explore below, "Mercy" does not document the slow, lonely death of one man, but instead depicts the agonized knocking and buzzing of a sort of community, all suffering from one man's pain. In fact, Selzer only completes four sentences of his introduction of the reader to his patient before confounding this assertion regarding the desolate deaths of human beings: "He was forty-two years old then. For this man, these have been seven years of famine. For his wife and his mother as well" (p. 71). This family has suffered through this long and painful illness together, and they

remain together now, in the hospital, waiting for this man to concede his violent struggle against pain and death and pass on. However, like the flies, this man knocks and buzzes and spins, rebelling against his imminent demise, whether consciously or not; and, like the flies, he is not alone in doing so.

MEDICAL AUTHORSHIP

“Mercy,” like many of Selzer’s stories, strongly resembles an entry in a diary or perhaps even a medical chart note. In fact, Selzer introduces “Mercy” with a vacationing surgeon, writing and reflecting upon his past experiences as he might in a diary. Such a form is a natural fit for Selzer, who asserts that “[s]uch *keeping* comes naturally to a doctor who writes every day in the charts of his patients, noting down the vital signs—temperature, blood pressure, pulse—recording the appearance of a wound or any change in symptoms, hypothesizing, adding up bits of evidence, making diagnoses, prognosticating, and all the while implying his own sadness or elation.”⁹ Further, Selzer even goes so far as to assert that such a form aspires to something greater than might some other story form:

I have come to diaries both by nature and by training. Every doctor is a diarist: You keep a daily record of your patient’s illnesses, setting down the vital signs, the physical findings, the patient’s “complaints.” You order tests, prescribe medications, express disappointment at worsening and joy upon recovery. Such “keeping” seems to me a higher genre than mere storytelling; there is a life at

⁹ Richard Selzer, Introduction, in *The Doctor Stories* (New York: Picador, 1998), 16.

stake at the center of each tale. Walt Whitman, upon first witnessing the wounds and suffering of the Civil War soldiers, cried out: “This bursts the petty bonds of Art!” I would agree. The best writing I have ever done in my life may have been done in medical charts where the patient is the hero, a character whose very existence is a work of art.¹⁰

Of course, this story, like most works of fiction, possesses a number of literary qualities that distinguish it from a note in a medical chart, including its intent, its tenor, its level of detail, and its method of description. Nonetheless, there are some features that do call to mind a chart note and demonstrate Selzer’s concern for the “li[ves] at stake at the center of each tale.” For example, in keeping with this style is the fact that none of these characters possesses actual identities except in their relationship(s) to one another. Selzer never refers to the patient as anything but patient, man, husband, or son. The women are always the wife or the mother, and the surgeon, who also narrates the story, is always “I.” Schuster also highlights this lack of individual identity as a unique facet of the story, yet he attributes it to Selzer’s desire for “simplicity . . . [in the] telling,” as well as to Selzer’s archetypal and/or allegorical intentions.¹¹ While I do not disagree with Schuster’s critical assessment, I believe he overlooks the possibility that these characters are not named and possess no discernible individual identities because Selzer treats them, in the story, much as physicians typically treat patients in their chart notes. Like a note, this story details the

¹⁰ Richard Selzer, “Writer with Scalpel,” in *The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work: A Collection from the Washington Post Book World*, ed. Marie Arana (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 239.

¹¹ Schuster, 72. Schuster describes the story as a sort of “secular Pieta,” in which the patient represents Christ, having suffered, died, and been resurrected, and the two women signify Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. I will discuss this below in greater detail.

significant features of this patient's hospital stay, the doctor's decision making and consent process, the administration of the determined treatment, and an elaboration of the patient's response to this therapeutic intervention. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, Selzer's story manages to focus upon the characters who drive the story while not actually being about anyone in particular. The reader is given little, if any, personal detail, about any of the characters, beyond that relating to and resulting from the disease process for which this patient has been admitted to the hospital. In effect, Selzer has written a medical tale that is driven by its anonymous characters rather than by actions and outcomes central to the standard chart note. To further this effect, Selzer also eliminates the passivity that typically dominates the language of medicine. Charles Anderson expands upon this conception of "the language of contemporary medicine" in *Richard Selzer and the Rhetoric of Surgery*:

The world or reality shaped by this language is an objective, manipulated place, containing bodies, diseases, and procedures. But it contains virtually no one in the "slots" where particular physicians and particular patients, as agents, ought to be found. They are generalized into broad categories (clinicians, practitioners, surgeons, a forty-five-year-old Caucasian male, the client) or are "understood." "Studies have shown," "gall bladders have been found to be," and "dosages were administered." It is a static, uninhabited, past-tense verbal world in which physicians, like the personalities or selves of their patients, are consistently removed from the actual performance of their work by the only terms in which they can do that work.¹²

In "Mercy," Selzer's surgeon speaks with an active voice, possesses an active role, and plays as discernible and active a role as any of the others in the story. As a result, this

patient's chart note reads significantly differently than it would if it had been written according to the traditional fashion. Rather than writing that "an exploratory laparotomy had been performed," the surgeon-character states, "I explored his abdomen" (p. 71). Instead of noting that "further palliative measures would be taken," the surgeon places his own ego and reputation at risk, insisting "I won't let you suffer. . . . I'll get rid of the pain" (p. 71). The traditional medical chart might indicate that "morphine was/will be administered to control pain," but this is not the case in "Mercy." Thus, in this account of this patient's final hospital stay, the physician is an active and participating agent who can be held accountable for his actions, unlike the traditional disembodied voice that merely describes events as they happen. As a result, the "life [that is] at stake at the center of . . . [this] tale" might as likely be that of the physician as that of the patient.

THE BOUNDARIES OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Early in his elaboration of this patient's condition, Selzer's surgeon refers back to the violent throes of the cluster flies with which he introduced the story: "All night long he has thrashed, as though to hollow out a grave in the bed. . . . In his struggle the sheet is thrust aside" (p. 71). Beyond the allusion to the dying flies, there are other references to death in these first few sentences. The surgeon compares his patient's bed to a grave that he both digs and avoids, vacillating like the flies, near death and yet somehow resistant.

¹² Charles M. Anderson, *Richard Selzer and the Rhetoric of Surgery* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 11-12.

The veiled reference to the sheet the patient violently casts aside supports and perpetuates this resistance, for this is the same sheet that might soon cover his body and face when he finally passes away. By this late stage in this patient's illness, he is frequently compared to a suffering animal that one might seek to put out of its misery. Aside from pervasive fly metaphors, Selzer describes the man's foot as "a beautiful dead animal" and marvels that even with a nearly lethal dose of morphine, the man "still miaows and bays" like a helpless animal in pain (pp. 71, 72). Perhaps when people near the end of their lives, and endure great pain and suffering, they recapture some of the innocence with which children and animals are frequently imbued. As a result, such a patient as the one in the story comes to resemble an animal upon which others take pity. Another possibility for the surgeon's frequent animalization of this patient might relate to the tendency to depersonalize patients that is so common in medicine. I explored this briefly above when discussing the frequent absence of names and identities in hospitals and medical charts. Some equate this inclination with a medical effort to remain somewhat detached from patient and family. However, thus far, there is little indication that this particular physician has used these animal metaphors in any way that might diminish the patient or distance the surgeon from him. The physician seems to genuinely care about his patient, and he openly acknowledges the significant toll that such an illness must take on the rest of the family as well. In fact, it is in response to the wife's pleading "Please . . . we cannot go on like this" that the surgeon moves to take permanent action to alleviate the suffering of his patient (p. 72). Thus, like the cluster flies, this patient is not the only one

who suffers disease and pain, but instead it is the entire family, suffering *ensemble*, albeit to different degrees. Further, it will not be long before the surgeon joins them.

From the outset of this patient's stay in the hospital, pain control had been the sole medical objective: "At the hospital nothing was to be done to prolong his life. Only the administration of large doses of narcotics" (p. 71). The surgeon possesses no therapeutic aspirations or illusions and seems intent on merely keeping his patient palliated by whatever means possible, even as he recognizes that such means might not even exist. It is not long before this possibility becomes fact, and the surgeon acknowledges that, despite his promises to the patient not to let him suffer, "there is no way to kill the pain without killing the man who owns it. Morphine to the lethal dose" (p. 72). When asked/ordered by the wife and mother to do whatever it takes comfort the husband/son, the physician warns them that "[t]o give him any more would kill him" (p. 72). However, within the context the story to this point, this statement reads much less like a protest or a refusal or an admission of unwillingness or inability than it does a statement of fact, a check to ensure that these family members truly understood that for which they ask. They prove that they do when the mother reiterates her demand: "Then do it" (p. 72). Thus, at this point, the doctor and the family members seem to stand in perfect agreement regarding the proposed course of action, and it falls to the physician to carry out their plan. However, it is also at this point in the story, as he begins to make preparations for this extreme act, that the doctor's ambivalence regarding his impending actions, to actively take the life of a man in order to relieve his suffering, begins to emerge. In contemplating these measures, the doctor seems certain, doubtless, about both

their necessity as well as their propriety. However, as contemplation transitions to execution, one perceives the introduction of some sense of caution or taboo. As the surgeon takes leave of the family, he notes that the preparation of the medication “is a thing that I cannot ask anyone to do for me,” and returns with “three *loaded* syringes” (p. 72; emphasis added). The physician’s mandate is no longer merely to “get rid of the pain” (p. 71). It has become something far more momentous: to kill his patient, albeit in the name of palliation, but to kill nonetheless. Further, because of the nature of this endeavor, the physician understands that he has moved beyond the bounds of the medical community, beyond the reach of all “fraternity,” and must act alone. He willingly accepts this charge and understands it to be a part of his professional responsibility, but he acknowledges the transition nonetheless. However, this shift in motive also marks the physician’s lost sense of his original and ultimate mission. Like the suffering patient, alone with his pain and preparing to leave this world for the next, the physician also becomes a sort of exile, waging a lonely and mortal battle against pain, against suffering. As it turns out, it is a battle that the surgeon seems destined to lose.

THE CONNOTATIONS OF KILLING

As he returns to his patient’s room and the women take their leave, the surgeon remarks that “[t]here is neither gratitude nor reproach in their gaze. I should be hooded” (p. 72). This statement, and particularly the latter sentence, possesses remarkable symbolic/metaphorical implications that warrant further exploration. That the wife’s and

mother's lack of gratitude or reproach is noteworthy reveals some of the surgeon's own perceptions of what it is he is preparing to do. Given that he is about to take the life of their husband/son, he expects that they might either thank him, for going above and beyond that which could reasonably have been expected of him and finally putting an end to his patient's fruitless suffering, or chastise him, for even deigning to do something so heinous as to take the life of another, no matter the situation. However, that they do not react in either way does not necessarily reflect their failure to appreciate the significance of the events that are about to unfold. Rather, it seems more likely that they accept, as the surgeon has to this point, his forthcoming act of euthanasia as a necessary and implicit part, however remarkable, of the right practice of medicine. They are not grateful because they believe it to be the physician's job, an extension of his obligation to relieve a patient's suffering. And they are not reproachful because they believe that it is right, that it is what ought to occur, that it is the only remaining option available to their husband/son. Actually the reader might be surprised by the surgeon's utterance of this perception because the supposed position of the family members seems consistent with the thoughts, statements, and actions of the physician to this point. He acknowledges this moral obligation at each step along the way: realizing that the injection of a likely lethal dose of morphine is the only viable option that might even approach pain relief, introducing this option as a possibility in his discussion of the plan with the family members, and assuming the heavy burden of this task by loading the syringes of morphine himself. However, his acknowledgment of the family's gaze and the utterance, "I should be hooded," muddies this seeming clarity significantly by introducing, almost *de*

novo, significant doubt and moral ambiguity just as such important events are about to unfold. Given how inevitable and acceptable the prospect of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia has seemed to this point, for doctor, patient, and family, the sudden introduction of such an image as an executioner's hood comes as a shock to the reader. There are a number of viable interpretations that might explain Selzer's intent in introducing this image, but it has been presented so subtly and ambiguously that there are too few clues, at least to this point, to provide satisfactory resolution. Perhaps Selzer intends to confound the reader's, as well as the characters', ready acceptance of the proposition of euthanasia as an acceptable medical practice. Although wife, mother, and doctor all regard physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia as the right and only course of action, it is essential that they, and the reader, not forget the stark reality of the task at hand. A man's life might soon be actively and intentionally ended, an occurrence that is very rarely tolerated by any civilized society or moral code. Another possibility is that the doctor has begun to wonder about the consistency of this plan with the work of medicine, a matter that he had merely assumed previously. In order to continue, the surgeon suggests that a change of symbolic attire might be appropriate: off with the white coat, on with the black hood. However, at the same time, this allusion to execution brings to mind arguments against the appropriateness of this metaphorical comparison to euthanasia: the act of execution consists of the carrying out of a punishment upon someone who has committed a crime. In order for the hood metaphor to work, the reader would have to believe the patient to be guilty of something, anything. And yet, all of the stylistic clues thus far have indicated the opposite: the patient's utter lack of

accountability for his predicament. If the references to the climate change and cluster flies have been interpreted correctly, one must regard this patient's impending demise as the natural conclusion of a life and the physician's role to be one of mercy, not punishment. Even as the surgeon enters his patient's room to administer the lethal injection, he hears "a flapping, a rustling, as in a room to which a small animal . . . has retreated to die," which again recalls the fated deaths of the cluster flies and reinforces the natural innocence inherent in his patient's condition (p. 72).¹³ Therefore, the conception of doctor as punisher seems inconsistent and unjustifiable, and yet it lingers within the metaphorical subconscious of the story nonetheless. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Selzer has introduced this image errantly, for, according to Schuster, "[t]he choice of words is deliberate: these syringes are weapons. Selzer is executing this man, but out of compassion for his unendurable pain and the grief being suffered by his wife and mother."¹⁴ Finally, it may be that the surgeon is merely attempting to justify his actions by acknowledging the existence of another example of socially condoned killing. Such an interpretation might be supported by the sentence that precedes the reference to the hood. The women regard the physician with neither gratitude nor reproach because they both expect and condone his actions, just as the law does those of the executioner. Of course, this is not to say that state-sanctioned execution and euthanasia are not controversial and/or morally questionable, but, where appropriate, they are condoned

¹³ His acknowledgement of the flapping and rustling also hints at the buzzing resistance of the flies to death and forebodes a trying future for doctor and patient.

¹⁴ Schuster, 71.

nonetheless. Selzer's ability to bring all of this to mind with one well-placed word testifies to the strength of such a narrative presentation and to the quality of Selzer's prose in particular. Anderson points to this "conscious[ness] of the power residing in the complex, interconnected, often-contradictory meanings of individual words" as one of Selzer's particularly praiseworthy talents:

What Selzer accomplishes through the choice of [such a] . . . particularly "multivalent" term is the opening of a rich field of potential meanings that contains all of the elements with which he wishes to deal, but does not limit him to any one of them. Instead, they act and interact in ways that further unsettle readers who search for clues and who become more and more engaged in the invitational ambiguities that continue to build around Selzer's representation of surgery.¹⁵

It is noteworthy that the mention of the hood does not really cause the surgeon to hesitate or waver in his resolve to attempt to alleviate his patient's pain and, perhaps, end his life. The surgeon merely acknowledges this image and proceeds according to plan.

TRANSFORMATION

Upon the departure of the patient's family, Selzer's surgeon reveals the syringes to his patient and promises to relieve him of his terrible pain. Although it is not necessarily clear whether or not the patient truly understands that the injection of these drugs might very well result in the end of his life, the surgeon proceeds as though he has

¹⁵ Anderson, 40.

attained a sort of implied consent and begins to carry out the act of administering the injections. Initially, he struggles to secure the vein into which he will inject this lethal dose of morphine, but once he does, he continues as promised: "I press the barrel and deposit the load, detach the syringe from the needle and replace it with the second syringe. I send this home and go on to the third" (p. 73). As though discharging ammunition from the rotating cylinders of a gun, Selzer unleashes three rounds into the body of his patient and "[i]t is done. In less than a minute, it is done" (p. 73). Given the long build-up, Selzer's surgeon seems almost surprised at the seeming ease with which such a deed is completed. Briefly, he even turns out the light, as though he were a parent having finally lulled a fearful child to sleep. However, such casual ease proves short-lived, for as soon as he turns out the light to leave his patient to his lonely death, something within the surgeon resists, perhaps some recognition of the stakes or his own complicity, having been an active participant: "I turn off the light. In the darkness the contents of the bed are theoretical. No! I must watch. I turn the light back on" (p. 73). Doctor and patient are united in this endeavor, and neither will find fulfillment without the help of the other. The patient requires the doctor's help in order to find relief and die, and the doctor requires the patient's compliance in order to accomplish that which he set out to do and move on:

I am impatient, too. I want to get it over with, then to step into the corridor where the women are waiting. His death is like a jewel to them. . . . My fingers at his pulse. The same rhythm as mine! As though there were one pulse that beat throughout all of nature, and every creature's heart throbbed precisely. (P. 73)

In these six sentences, the physician describes the strong bond that has formed between the two men, even as he hints that perhaps their motives may no longer be the same. His mention of nature and creatures brings to mind his previous observations regarding the cluster flies and their communal deaths. Unlike the isolated and lonely human death with which he contrasted the flies' deaths, the synchrony of the heartbeats of these two men affirms the sense of community that exists both within and outside the hospital room. At the same time, however, the physician also suggests that his motivation might have diverged slightly. Palliation is no longer the sole end for the physician, as he also wants to be able to complete that which he set out to do and to be able to report as much to the expectant family. Embedded in this physician's noble altruism remains a sense of self-regard and concern. Of course, some degree of self-interest may be appropriate, and even desirable in most medical practitioners, so long as the primary focus remains the patient. However, when the focus shifts, as it may have for Selzer's surgeon, the results may not be in the best interests of anybody.

Merely a few paragraphs later, it becomes evident that something along these lines may have occurred, for even as the surgeon watches as his patient's "familiar emaciated body untenses" and his "gaze" grows increasingly "distant, opaque, [and] preoccupied," the predominant emotions expressed by the physician are frustration and disbelief, rather than the relief one might expect given a finally placid patient:

But this man will not die! The skeleton rouses from its stupor. The snout twitches as if to fend off a fly. What is it that shakes him like a gourd full of beans? The pulse returns, melts away, comes back, and stays. The respirations are twelve, then fourteen. I have not done it. (P. 73)

Perhaps the reader might have expected such results, given the pervasive references to the cluster flies and their tenacious resurrections. Here, the narrator continues to allude to the flies, describing the patient as a “skeleton” rousing from a supposedly terminal “stupor” and shaking “like a gourd full of beans,” and he even makes direct reference to the flies, which the patient tries to “fend off” by twitching his “snout.” Further, one can hardly blame the surgeon for his surprise, given the expectations to which all parties had previously been oriented. However, what the reader is not prepared for is the degree of exasperation evident in the surgeon’s statements. “But this man will not die!” is an utterance of almost visceral bewilderment. Moreover, the physician’s reference to the patient’s “snout” not only perpetuates some of the animalistic overtones elaborated above, but it also introduces a previously nonexistent element of disgust. While the earlier described “miaows and bays” might have captured some sense of this patient’s helpless innocence, this reference to the patient’s “snout” suggests something dirty or vile, a pig perhaps, upon whom a fly might land in the barnyard. Thus, such animal overtones are no longer benevolent characterizations, but instead seem malicious, as though the surgeon has begun to turn on his patient. Finally, with “I have not done it,” the surgeon’s frustration and disbelief seems to transform, at least briefly, into shame, or at least disappointment, at his own failure. What was an attempt at a compassionate act of mercy now seems to have become something entirely different. The surgeon has become focused solely upon the act itself and its necessary completion and has forgotten

that from the outset, this act was intended as a palliative measure—a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

MURDER

However, frustration and disbelief are not the only emotions at work in this transitional paragraph, for, in this analysis, I have intentionally omitted the final two sentences in order to emphasize the rich complexity of the surgeon's thoughts and experiences in these brief moments. The remainder of the paragraph reads as follows: "I have not done it. I did not murder him. I am innocent!" (p. 73). Thus, in the context of the paragraph as a whole, "I have not done it" serves as a sort of bridge. Read as a conclusion to the first six sentences of the paragraph, the statement works as described above, implying some degree of frustration on the part of the surgeon, both with himself, for his seeming failure to carry out the lethal injection competently, and, perhaps, with his patient, for his not having died as had been previously arranged. However, taken as an introduction to the final two sentences of this paragraph, "I have not done it" betrays the introduction of some sense of relief, not at the successful palliation of his patient, but instead at the fact that he had not yet killed anyone after all. Apparently, the weight of the executioner's hood continued to burden the surgeon and to a greater degree than the reader was allowed to perceive. Previously, the surgeon acknowledged and seemed to accept his impending role as euthanist, if only because no other options remained for his patient. Although the surgeon briefly took note of the resemblance of the euthanist to the

executioner, the mention was isolated and quickly subsumed within the mantle of professional duty. Regardless of the ambiguity surrounding the moral nature of euthanasia, the surgeon proceeded willingly, suggesting that even if part of him had recoiled at some of the implications of his impending actions, such a conflict was an acceptable cost for what he perceived to be the greater good, the fulfillment of this professional duty and the relief of his patient's suffering. However, now, after having failed to actually end his patient's life with what should have been a lethal dose of morphine, and despite the fact that his patient seems at least temporarily palliated, the surgeon introduces such weighty normative concepts *murder* and *innocence*.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *murder* as "the crime of unlawfully killing a person esp. with malice aforethought; . . . something outrageous and blameworthy."¹⁶ Thus, the surgeon's reference to attempted murder introduces a number of new ways of thinking about his actions, including wrongful, nonconsensual, malicious, immoral, and illegal. In other words, the surgeon's choice of words is significant, and murder is not merely a value-neutral synonym for killing. It is true that there may not be a neutral term to describe the act of taking another's life; however, some are more (or less) loaded than others. *Kill*, for example, is a significantly more neutral term.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *kill* as "to deprive of life" and omits any mention of *crime*, *lawfulness*, *malice*, or *blameworthiness*.¹⁷ Further, typical

¹⁶ *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "murder."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, s.v. "kill."

formulations of common law and morality prevent the easy conflation of the acts of killing and murder by elaborating a number of instances of killing that could not be defined as murder. Killing another person in self-defense is one frequently cited exception, and execution, while a great deal more controversial, at least from a moral standpoint, is another. Thus, with the introduction of this one word—*murder*—the surgeon significantly complicates one’s moral understanding of the events unfolding in the story. Interestingly, Selzer, the real life doctor-writer, conceives of the relationship between euthanasia and murder much differently than his surgeon-character seems to. In his above comments regarding the practice of euthanasia, Selzer claims to support the legalization of euthanasia, as he believes the practice would provide “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Selzer goes on to describe those potential abuses that might occur if euthanasia were legal as “those rare instances where euthanasia shall have been *murder*,” which ought to be “investigated and treated accordingly.”¹⁸ At the same time, the matter of *murder* also crops up in “A Question of Mercy,” in which Selzer dreams that he is being arrested “[f]or the murder of R. C.” after facilitating his death in a fashion much like that attempted in “Mercy.”¹⁹ Thus, there remains some ambiguity on the part of Selzer as author regarding the relationship between euthanasia and murder, but the reference to murder in the story surprises nonetheless. The concept of *innocence*, mentioned in the next sentence, only further complicates the significant ambiguity that

¹⁸ Josyph, 167. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Selzer, “A Question of Mercy,” 38.

has crept into the story. *Innocence* is noteworthy both for its own normative implications as well as for those of its antonym *guilt*. If having failed to successfully end his patient's life preserves the surgeon's innocence, does that mean that if he had succeeded, he would be guilty of something? Of *murder*? It is relatively easy to sympathize with such a position, as the popular association between euthanasia and murder is not an uncommon one, but it seems particularly surprising and inconsistent in this context given that there had been no previous reference to murder in the story: execution, yes, but not murder. One wonders why the surgeon would have consented to and initiated this medical course of action if he had believed all along that he was preparing to commit murder. For the reader, and especially in light of Selzer's comments to the contrary, all of this conflict and ambiguity works to make matters significantly more complicated than one was led to believe by Selzer's surgeon at the outset of the story. Perhaps physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia ought not be considered a potential tool in the doctor's black bag after all.

One final transition that occurs in this paragraph, amidst the swirling ambiguity regarding the moral status of the physician's intentions, is a subtle yet significant shift in the primary concern of the surgeon, and the family, for that matter, all of which now seem to care more for the patient's death than for the control of his pain. As I alluded to briefly above, there seems to be little acknowledgment that the morphine, whatever the expectations of it, appears to have diminished the patient's pain for the time being and that his status seems to have improved, however transiently. The physician moves from frustration with his patient's stubborn vitality to relief at his own innocence to fear of the

inevitable reproof he is certain to suffer in the “expectant” eyes of wife and mother waiting in the corridor (p. 73). Amidst of his rapid transition through such volatile emotions, Selzer’s surgeon seems to forget the merciful intentions that had supposedly driven all of his actions thus far. Instead, it is at this point that the suffering that is of primary concern for the physician becomes his own, and it is the doctor who longs for some act of mercy, either from the obstinate patient and family members or from his own conflicted conscience. That the surgeon’s motivation for his participation in euthanasia has changed goes almost unacknowledged by the story, and the reader, who has become so consumed by the tragic drama unfolding in and just outside of this hospital room, might not even perceive such a transformation. In fact, whether even the surgeon himself appreciates the change is unclear, yet he perseveres nonetheless, stolidly pursuing the same course of action despite the fact that the circumstances have changed significantly.

It is not long, however, before the surgeon is reminded that whatever vital force has kept his patient alive thus far is not about to relent: “I lift the sheet to cover him. All at once, there is a sharp sting in my thumb. The same needle with which I had meant to kill him has pricked *me*. A drop of blood appears. My fresh blood deepens the stain on his gauze” (pp. 73-74). The surgeon’s attempt to cover his patient with his sheet does not seem to be a caring gesture to warm his patient or to respect his modesty. Rather, he seems to be trying to reverse his patient’s actions from before, when he cast the sheet aside during his pain-filled thrashing. As a doctor might when declaring someone newly dead, the surgeon covers his patient in an attempt to force death upon him, perhaps to bury him in the grave that the patient had already begun to dig in his bed. In doing so

before his patient has actually passed away, the surgeon engages in a sort of mortal combat he seems destined, thus far, to lose, and he is wounded immediately, his own weapon having turned on him. Now, both doctor and patient have shed blood during this battle, a reality that unites them in their experiences even as it emphasizes the seeming cross-purposes at which they work. Undeterred, the surgeon seeks another method to accomplish his unchanging goal:

The man in the bed swallows. His Adam's apple bobs slowly. It would be so easy to do it. Three minutes of pressure on the larynx. He is still not conscious, wouldn't feel it, wouldn't know. My thumb and fingertips hover, land on his windpipe. My pulse beating in his neck, his in mine. I look back over my shoulder. No one. Two bare IV poles in a corner, their looped metal eyes witnessing. Do it! Fingers press. Again he swallows. Look back again. How closed the door is. And . . . (P. 74)

Suddenly, it is the reader who is forced to reconsider his or her position, for what had previously seemed like a relatively benign medical act now no longer seems so benign. Is it possible that this, or any, physician would consider such a thing? Is it possible that matters could have gotten so out of hand? Mere moments before, the surgeon struggled with his decision to inject his patient with what turned out to be an inadequate dose of morphine, rejoicing at his innocence and despairing at his failure. Now, sounding more like a mercenary (or a murderer) than a physician, the surgeon contemplates asphyxiating his patient, cutting off his air supply until he suffocates. For a moment, he seems like a man possessed, determined to complete what he has begun, regardless of the method, or even the existence of a viable plan. No matter that the man is temporarily palliated, that the surgeon has accomplished his primary objective in relieving his patient's pain,

Selzer's surgeon presses on, undaunted in his quest to fulfill his perceived duty. And then, in a seeming moment of clarity, the surgeon pauses, and reconsiders: "And . . . my hand wilts. I cannot. It is not in me to do it. Not that way" (p. 74).

Suddenly, what had seemed inevitable now sounds impossible to the physician. Whereas before he had determined that he must keep his promise, regardless of the cost, now the surgeon acknowledges the moral importance of both the means as well as the ends of his work. No longer does his debate solely regard whether or not to facilitate his patient's death, but also whether there are right or wrong ways to do such things. Earlier, the surgeon had little problem injecting his patient with what he believed to be a lethal dose of morphine. Now, however, he is forced to stop, unable even to attempt to end his patient's life "that way." By way of this development, Selzer introduces an issue that typical physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia debates frequently neglect to consider. Most discussions of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia focus upon the issue of whether or not it is ethical for a physician to actively participate in the death of another person, but typically they do not consider the moral significance of the method by which physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia is conducted. Although some might argue that death is death, regardless of method, Selzer's harrowing portrait of a physician who considers taking matters into his own hands when traditional medical technology fails, suggests that perhaps such matters ought to be discussed more frequently. As a reader, regardless of one's position on the ethics of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia, one might sympathize with the plight of the patient and at least follow the physician through his consideration of and early attempt at euthanasia. However, once the injection fails

and the surgeon considers strangling his patient, such sympathy and attention might become significantly more difficult to muster. Rationally, what is the difference? His patient is unconscious and will have no idea, and both methods will result in the same end. All that varies is the knowledge possessed only by the surgeon regarding the whole truth of his patient's death. And yet, there seems to be a significant normative difference between the physician who uses a syringe to kill and the one who uses his hands. Certainly, there is for this surgeon, who was willing to *murder* his patient before by lethal injection, but cannot bring himself to do so now manually. Perhaps to even ask a doctor to kill, regardless of manner, is too much to ask. On the other hand, perhaps it is not. Regardless, by posing the surgeon's dilemma this way, Selzer exposes some of the fundamental, and perhaps irresolvable, inconsistencies that lie at the heart of the debate regarding the propriety of physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia. Perhaps it is sufficient to accept that "[s]ome mysteries are not meant to be solved, . . . [only] deepened."

MERCY

After significant emotional and mental thrashing, Selzer's surgeon decides to retreat, feeling exhausted and somewhat cowardly:

I back away from the bed, turn and flee toward the doorway. In the mirror, a glimpse of my face. It is the face of someone who has been resuscitated after a long period of cardiac arrest. There is no spot of color in the cheeks, as though this person were in shock at what he had just seen on the yonder side of the grave. (P. 74)

Selzer's use of the image of the mirror here is noteworthy, for it reflects the continued doubling of doctor and patient. After having watched his patient rise from the dead, Selzer's surgeon experiences a resurrection as well, having descended briefly into a sort of hell himself. At this point, the surgeon believes that he has undergone something similar to that experienced by the patient: suffering, death, and, ultimately, resurrection. At the same time, Selzer's imagery grows increasingly religious:

In the corridor, the women lean against the wall, against each other. They are like a band of angels dispatched here to take possession of the body. It is the only thing that will satisfy them. (P. 74)

Upon exiting the room, the surgeon encounters the wife and mother of his patient, who now resemble angels as well as Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary and have come to retrieve the body of their loved one and take him home, to Heaven.²⁰ In conceiving of the women in such a way, and thereby portraying himself as a sort of Judas figure, who has betrayed and failed his Christ-like patient, Selzer's surgeon emphasizes the ultimate significance of his moral failure:

“He didn’t die,” I say. “He won’t . . . or can’t.” They are silent.

“He isn’t ready yet,” I say.

“He *is* ready,” the old woman says. “*You* ain’t.” (P. 74)

²⁰ Schuster, 72.

Despite the surgeon's excuses, the patient's mother rebuffs his attempts to blame the patient for the events that have come to pass, insisting instead that it was his fault and not the patient's. According to Schuster, "the narrative ends . . . with the mother condemning Selzer for his inadequacy, censuring him for his failure of nerve."²¹ I agree that the mother is certainly chastising the surgeon for his failure. However, I disagree about the nature of that failure, for, in light of all of the religious imagery, it may not, or may not only, be nerve that the physician lacks, but, rather, faith. By faith, I do not mean to insert an overtly religious concept into this ethical critical discussion. Rather, I mean to describe something less spiritual. While *nerve* adequately captures the surgeons' reticence, it seems to imply that there exists some significant degree of uncertainty on the part of the physician regarding the right course of action and his implied role. However, this does not seem to be the case in the story, for the surgeon seems to know all along that he is doing, or at least aspiring to do, that which is right, or at least the best that is possible. Selzer's surgeon seems incapable of action even though he knows that he is trying to be and do good. Such a concept as *faith* seems more apt to capture this aspect of the surgeon's plight more accurately, while at the same time incorporating Selzer's developing religious overtones. Thus, at this point, the story comes full circle, for it is no longer the patient who requires the act of mercy, but instead it is the physician. In concluding this story with more explicit hints of religious allegory, Selzer expands and deepens the common cultural connotation of the word *mercy*, helping it to rise above the

²¹ Ibid.

mere “compassionate treatment of those in distress” to become “a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion.”²² In doing so, he also helps the practice of medicine to transcend its similarly rote public identity by implying that there is a great deal more to the practice than mere bodily repair. More than anything else, “Mercy” is the story of a physician trying his best to do what is right. Although “the moral crisis . . . is unresolvable, and Selzer appropriately offers no answer,” this is not to say that no answers are possible. After experiencing “Mercy,” a reader knows a great deal more about the true nature of some of the ethical dilemmas that make such matters as physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia so difficult.²³ Despite its inability to offer readers “the right answer,” “Mercy” serves to bring to the surface some of the issues upon which such questions depend, and, as a result, a reader is likely to leave “Mercy” knowing a great deal more about the crux of the euthanasia issue than he or she did going in. Thus, despite the glaring absence of any sort of resolution or determination of “right answers” from such a discussion, the possibility of improved understanding remains distinct and exceedingly valuable. Perhaps, in ethics, this is all for which one can hope.

²² *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. “mercy.”

²³ Schuster, 72.

CHAPTER 6: THE REALITIES OF “ABORTION”

Like physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia, which I examined in some detail in the previous chapter, abortion is a controversial ethical issue that is relevant to the practice of medicine and frequently addressed as a part of most medical schools' medical ethics curricula. However, also like physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia and other matters concerning mortality and personhood, the question of abortion frequently defies traditional rationalistic analysis as a result of the numerous other compelling appeals at work in such an issue. One might easily and reasonably assert that the practice of abortion violates sacrosanct values inherent in the practice of good medicine, chief among which is the prohibition against the intentional destruction of an innocent life that inevitably results from the procedure, regardless of the ethical or legal status of that life. This position might be even stronger when referring to circumstances in which the health or life of the mother is not in jeopardy. This question regarding the propriety of abortion becomes even more relevant when one considers some of the more controversial scenarios such as late-term abortions and abortions for the sake of gender or trait selection. On the other hand, there are strong arguments in favor of abortion that take into account the autonomy of the mother, the social conditions into which a child will be born, and the circumstances that resulted in pregnancy in the first place, such as rape or incest. All of these arguments make rational claims that may be more or less compelling depending upon the particular circumstances of the case at hand. And yet, despite the existence of numerous rational arguments for and against abortion, there remain a

number of other equally relevant and persuasive appeals that people make in considering the ethics of abortion. Religion is perhaps the most frequent appeal made by participants who frequently possess more conservative ideas about the propriety of abortion.

However, many others may appeal to vitalism and the sanctity of human life without delving into religious arguments. Like euthanasia, abortion remains far too significant a matter for rational determination to be a sufficient arbiter for every person. Further, I maintain that there is a great deal more at stake in such deliberation than rational arguments can ever fully account for. In “Abortion,” Selzer considers the matter descriptively, in an attempt to appreciate and elaborate upon exactly what is at stake when people consider abortion, for it is only with as rich an understanding as possible that people might responsibly make value judgments about the matter. Without this understanding, such a decision would be ill informed and therefore short-sighted. In this chapter, I will examine Selzer’s “Abortion” in an attempt to understand his intended and actual accomplishments with this work, in part to appreciate what such a work might contribute to the understanding and subsequent ethical deliberation of its readers.

ESSAY OR STORY?

In “Abortion,” as in “Mercy,” Selzer constructs his story carefully, taking time to set the scene and orient the reader before launching into the substance of his work. In “Mercy,” this means beginning the story with a surgeon-writer in an exotic room, reflecting upon and writing about an encounter with a patient from some time in the past.

Selzer introduces the themes that pervade the story early on, as the surgeon-character reflects upon the limits and tenacity of life in the context of the cluster flies that die upon a nearby window sill. Thus, when, pages later, the reader finally encounters the dying patient for whom life *and* death are also a struggle, he or she is somewhat prepared, having been introduced to these themes by way of the allusive flies of the previous section. In “Abortion,” Selzer takes a similar tack. Although the story is only eight pages long, the first three deviate significantly from the section around which the work is primarily focused. Selzer begins the piece with the following introduction:

Horror, like bacteria, is everywhere. It blankets the earth, endlessly lapping to find that one unguarded entryway. As though narcotized, we walk beneath, upon, through it. Carelessly we touch the familiar infected linen, eat from the universal dish; we disdain isolation. We are like the newborn that carry immunity from their mothers’ wombs. Exteriorized, we are wrapped in impermeable membranes that cannot be seen. Then one day, the defense is gone. And we awaken to horror.¹

From the beginning, Selzer confronts his readers with the ideas that life contains inevitable horrors and that people, typically going about their lives as though this were not the case, will inevitably be confronted with these horrors, most frequently when they least expect it. Implicit within this introduction is an integration of descriptive and normative concepts that is a common narrative technique in Selzer’s work. He equates bacteria, here merely a descriptive and value-neutral concept (though this is perhaps

¹ Richard Selzer, “Abortion,” in *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (1974; reprint, San Diego: Harvest, 1996), 153. All subsequent references to “Abortion” in this chapter will be cited parenthetically in the text.

surprising for a surgeon for whom antisepsis in a continual preoccupation), with *horror*, a concept that bears significant emotional and moral weight. This conceptual union of normative and descriptive is one to which Selzer will return later in this work. Further, Selzer correlates the pervasiveness of horror with human nature, linking it with the human need for social contact and interaction. If it were not for the fact that it is part of human nature to disdain isolation, perhaps people might be able to avoid the horrors that inevitably infiltrate human life. However, alas, this is not possible, for to be aware of the risks at which people place themselves is not a part of the typical human life as it is lived. Finally, Selzer introduces the reader to such concepts as *newborn*, *mother*, and *womb*, employing them metaphorically but, nonetheless, subtly preparing the reader for the exposure to early human life that is soon to follow. He concludes the paragraph by noting that “[t]hen one day, the defense is gone. And we awaken to horror.” Later in this story, one will be forced to wonder whether it would be better or worse if one did not awaken at all, for that is the plight suffered by the aborted fetuses that are the focus of this work. Thus, one question/dilemma that will preoccupy Selzer throughout this story concerns whether it is better to live, and experience life’s incumbent horrors, or to not live, and thereby be exempted from the horrific experiences to endure during life. This question may seem to be somewhat peripheral to the one that seems to drive Selzer throughout this story, but it remains a vital one to the sense of life imagined and elaborated throughout.

In the section that follows the introduction, Selzer alters the narrative style of his story continually and in a number of ways, perhaps the most obvious of which is the

abrupt transition from abstract rumination to concrete recounting. This change, with others upon which I will elaborate below, forces the reader to wonder about the nature of the narrative work that he or she is reading. “Abortion” is one of the pieces that comprises the “Essays” section of *Mortal Lessons*, though its structure frequently more closely resembles that of a story than it does that of an essay. Although it does not possess sufficient qualities to fall clearly within either category, hereafter I shall refer to “Abortion” primarily as a story, for it is the presence of a number of literary techniques that makes the story most effective and noteworthy. First of all, although “Abortion” is probably mostly nonfictional, Selzer seems to exercise a great deal of artistic license upon this nonfictional foundation throughout the story. For example, for the first half of the story, Selzer adapts a number of details from a newspaper article he had read regarding the discovery of a number of dead human fetuses on a street in New York City. According to Charles Schuster, “Selzer is quite faithful to the actual journalistic report, which includes statements from the police and from the associate executive director of the hospital. . . . Selzer, however, did not simply repeat the account verbatim. He altered the tone, added details, created a scene with mood and characters.”² In other words, Selzer fictionalizes the work to a certain degree, not necessarily altering the account in any way that makes it untrue, but nonetheless changing some of the facts. However, perhaps even more significant is the way Selzer frequently changes the narrative point of view through which the reader experiences the story, ultimately and repeatedly

² Charles I. Schuster, “Passion and Pathology: Richard Selzer’s Philosophy of Doctoring,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 66-67.

transforming the reader's perspective.³ Although, at various points, the work reads a lot like an essay, with an omniscient and nonparticipatory narrator describing events as they unfold to an engaged but uninvolved reader, there are several other occasions when Selzer incorporates himself, or a character that resembles him a great deal, and/or the reader into the action. For example, the narrator begins the second paragraph by describing the garbage collection routine where he, and some unknown other, lives: "In *our* city, garbage is collected early in the morning. Sometimes the bang of the cans and the grind of the truck awaken *us* before our time. *We* are resentful, mutter into *our* pillows, then go back to sleep" (p. 153; emphasis added). What is peculiar about these sentences is that they possess plural subjects, and they are markedly different, more local, more specific, than the *we* referred to in the first paragraph, who is more global and all encompassing, likely referring to all of humanity. The reader cannot be presumed to be included in this later *we*, for the author is no longer describing some shared, collective, human experience, but instead is describing a unique experience, shared only by those living in this place or one like it. Who is this other person to whom the narrator refers? Who else is narrating? One expects the continued narration of the surgeon who has narrated all of the preceding lessons, but the identity of this person (or people) is left unclear. Regardless, the tension created by this abrupt change in point of view, despite the continued use of the first person plural, is left unresolved, and shortly thereafter the narrative perspective shifts to describe the third person plural "people of 73rd Street near

³ Ibid., 67.

Woodside,” which, incidentally, is the location of the actual events that transpire in the newspaper article that Selzer is adapting: “When at last *they* rise from their beds, dress, eat breakfast, and leave their houses for work, *they* have forgotten, if *they* had ever known, that the garbage truck had passed earlier that morning. The event has slipped into unmemory, like a dream” (p. 153; emphasis added). Where before it was *we* who had awakened to the commotion of the garbage trucks, now it is *they* who have gone about their day and forgotten the early morning intrusion. It is also noteworthy that here Selzer subtly refers back to the existential omen presented in the first paragraph. By describing the typical day-to-day, week-to-week rigmarole of city life, inundated with such events as garbage collection that enter and exit one’s consciousness without even awareness, Selzer creates an opportunity for the opposite to happen, for the subjects’ guard to fall away and allow the horror lying in wait to intervene. Most of such events as the garbage collection might typically slip away into unmemory, but that does not preclude the possibility of the occasional horrific one that will not. Nonetheless, this point of view is also short-lived, as the narrator abruptly shifts to another: “*They* close their doors and descend to the pavement. It is midsummer. *You* measure the climate, decide how *you* feel in relation to the heat and humidity. *You* walk toward the bus stop. Others, *your* neighbors, are waiting there. It is all so familiar” (pp. 153-54; emphasis added). Suddenly, and without warning, the reader has been made a character, a participant in the story. No longer can he or she merely sit by and watch as someone else, the narrator of the story, or the characters that he describes, experience the events as they unfold. Rather, Selzer has “pulled” the reader “forcefully into the scene” and, in doing so, has transformed the

descriptive essay into something more experiential, something more akin to a fictional story in which the reader is immersed and with which he or she identifies.⁴ Like much of the rest of Selzer's corpus, and as I described in greater detail in chapter 5, "Abortion" reads like a sort of blended form of writing, situated somewhere between fiction and nonfiction—a work based largely upon the real-life experiences of a surgeon-writer who may have altered some facts to make the account more true. Thus, through such a story as "Abortion," Selzer seeks to make evident just how much more is essential to truth than merely the facts.

"FETUSES IN STREET" AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE⁵

For the remainder of the first part of "Abortion," Selzer describes *your* experience, the reader's experience, in the neighborhood street following the beginning of a typical morning:

It is all so familiar. All at once you step on something soft. You feel it with your foot. Even through your shoe you have the sense of something unusual, something marked by a special "give." It is a foreignness upon the pavement. Instinct pulls your foot away in an awkward little movement. You look down, and you see . . . a tiny naked body, its arms and legs flung apart, its head thrown back, its mouth agape, its face serious. A bird, you think, has fallen from its nest. But there is no nest here on 73rd Street, no bird so big. It is rubber, then. A model, a . . . joke. Yes, that's it, a joke. And you bend to see. *Because you must.* And it is no joke. Such a gray softness can be but one thing. It is a baby, and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. According to Schuster, "Fetuses in Street: Horrible" was the title of the newspaper article from which Selzer adapted the first section of this essay.

dead. You cover you mouth, your eyes. You are fixed. Horror has found its chink and crawled in, and you will never be the same as you were. Years later, you will step from a sidewalk to a lawn, and you will start at its softness, and think of that upon which you have just trod. (P. 154; emphasis added)

Here, the horror to which Selzer alluded has become reality. He has transitioned from his abstract prediction to an utterly shocking concrete reality, and he has also made real, visceral even, that which results from the act with which he titles this story. This fetus, this baby, is the product of abortion, a practice that can seem substantially less horrifying when considered in the context of an abstract argument, as it most often is. Here, we can feel the special “give” of the dead human body, and we must look, for to refrain from doing so would make us less human than the dead fetus upon which we have stepped. One sense that seems to pervade Selzer’s story is a sort of awe at how easy it has become to refrain from truly understanding such matters when they are considered in the security of abstract contemplation. Now we know how the dead babies that result from abortions look, how they feel, and though they differ slightly, perhaps even significantly, from one’s expectations of the looks of a human baby, they remain undoubtedly human.

Over the course of the next paragraph, one becomes acutely aware of the metaphorical significance of the seemingly innocuous choice of words Selzer uses to describe these objects of attention:

“Look,” they say, “it’s a *baby*.” There is a cry. “Here’s another!” and “Another!” and “Another!” And you follow with your gaze the index fingers of your friends pointing from the huddle where you cluster. Yes, it is true! There *are* more of these . . . *little carcasses* upon the street. And, for a moment, you look up to see if all *the unbaptized sinless* are falling from Limbo. (P. 154; emphasis added)

It is not until an entire page later that the word *fetus* is broached, and even then it is in a statement issued by the hospital director on whose watch this horrific mistake was made. In the meantime, the narrator has referred to the dead beings in the street as “babies,” “carcasses,” and “the unbaptized sinless.” While it is clear that Selzer regards the words used to describe these children as significant and deeply meaningful, the narrator’s subsequent vacillation regarding how best to refer to them demonstrates the deep ambiguity surrounding their status. The term *baby* is particularly value-laden, given its rich connotative place in elaborations of human culture. Who would kill a baby? How could one do so? Babies are innocents who are wholly dependent upon their parents until they attain an age and level of maturity that allows them to become parents themselves in turn. And yet, here they are littering the street and being stepped upon by pedestrians going about their typical workday routines. Moreover, the narrator’s descriptions of these beings do not sound like those typically afforded human babies. According to the evidence with which Selzer presents the reader, these are gray and resemble rubbery birds. Thus, despite its callous overtone, perhaps the word *carcass* is really not far off, referring merely to the bodily remains of a dead creature. However, at the same time, there remains little doubt in the narrator’s mind that this thing is human, despite his many attempts to persuade himself otherwise: “A bird, you think. . . . It is rubber, then. . . . A model, a . . . joke” (p. 154). The narrator reaches desperately for some alternative possibility to describe this thing upon which he has stepped, upon which *the reader* has stepped. And yet, all along it seems somehow you must have known: “And you bend to

see. Because you must. And it is no joke. Such a gray softness can be but one thing. It is a baby, and dead” (p.154). At this point, before reflecting upon the implications of this reality, the narrator seems resolute, as indicated by the short declarative sentences with which he or she comes to this realization. Whatever these bodies are, they were certainly human, and, therefore, the idea of their being in the street is simply inconceivable.

Throughout the remainder of the section, Selzer continues to marvel at the extreme and opposite positions maintained by various parties involved in the debacle, as though metaphorically evaluating the frequently unwavering and absolute positions maintained by those engaged in the typically two-sided debate regarding the ethics of abortion. However unconscionable the narrator finds the situation that has dead babies littering the street, he finds similarly shocking the actions and attitudes of those professional types whose role it is to clean up and explain the catastrophe. His first target is the police who have been dispatched to collect babies and restore order in the streets: “There are police. They know what to do. They rope off the area, then stand guard over the enclosed space. They are controlled, methodical, these young policemen. Servants, they do not reveal themselves to their public master; it would not be seemly” (p. 154). How can they remain so calm, orderly, and businesslike in light of such horrific circumstances? How do they “know what to do”? Have they ever experienced such events in the past, collecting the remains of dead babies from the street? The narrator briefly acknowledges that not all of the policemen seem so unfeeling: “Yet I do see their pallor and the sweat that breaks upon the face of one, the way another bites the lining of his cheek and holds it thus” (p. 154). Nonetheless, the narrator remains mystified at the

mechanistic behavior of the group as a whole while the passers-by and lookers-on stand by, feeling numbed and battle-weary:⁶

What they place upon the litter amounts to little more than a dozen pounds of human flesh. They raise the litter, and slide it home inside the ambulance, and they drive away. You and your neighbors stand about in the street which is become for you a battlefield from which the newly slain have at last been bagged and tagged and dragged away. *But what shrapnel is this? By what explosion flung, these fragments that sink into the brain and fester there?* Whatever smell there is in this place becomes for you the stench of death. The people of 73rd Street do not speak to each other. It is too soon for outrage, too late for blindness. It is time for unresisted horror. (P. 155)

Thus, the bodies in the street resemble the shrapnel that might have resulted from a particularly catastrophic explosion just as they have peppered the emotional landscapes of the helpless witnesses standing idly by. For the narrator, the events of the day have been so remarkable as to permanently scar the human psyche forever. This is not to say that he, or the reader, will not ever lapse into the blinded complacency from which these events dislodged them, for the power of unmemory, as the narrator acknowledges, is indeed substantial. Nevertheless, Selzer seems to be asserting that so dire are the consequences of having witnessed such horrific loss of innocent human life that one might, in fact one ought, never be the same again.

After the policemen, Selzer quickly finds another foil to provide the counterpoint to this seeming vitalist position. At the conclusion of what the narrator describes as a somewhat “brisk” investigation, the hospital director reports:

⁶ The cavalier attitudes with which Selzer imbues the policemen, and the hospital director below, resemble those qualities that he later explores in the medical professionals engaged in the abortion in the

“ . . . fetuses accidentally got mixed up with the hospital rubbish . . . were picked up at approximately eight fifteen A.M. by a sanitation truck. Somehow, the plastic lab bag, labeled HAZARDOUS MATERIAL, fell off the back of the truck and broke open. No, it is not known how the fetuses got into the orange plastic bag labeled HAZARDOUS MATERIAL. It is a freak accident.” The hospital director wants you to know that it is not an everyday occurrence. Once in a lifetime, he says. But you have seen it, and what are his words to you now?

He grows affable, familiar, tells you that by mistake, the fetuses got mixed up with the other debris. (Yes, he says *other*; he says *debris*.) He has spent the entire day, he says, trying to figure out how it happened. He wants you to know that. Somehow it matters to him. He goes on:

Aborted fetuses that weigh one pound or less are incinerated. Those weighing over one pound are buried at a city cemetery. He says this. Now you see. It is orderly. It is sensible. The world is *not* mad. This is still a civilized society.

There is no more. You turn to leave. Outside on the street, men are talking things over, reassuring each other that the right thing is being done. But just this once you know it isn't. You saw, and you know.” (P. 155)

As though the street scene were not an absurd enough vision of an horrific reality, the hospital director's description has the paradoxical effect of making the event even more bizarre, even as it provides a rational and significantly less visceral experiential account of the event. Immediately, one notices his use of the word *fetus* instead of *baby*, establishing a more medicalized conception of the aborted fetuses than is provided above. These are not dead people or dead babies, but dead *fetuses*. Moreover, they are merely the discardable remains of a common medical procedure. The hospital likely operates according to some protocol for the disposal of these medically interrupted products of conception, just as it would for the disposal of other blood or tissue products. The

hospital director's references to *waste* and *debris* corroborate this idea. Of course, perceived through the lens of the narrator, the hospital director comes across as quite insensitive and callous, but it is possible, and perhaps even easy, to understand this perspective and the existence of a hospital protocol regulating the disposal of discarded human tissue. Nonetheless, the narrator's sarcastic rejoinder to the hospital director's statements seems to tell a different story: "It *is* orderly. It *is* sensible. The world is *not* mad. This is still a civilized society" (p. 155). In such comments, he seems to lament and marvel at the idea that such weighty human matters could have spiraled so far out of control. How could such a practice as medicine, rooted as it is in care and concern, a service profession devoted to the health and well-being of people, have faltered in such a way that aborted babies might be treated with the same amount of respect that one affords a piece of trash? Of course, the hospital director acknowledges that some of the fetuses, those that have reached a particular weight, are buried in the cemetery, just as other people might be, but even this is negated by the absurd admission that other, similar fetuses, differing only in weight, are incinerated with the rest of the hospital rubbish. Are aborted fetuses weighing less than one pound deserving of less respect than those that weigh more than a pound? Why is one group treated as though they were people and the other group treated as though they were trash? Certainly those weighing less than a pound were human enough to be identifiable to people on the street and to evoke shock and despair on the part of those who witnessed such a sight: "Outside on the street, men are talking things over, reassuring each other that the *right* thing is being done. But just this once you know it isn't. You saw, and you know" (p. 155; emphasis added). It is

clear here that the narrator believes, and the reader would likely agree, that something terrible, something truly horrific, has been exposed on this surreal morning. However, determination of *right* and *wrong* requires further analysis.

ABORTION AND THE DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP

At this point in the story, Selzer shifts the narrative point of view once again, this time to the first-person singular, and the narrator obviously becomes that surgeon-character who has guided the reader through the preceding *mortal lessons*. He begins the second section of the story with a sort of surgical manifesto:

I am a surgeon. I do not shrink from the particularities of sick flesh. Escaping blood, all the outpourings of disease—phlegm, pus, vomitus, even those occult meaty tumors that terrify—I see as blood, disease, phlegm, and so on. I touch them to destroy them. But I do not make symbols of them. I have seen, and I am used to seeing. Yet there are paths within the body that I have not taken, penetralia where I do not go. Nor is it lack of technique, limitation of knowledge that forbids me in these ways. (P. 156)

Here, Selzer's surgeon attempts to explain his own existence, his reasons for his being, and thereby conveys that which he believes ought to bind all those engaged in this same practice. He claims to take "the particularities of sick flesh" for what they are: manifestations of disease that a surgeon has been trained to excise or remedy. He acknowledges, and even advocates for, this way of being, even as he allows that there may be other conditions that befall the human body that might extend beyond his jurisdiction: "paths within the human body that I have not taken, penetralia where I do

not go.” It is not that he does not possess sufficient training to accomplish these tasks, but rather that such acts are taboo and to perform them nonetheless would be to violate the code that is implied by one’s endowment with such knowledge and ability. Of course, this might be a legitimate belief, and surgeons, like anyone else, are entitled and even expected to exercise a certain amount of discretion in order to maintain their part of the implied covenant they have negotiated with the rest of humanity. Nonetheless, within this manifesto is more evidence of Selzer’s previously acknowledged tendency to conflate the normative and the descriptive, for even as he claims not to make symbols out of that which befalls the body, resigning such events to the realm of the descriptive, he clearly implies normative judgments in his determination that certain practices, like abortion for example, might transcend that which is typical and appropriate within the practice of surgery. He seems to argue, even as he liberates surgery from such value judgments, that knowledge of that which is forbidden, is implied within the practice itself, and therefore might be known by all who practice the sacred art. Thus, Selzer’s surgeon presents surgeons in general with a difficult task—to just know whether something is right or wrong, is acceptable or not, and to act accordingly. Of course, Selzer’s surgeon might be saved from inconsistency if one can accept that there are such instances as abortion that do not qualify as illness, “particularities of sick flesh,” thereby relieving surgeons of the very dilemma to begin with. However, I believe that such attempts to draw out Selzer’s surgeon’s statements so explicitly might miss the point, for I agree with Ronald Carson that Selzer is by definition a symbol maker and that he demonstrates this tendency with this very work: “For Selzer there is, however, more to

doctoring than being able to look without flinching at all the outpourings of disease and being skilled at taking up scalpel and chemical in the battle against disease, important though these be. His protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, Selzer's surgeon is also a symbol maker."⁷ In this story, the practice of abortion becomes the symbol for this boundary violation of which Selzer suggests doctors ought to be wary. Thus, for Selzer, as for the reader, there is an ever-present tension to be managed between the conception of surgery as mere technical work and the conception of surgery as a practice beholden to higher values, and in considering and managing this tension, Selzer seeks to accomplish that which I explored in chapter 4: to attempt to understand how one ought to live as a clinician. Following this manifesto, the narrator introduces the reader to the setting, scene, and characters that will be the focus of the second half of "Abortion":

It is the western wing of the fourth floor of a great university hospital. An abortion is about to take place. I am present because I asked to be present. I wanted to see what I had never seen.

The patient is Jamaican. She lies on the table submissively, and now and then she smiles at one of the nurses as though acknowledging a secret.

A nurse draws down the sheet, lays bare the abdomen. The belly mounds gently in the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy. The chief surgeon paints it with a sponge soaked in red antiseptic. He does this three times, each time with a fresh sponge. He covers the area with a sterile sheet, an aperture in its center. He is a kindly man who teaches as he works, who pauses to reassure the woman.

He begins. (P. 156)

⁷ Ronald A. Carson, "Selzer's Surgeon as Seer," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 284.

Over the next few pages, with his detailed description of the events that transpire at the hands of the involved characters, Selzer seems to critique the nature of the health professionals', and especially the doctor's, participation in such events. Like the policemen and the hospital director before him, the surgeon performing this abortion seems to be immune, invulnerable, to the horrific nature of the actions he undertakes. And yet, the depiction of this health professional is anything but caricature, for the narrator is quick to comment upon the exceptional bedside manner of this physician: "He is a kindly man who teaches as he works, who pauses to reassure the woman" (p. 156). Moreover, there are several occasions throughout the remainder of the story in which the narrator comments, either explicitly or implicitly, upon the surgeon's consistent regard for his patient's comfort and well-being. Contra Schuster, who characterizes the doctor as "bland, mechanical, correct, unfeeling," he is neither callous nor uncaring, but seems to care deeply both for his patient as well as for the quality of his work.⁸ However, such ambivalence on the part of the narrator only seems to further intensify the fundamental perplexity at the heart of physician-patient encounter. For, though the doctor is in fact kindly and reassuring—the very model of the brand of professional behavior currently en vogue in medical circles—the narrator maintains that there is something significant lacking from his conduct of the abortion procedure. Upon administering a "little pinprick" of local anesthetic to numb the area into which he will soon insert a larger needle, the physician responds to his patient's grimace as follows:

⁸ Schuster, 67.

“That is all you will feel. . . . Except for a little pressure. But no more pain” (pp. 156, 157). Of course, all surgeons want their patients to experience as little pain as possible, but the narrator seems to suggest that this may not be true in this particular circumstance, for without pain, what remains to mark the significance of the event? He may not want the patient, or even the doctor for that matter, to suffer, but he does want them to exhibit evidence of feeling something. With the administration of the local anesthetic “[t]he worst is over,” even though the procedure to end the life of the innocent being that resides inside this women’s womb has not yet even begun (p. 157). Upon the insertion of the larger needle, the patient does exhale a silent “Oh,” acknowledging, according to the narrator, not pain but the fact that “the deed is being done” (p. 157). Yet should not the undertaking of something so momentous as the termination of another human life yield something more intense, more noteworthy than a quiet grimace or sigh of acknowledgement? And where is even the hint of such a grimace on the face of the surgeon? Is this really just another of the various procedures undertaken as a matter of course as a part of the typical surgical practice, akin to a wart or gallbladder removal? Or is something far more significant underway? The narrator seems to maintain the latter point of view, and, as I alluded to above in my comparison of the narrator’s description of the conduct of these various professionals coping with the deaths of human fetuses, Selzer seems to take umbrage at the exceedingly rational and seemingly muted professional demeanor that has overwhelmed the expression of natural human feelings that ought to be expressed during such practices. According to Schuster, “[f]rom

the standpoint of the patient and the doctor performing the abortion, all goes well.”⁹

However, from the standpoint of the narrator, that *all* might go well under such circumstances is simply an impossibility. This is not to say that good things might not occur during the performance of such a procedure, such as the minimization of pain experienced by the woman and the completion of a successful and complication-free operation, but such an operation ought still to take place with some acknowledgement of the attendant negative ramifications that inevitably occur as well.

This difference in perspective is exemplified again at the conclusion of the story in the conversation that takes place between the surgeon and the narrator, in which the surgeon recalls one particular abortion in which the fetus turned out to be slightly older than he or she was believed to be in utero:

Later, in the corridor, the doctor explains that the law does not permit abortion beyond the twenty-fourth week. That is when the fetus may be viable, he says. We stand together for a moment, and he tells of an abortion in which the fetus *cried* after it was passed.

What did you do? I ask him.

There was nothing *to* do but let it live, he says. It did very well, he says. A case of mistaken dates. (P. 160)

As a result of the general absence of quotation marks to separate speech from thoughts and commentary, it is not clear whether “[a] case of mistaken dates” is the surgeon’s comment or the narrator’s sardonic rejoinder. However, whichever it might be, it

⁹ Ibid.

provides an ironic reminder of what is really at stake. Human society, and specifically the medical profession, condones a procedure that takes the innocent life of developing human beings and, as if this weren't enough, realizes and accepts the possibility that such humans might even be able to survive outside the womb of the mother. Further, not only might they survive, but they might *cry*, thereby expressing pain or even emotion and exemplifying their very humanity. That the doctor can recall this tale with a straight face, without even acknowledging the potentially problematic nature of this practice and merely resigning the events to "[a] case of mistaken dates," seems to drive home Selzer's implicit position. Regardless of where one comes down on the matter of the ethics of abortion, one must, at the very least, acknowledge the existence of some tension or conflict. Perhaps even more absurd is the notion that a somewhat arbitrary law dictates whether or not an abortion can be performed. What is the point of such a law if the gestational age of the fetus cannot be determined accurately enough to justify such a law's very existence? Like the law, the ethics of abortion is far too complicated and ambiguous to be left to the delineation of rational principles. It is with this doctor's failure to appreciate fully the significance of his actions, and not with his bedside manner or any of the other typical foci of conversations regarding medical ethics and/or professionalism, that Selzer takes issue. Such impassiveness, such detachment, has no place in medicine, he seems to want to assert, for medicine was, is, and ought always to remain a human endeavor. Perhaps the narrator's discussion of forbidden paths attempts to make matters too simplistic as well. Perhaps what remains fundamental to the practice of medicine is not the existence of a strict prohibition regulating what a physician ought

or ought not do, but rather at least some acknowledgment of one's potential transgression of some sacred limits. It seems only to be here, amongst the acknowledgment of such ambiguity and potential horror, that the best medicine might be practiced.

SYMPATHETIC IDENTIFICATION AND SELZER'S TENDENCY TOWARD HUMANIZATION

Following this brief introduction to the clinical scene and the involved doctor and patient, Selzer's narrator embarks upon an imaginative counterpoint to the exterior version of the events described above. Selzer begins with a transition in the grammatical voice employed to describe the events as they occur to the woman's body. As the doctor begins the procedure, it is clear that he is the one responsible for the actions unfolding: "The doctor selects a three-and-one-half-inch needle bearing a central stylet. He places the point at the site of the previous injection. He aims it straight up and down, perpendicular. Next he takes hold of her abdomen with his left hand, palming the womb, steadying it. He thrusts with his right hand" (p. 157). The subject in each of these sentences is the doctor, and the active verb that follows describes an action performed by this physician. However, shortly thereafter, a slight transition occurs: the doctor "spear[s] the uterus" (p. 157). Although *spears* is an active verb, describing an action of the physician, it also bears metaphorical possibilities that impart something about the nature of the thing being speared. It seems to suggest that this woman's uterus is a living organism and a sort of adversary, something that he has hunted and is now attempting to

subdue or bring down with physical violence. Suddenly, the internal organs of this woman are no longer inanimate and constituent parts of her body. Instead, they have begun to take lives of their own. The narrator corroborates this sense in a sentence that follows shortly thereafter, in which he describes “the muscular wall of the organ gripping the shaft of his needle” (p. 157). Now it is the woman’s uterus that has become the active agent in the sentence, and it is this uterus that is doing the gripping. Such a change might seem inconsequential except that it subtly prepares the reader for the narrative turn that the story is about to take:

I see something! It is unexpected, utterly unexpected, like a disturbance in the earth, a tumultuous jarring. I see a movement—a small one. But I have seen it.

And then I see it again. And now I see that it is the hub of the of the needle in the woman’s belly that has jerked. First to one side. Then to the other side. Once more it wobbles, is *tugged*, like a fishing line nibbled by a sunfish.

Again! And I *know*!

It is the *fetus* that worries thus. It is the fetus struggling against the needle. Struggling? How can that be? I think: *that cannot be*. I think: the fetus feels no pain, cannot feel fear, has no *motivation*. It is merely reflex.

I point to the needle.

It is a reflex, says the doctor. (Pp. 157-58)

No longer is the woman a mere body upon which the surgeon might work. No longer are even her organs active participants in the surgical process. There is an independent life that dwells within this woman, and, with the observation of a couple of subtle twitches of the needle, the fetus has assumed an active, even intentional, role in these events as they

transpire. According to the narrator, the needle “is tugged” as the fetus “worries” and “struggl[es],” and, despite the narrator’s rational attempts to dispel the possibility of such active agency on the part of the developing fetus, he cannot quell this anxiety. Is it possible that such a young being can tug, worry, and struggle? Certainly not, according to the best scientific evidence of contemporary medicine, and yet somehow such reassurance is not enough. Such movements seem to assert otherwise, despite the attempts of both narrator and surgeon to dispel them as mere reflex. According to Schuster, it is by way of this observation that Selzer elaborates his position: “Selzer makes us feel by forcing us to experience the pain of the procedure literally from the inside.”¹⁰ The reader is forced, by way of the transformation of the active subject, to experience not what the doctor is doing, but rather what the fetus experiences and is doing. Then, as if to confirm whether or not such a description is viable given the developmental status of the fetus, the narrator turns to the biology of human development in order to elaborate just what such a being might act and look like:

By the end of the fifth month, the fetus weighs about one pound, is about twelve inches long. Hair is on the head. There are eyebrows, eyelashes. Pale pink nipples show on the chest. Nails are present, at the fingertips, at the toes.

At the beginning of the sixth month, the fetus can cry, can suck, can make a fist. He kicks, he punches. The mother can feel this, can *see* this. His eyelids, until now closed, can open. He may look up, down, sideways. His grip is very strong. He could support his weight by holding with one hand. (P. 158)

¹⁰ Ibid.

This image seems significantly different from the rubbery bird that the reader encountered on the street after it had fallen from the back of the garbage truck. This fetus really looks like a baby, and, although the surgeon again insists that the needle's movement is merely a fetal "reflex," the narrator now *knows* differently: "I hear him [the surgeon]. But I saw something in that mass of cells *understand* that it must bob and butt. And I see it again! I have an impulse to shove to the table—it is just a step—seize the needle, pull it out. . . . Something strangles *there*. An effort, its effort, binds me to it" (p. 158). Then, in what follows, Selzer suddenly shifts the narrative point of view again. Combining his physiological knowledge with his sense of identification with the developing, struggling fetus, the narrator travels into the womb of this woman to describe what life might be like for the fetus at this particular moment:

I close my eyes. I see the inside of the uterus. It is bathed in ruby gloom. I see the creature curled upon itself. Its knees are flexed. Its head is bent upon its chest. It is in fluid and gently rocks to the rhythm of the distant heartbeat.

It resembles . . . a sleeping infant.

Its place is entered by something. It is sudden. A point coming. A needle!
(Pp. 158-59)

This passage is one of significant transition. First, the narrator describes the womb and the fetus from the first-person point of view, providing the reader with an interior perspective he or she could never receive standing idly by and watching the procedure as Selzer's narrator-witness has been doing. However, abruptly, the narration shifts in its

orienting point of view once again, with the narrator now *becoming* the fetus in question:¹¹

A spike of *daylight* pierces the chamber. Now the light is extinguished. The needle comes closer in the pool. The point grazes the thigh, and I stir. Perhaps I wake from dozing. The light is there again. I twist and straighten. My arms and legs push. My hand finds the shaft—grabs! I *grab*. I bend the needle this way and that. The point probes, touches on my belly. My mouth opens. Could I cry out? All is commotion and a churning. There is a presence in the pool. An activity! The pool colors, reddens, darkens. (P. 159)

With this passage, Selzer provides a chilling portrait of the fetus as prisoner, held captive within the uterus of his or her mother and unable to avoid the lethal advances of the physician's needle. Suddenly, a procedure that was supposed to yield only "a little pressure . . . [b]ut no more pain" seems significantly more momentous upon this shift in perspective (p. 157). Then, upon the narrator's return to himself from his imagining of the experience of the fetus, the reader is shocked again, though this time by the mundanity and sterility of the exterior scene as it is presented in contradistinction to the horror depicted previously from the inside:

I open my eyes to see the doctor feeding a small plastic tube through the barrel of the needle into the uterus. Drops of pink fluid overrun the rim and spill onto the sheet. He withdraws the needle from the plastic tubing. Now only a little protrudes from the woman's body. A nurse hands the physician a syringe loaded with a colorless liquid. He attached it to the end of the tubing and injects it. (P. 159)

¹¹ Ibid.

Following the mortal struggle in which the fetus was engaged, this return to the exterior view of the proceedings feels cold, empty, bloodless. The narrator's mention of two different fluids here sets up a stark contrast to the gradual reddening of the amniotic fluid that follows the spearing of the fetus. In fact, the "pink fluid" that "overrun[s] the rim and spill[s] onto the sheet" is likely this same amniotic fluid as that into which the baby's blood began to spill as the reader left the womb. As I alluded to briefly in chapter 4, Selzer's tendency to use horror "and the grotesque as instruments of illumination" is employed to fine effect here.¹² How can the reader help but shudder in horror as the protective fluid in which the baby placidly floats suddenly darkens as it is polluted by the baby's own life-blood? However, here it is not just horror, but also the stark contrast established between the horrifying experience of the fetus and the cold emptiness of the events taking place outside that illuminates. Such sterility is exemplified by the replacement of the bloody fluid seeping out of the woman's womb with the colorless liquid the doctor injects from the syringe. The transition from life to nothingness is nearly complete.

When it comes to such graphic depictions of the violence occurring within this operating room, it becomes essential to assess carefully what Selzer is really doing narratively. According to Schuster, "Selzer here is not engaging in mere imaginative fancy. Nor is he intentionally espousing right-to-life doctrines. That 'Abortion' has been used by the antiabortionists is beside the point. What he intends is to make us feel and to

¹² Richard Selzer, Preface, in *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* (San Diego: Harvest, 1996), 8.

reawaken within us our essential humanity.”¹³ Selzer himself argues a similar position, asserting that “Abortion” was intended to be “a literary rendition of the event, not an argument against the procedure.”¹⁴ In an interview with Schuster, Selzer expands upon this position while reaffirming that his goal was to depict the procedure and its ramifications artistically and accurately:

I wanted the identification [of author with fetus] to be complete because I knew that it would make the piece so powerful that it would be almost unbearable. And I swear to you—done without any prior feelings for or against abortion, and I still have no feelings for or against. . . . The fact that it took on a political flavor happened after I had written it. I was not writing a tract. I was writing an artistic rendering of the event, of the event and its effect not only on the people but on the doctor who was performing it and on the narrator. . . . And I was so relentless, murderously relentless in this case. I wanted to be right there, all of it right on the spot. Not only in the first person. Actually becoming the fetus. I was absolutely relentless. If there was another step to take, I would have taken it. I had to.¹⁵

While I concur with both Schuster’s and Selzer’s assessments to a certain degree, I believe that they betray a somewhat simplistic reading of the story. Perhaps, Selzer is not actively espousing a particular position on the ethics of abortion, and perhaps he went into and came out of the procedure with his rational principles and philosophical open-mindedness intact. Further, I agree that to read “Abortion” as merely another anti-abortion or pro-life diatribe would be an egregious oversimplification. However, this does not mean that “Abortion” might ever be interpreted as an objective or value-neutral

¹³ Schuster, 68.

¹⁴ Selzer, Preface, 8.

¹⁵ Schuster, 68.

rendering of the procedure, were such thing even possible. While one might argue that “Abortion” might present a literally accurate depiction of the event, Selzer seems to underestimate the power of the very language that he values so dearly for its representation of the truth. Although Selzer himself, both in the story as well as in other fora, asserts that he does not possess a static position on the matter and that he sympathizes with arguments on either side of the divide, it remains the case that he believes, and wants to convey to his readers, that, regardless of one’s position, the practice of abortion is morally significant and ought never to be considered value-neutral. In fact, he seems to be saying that the very attempt at neutrality might be among the most egregious of immoral positions on the matter. Regardless of whether abortion might be considered right or wrong, good or bad, the onus of that determination does not exempt one from acknowledging the conflict inherent in the matter. Thus, Schuster’s assertion that “Abortion” ought not be considered an argument against the procedure is mistaken, for surely Selzer does present an argument of sorts, just not the typical rationalistic one. Rather, he produces one that is rooted in narrative for the primary source of support for its claims. Having read “Abortion,” I believe it is likely that Selzer would not oppose a law or rule that would prohibit wholly frivolous abortions, were such a rule even possible. That is, I believe that, removed from all particularity, Selzer would argue that abortions, in general, are wrong and do harm, involving, as they do, the destruction of innocent human life. However, this does not necessarily mean that Selzer would oppose the possibility of the ethical practice of abortion *under certain circumstances*. Inasmuch,

Selzer demonstrates narratively Nussbaum's arguments regarding the noncommensurability of valuable things, the possibility and authority of emotional knowledge, and the inevitability of moral costs in the undertaking of morally significant human acts. Regardless of whether abortion ends the life of a person or merely a clump of cells does not really matter as it relates to one's appreciation of the results. Regardless of the status of the life, something with at least potential personhood has died. Something has been killed. Something has been wronged. But this in itself does not necessarily make the practice of abortion itself wrong, for the overall result might have yielded more good or more right, despite what is lost in the process. On the other hand, it may also be that the result was not worth the cost of the actions that led to it. Of course here I do not intend to make some quasi-utilitarian argument, for that misses the point entirely. Rather, I mean only to suggest that few moral decisions come without cost or loss, and implicit within such decisions ought to be some acknowledgement of that cost, some acknowledgement of the reality of one's actions. According to Schuster, "an abortion demands that the doctor remove himself from the ultimate consequences of the operation; for no matter how idealistic the principles involved, the outcome of an abortion is the death of the fetus, the termination of a life."¹⁶ However, it is exactly this remove with which Selzer takes issue. Because the practice of abortion may be so emotionally demanding is exactly why Selzer would insist that doctors not remove themselves from the reality of their actions, for to do so would be to operate without the sense of that which makes medicine a *human* endeavor.

¹⁶ Ibid., 66.

CONCLUSION

One of the most common complaints voiced by medical students and practitioners about medical ethics and its place in the medical curriculum regards the frequent absence of “right” answers to the moral questions typically encountered in the practice of medicine. Most would simply prefer to be taught what they need to know or told what they ought to do rather than accept the ambiguity that frequently accompanies such matters. Certainly, this desire is understandable and one can hardly blame these students and practitioners for such wishful thinking. Further, such hopes are frequently even encouraged and implicitly reinforced by medical ethics curricula that create the false perception that moral certainty might be attainable through the performance of sufficiently rigorous ethical analysis. When ethics is described as merely the rationalistic application and balancing of predetermined and externally derived principles, it becomes difficult not to perpetuate such an impression. Further, given the nature of medical education, as well as the popular conceptions of medical and legal knowledge, that students possess such expectations should not be surprising. Many believe the disciplines of medicine and the law to be accumulations of fact and truth to be learned and then applied to practical situations. As a result, students frequently possess similar expectations of the practice of ethics and find themselves frustrated when such expectations are confounded. However, missing from this understanding of each of these three disciplines is some acknowledgment of the inherent uncertainty and room for interpretation and variable application implicit in each. From this perspective, ethics is

quite similar to both law and medicine, and yet it is ethics that suffers most frequently from the stigma that often accompanies ambiguity when what is desired is certainty or concrete fact. However, despite the cross purposes at which these conflicting perspectives frequently place ethics educators and medical students, it is possible to bridge this theoretical divide. Perhaps if students could be disabused of this misguided hope for absolute certainty, they might be more willing to accept ethics on its own terms, seeking not certainty, but the best decision possible according to the particular demands of the particular circumstances at hand. To accomplish this turn, it is necessary to convey as early and clearly as possible what is meant by *ethics* when that term is used. Among the most important contributions of Martha Nussbaum's theoretical work in *Love's Knowledge* is her careful rearticulation of the operative conception of ethics around which she focuses her work, asking and attempting to answer not what is right, or even what is right in a particular circumstance, but rather how one ought to live.¹ Then, having accommodated this explicit shift in paradigms, medical students and professionals could begin their education in ethics with a more open-minded, comprehensive, and compatible conception of the subject and, as a result, consider a significantly more diverse collection of resources as they work toward reasonable solutions to ethical dilemmas. Of course, such resources will inevitably continue to include much of the philosophical ethical literature that has grounded medical ethics curricula thus far, for this material certainly possesses an important role, facilitating ethical deliberation and

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 23.

guiding practitioners toward better considered possibilities. However, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, such a rearticulation as Nussbaum's also creates room for the essential contributions of literary works, with their incumbent attention to ambiguity and particularity, in the refinement of one's capacity for moral deliberation.

Throughout this dissertation, and particularly the first half, I have examined a concept that I have called ethical criticism. Although that terminology is not originally my own, I have made use of it in part to serve as a sort of conceptual shorthand to refer to the role that literature might play in ethics education and moral inquiry. Thus, this particular elaboration of ethical criticism cannot satisfactorily be described as the work of one person, but rather it reflects the culmination of the work of several thinkers and theorists who provide invaluable, even essential, insights into this ever-developing introduction of literature to the work of ethics. Of course, my list of contributing philosophers and critics is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely to highlight a few of these essential contributors. F. R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling merit recognition, not necessarily for some revolutionary theoretical development, nor for the proposal of some novel paradigm. Rather, perhaps the most noteworthy contribution of these critics to the evolution of ethical criticism derives from their uncompromising commitment to the idea that literature might be edificatory and their unwillingness to diminish literary criticism to the mere criticism of aesthetics. For Leavis and Trilling, literature possesses the potential to affect the thoughts, actions, and lives of people, and, according to this perspective, aesthetics is merely one necessary, though certainly not sufficient, part of this larger

edificatory ambition. Only with the successful integration of all of a work of literature's valuable aspects might it be considered truly *great*.

Unlike Leavis and Trilling, Iris Murdoch, the celebrated philosopher *and* novelist, does not so easily succumb to the notion that literature might play a role in moral philosophical inquiry. However, despite her resistance to the idea that anything so subjective as literature might affect such a rigorous and analytic discipline as philosophy, she is responsible for a number of revisions to the mainline moral philosophy of her time, which, for her, is too often action-based and does not account adequately for the true nature of moral deliberation. Rather, for Murdoch, ethics might be more accurately described as concerning the "total vision of [one's] life" or the "texture of a man's being," shifting the focus away from an explicit concern with discrete actions and toward a sense of the internal work of a person that guides ethical conduct.² Through such departures, Murdoch paves the way for later advances by thinkers such as Booth, Rorty, and Nussbaum, each of whom advances this reconceptualization of the nature of ethics, thereby creating a substantive and active role for literature in moral inquiry.

Hans-Georg Gadamer deserves similar recognition for his own monumental contributions to the evolution of this discourse, having attempted to ground a conception of human understanding and truth in art. For Gadamer, such resources as works of art and literature incorporate certain knowledge and historical tradition into a form that then confronts the interpretive experience of the reader or viewer. Thus, implicit in one's

² Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society for the Systematic Study of Philosophy* 30 (1956): 39.

experience of a work of art, and especially literature, is an inevitable dialogue between the work, with its incumbent historical situatedness, and the experiencer and his or her place in and understanding of the world. As a result, art becomes a valuable source of moral knowledge, refining one's understanding of the past and affecting one's experience of the present and future. Such knowledge, of course, undergoes continual development and refinement as one encounters other perspectives, other works of art, and alternative interpretations. Thus, with this conception of literature as grounded in a shared *tradition* and discussed within the *hermeneutic circle*, through which experiencers of art and the world refine their own conceptions of knowledge, Gadamer paves the way for a dynamic conception of ethics, rooted in the past and previously articulated knowledge but evolving according to the developing circumstances provided by the present.

I am not certain whether Wayne Booth has read Gadamer or not, but one of his most significant contributions to this discourse, the concept of *coduction*, echoes much of Gadamer's work, though in a way more explicitly related to the practice of literary criticism. According to Booth, *coduction* is a conversational form of reasoning through which one derives knowledge and whereby one's conception of the ethical in criticism is constantly refined by the breadth of one's previous and continuing experience of literature as well as one's discussions with others regarding their experience of the same works of literature. Accordingly, "every appraisal of a narrative is implicitly a comparison between the always complex experience we have had in its presence and

what we have known before.”³ Nussbaum summarizes Booth’s coduction as the complex interaction of “principle, concrete experience, and advice from one’s friends,” all of which affect one another as they are revised over time to reflect an evolving and, therefore, more complete conception of practical wisdom.⁴ As a result of the implicit pluralistic conception of ethics that grounds coduction, Booth’s vision guarantees a rich, revisable, and therefore responsible conception of practical ethics and demonstrates a certain dynamic superiority over more traditional deductive and static conceptions of ethics.

Like Booth, Northrop Frye also grounds his claims for literature and its edificatory potential in a vaguely hermeneutic conception of moral inquiry. He regards literature as a valuable source of material with which people might refine their moral vision, allowing them “to look at contemporary social values with the detachment of one who is able to compare them in some degree with the infinite vision of possibilities presented by culture.”⁵ Implicit within this vision of literature and culture is an accumulation of historical traditions, which must then to be brought to bear on any critical interpretation of literature. Thus, when performed with sufficient regard for the work of literature itself and the implicit cultural traditions manifested in such work, ethical criticism can actually refine a person’s moral vision, and, perhaps to a degree

³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 71.

⁴ Nussbaum, 234.

⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 348.

superior to that possible through actual experience, given the infinite varieties of this vision presented in and through literature. Through increasing and careful exposure to a variety of works, ethical criticism actually has the potential to refine one's moral foundation, making one's "critical responses" increasingly "sensitive and accurate."⁶ Of course, none of this is to suggest that Frye regards literature merely instrumentally. Far from it: it is the failure of a reader to attend adequately to the text itself that he finds most deplorable. However, given a reader's adequate attention to the particularities of a work itself, Frye insists literature cannot help but affect its readers as people.

Richard Rorty's contributions to the ethical critical discourse relate less explicitly to the practical work of ethical criticism and have more to do with the nature of moral inquiry in general. Of course he, like the others described above, suggests that literature might significantly improve the way ethics is done, shifting the focus of moral inquiry away from philosophy's traditional and typical essentialism and toward the unique features of the literary novel: "[g]rasp of detail, enthusiasm for narrative, comprehension of accident alongside purpose, surprise as well as design."⁷ However, Rorty advocates a more significant departure with his desire to see the distinctions that traditionally separate philosophy from literature as source matter for moral inquiry abolished. For Rorty, both philosophy and literature ultimately serve the same purpose: the *redescription* or refinement of one's *final vocabulary*—the "set of words which . . . [people] employ to

⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 104.

⁷ Peter Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel: A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 17.

justify their actions, their beliefs, their lives; . . . the words in which we tell . . . the story of our lives.”⁸ Though he would likely acknowledge, at least on some level, the differences between the typical styles of literary and philosophical writing, he insists that this stylistic difference does not make literature less useful. Rather, literature offers its readers a great deal more than traditional philosophy through its ability to demonstrate “what people are experiencing when they are humiliated . . . or treated cruelly” and its depiction of an almost unlimited number of “moral possibilities.”⁹ Unlike literature, philosophy does not go far enough in this descriptive capacity.

Finally, with Nussbaum comes the culmination of this ethical critical endeavor. As a result of her facility with the language of literary criticism and her understanding of the work of moral philosophy, Nussbaum bridges these two realms in a way unrivaled by these other thinkers. Because of philosophical ethics’ entrenched place in moral discourse and ethics education, I do not intend, in this dissertation, to go as far as Rorty does in his disavowal of the differences between literature and philosophy. Rather, based on the model provided by Nussbaum, I mean merely to suggest that literature might make an additional essential contribution to the conception of ethics in medicine. In her work, Nussbaum makes several invaluable contributions, including her insistence upon the interrelationship of form and content in the estimation of the ethical value of a work; the noncommensurability of valuable, and frequently mutually exclusive, ethical goods; the

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

⁹ Johnson, 146.

essential role of perception above and beyond the existence of general principles in one's evaluation of a particular situation; and the substantive role for the emotions in one's deliberation regarding ethical matters. Like Nussbaum, I maintain that each of these elements contributes something invaluable and essential to a broad conception of ethics that aspires to more than the mere rationalistic application of philosophical principles to ethical problems. Through this lens, the practice of ethics might actually extend to consider how we ought to live, and, through this revision, the problems of medical ethics need not remain so frustratingly short-sighted and unsatisfactory.

Then, once one has accepted this revision to the operative conception of ethics at work in medical education and the subsequent expansion of the resources available for such inquiry, one's task becomes the determination of which resources might be worthwhile and why. Although one might make a strong case that there exists a vast body of literature that is capable of enriching medical ethical reflection, I maintain, as I have asserted throughout the latter part of this dissertation, that such work as that of Richard Selzer might prove particularly valuable, in part as a result of its particular and explicit relevance to the practice of contemporary medicine. In order for students and practitioners to accept a certain amount of ambiguity as inherent in the work of medical ethics, it seems important, at least initially, not to strain the credulity of students with one's choice of literary supplementation. For example, with such stories as "Mercy" and "Abortion," examined above in significantly greater detail, Selzer provides candid and imaginative examinations of two controversial medical ethical issues that remain of great concern to the contemporary practice of medicine: physician-assisted suicide/euthanasia

and abortion. Although his presentations of these issues are themselves controversial and biased by his own particular experience and education, requiring careful criticism and conversation, they also possess the potential to provide unique insight into these ethical matters that might not be attainable elsewhere. In “Mercy,” Selzer depicts the struggles of a physician who has been asked by a patient’s family to put an end to the suffering, and likely the life, of his patient. As he attempts to fulfill this request, Selzer’s surgeon also suffers tremendously as a result of the weighty dilemma he is forced to navigate. However, through Selzer’s methodical development of this experience, his surgeon reveals a great deal about the trials and tribulations of a particular physician beset by such difficult circumstances. Despite the uniqueness of Selzer’s surgeon’s situation, Selzer’s imaginative depiction of this dilemma in “Mercy” remains an invaluable resource for examination and contemplation. Likewise, in “Abortion,” Selzer describes the impressions of a physician, presumably himself, witnessing an abortion for the first time in his professional career. At the same time, however, Selzer complicates and enriches this rendering with his attempts to provide alternative perspectives, including a first-person depiction of the experience of a human fetus during an abortion as well as an episode in which he describes the effect of the discovery of a number of dead human fetuses upon an early morning city street in order to demonstrate how truly surprising and horrific the effects of an abortion might actually seem when removed from their traditional medicalized environs. As with euthanasia, Selzer does not come out and say, explicitly, whether abortion is right or wrong, for that is not the role of narrative art as he

conceives it. Rather, he merely attempts to present in such scenarios ways that reveal what he believes actually occurs in such circumstances and to stimulate active reflection.

One of the most pervasive and relevant ethical critical elements present in my reading of these stories regards Nussbaum's articulation of the noncommensurability of valuable things and the inevitable moral cost that results from difficult choices. Through her theory and his stories, Nussbaum and Selzer both acknowledge how few significant moral choices can be made without some incumbent moral loss, regardless of the ethical value of the ultimate choice. In "Mercy," despite the surgeon's belief that his decision to facilitate the death of his patient is likely the best one possible, upholding many of the medical principles that he holds most dear, including the attempt to rescue his patient from the interminable suffering that has ultimately consumed his life, he acknowledges he could not complete an act without enduring some inevitable moral cost. Had he actually succeeded in bringing this man's life to an end, would he have done the right thing? Is it ever permissible for a doctor to kill? Might there not be some other option? Each of these questions would likely have plagued the surgeon long after the death of his patient, forcing him to reconcile a conception of medicine that cannot always cure with a doctor who is willing and able to kill. At the same time, his ultimate failure to follow through with his intended plan to end his patient's life and suffering imposes its own psychic and moral ramifications. He must persevere and accept that he might have failed his patient as a result of his own inability to do everything within his power to help him. He must go on to face his patient's wife and mother and tell them the same, that he failed them as well as their loved one. Similarly, in "Abortion," Selzer's surgeon himself

acknowledges that there are inevitable occasions when abortion may really be the best of the options available to a particular person in a particular circumstance. However, here again, Selzer insists that such knowledge does not save one from the moral ramifications implicit in such an act. Regardless of the reason, abortion inevitably results in the intentional death of an innocent and exceedingly vulnerable human life. That life still perishes, regardless of whether the involved parties made the best decision available to them or not.

Another of the overarching ethical critical themes that pervades my reading of these stories is Nussbaum's conception of the value of the emotions and emotional knowledge to the ideal conduct of truly ethical deliberation. In "Mercy," Selzer's surgeon does not turn to ethical principles or philosophical scholarship in his deliberation about the decision that confronts him. Rather, it is clear that this surgeon employs all of the knowledge and medical experience available to him to fully appreciate this potential situation, and he allows his feelings to help determine the best course of action. Of course, this surgeon's emotions remain somewhat conflicted throughout, as one would expect given such difficult circumstances. However, ultimately, it is his emotional resolve that remains his guide. Initially, as he wonders whether or not to administer the injection that will likely kill his patient, Selzer's surgeon determines that he would be justified to do so, largely because it *feels* right. Later, it is this same reservoir of emotion that stays his hand as he considers strangling his patient when the drugs fail. To do so *feels* wrong, and he cannot do it—not like that. Despite Selzer's later assertion that the physician depicted in this story is ultimately a coward for having failed to accomplish

that which he had set out to do, it seems relatively apparent within the story that Selzer's surgeon recognizes a clear qualitative distinction between this particular act and that which he had previously promised to perform. Whether or not such a distinction should have provided sufficient reason to stay the surgeon's hand does not matter. Rather, what matters is that, in the context of this surgeon, in this story, it did, and it is the existence and nature of this distinction that remains interesting. Selzer seems to assert that, in such circumstances when the difference between right and wrong is no longer clear, the emotions, operating according to the guidance provided by a strong foundation of tradition, experience, and ethical knowledge, might be the only true guide to which one might be privy, and he demonstrates little hesitation in following their lead. In "Abortion," the crux of the moral controversy swirling in the head of the witnessing physician centers upon a seemingly irresolvable conflict between rational argument and emotion. At the conclusion of the story, Selzer's surgeon elaborates the many reasonable justifications for society's moderate sanction of the practice of abortion, and yet these reasons seem to do little to assuage the emotional upheaval experienced by the surgeon as he witnesses the seemingly conscious and intentional movements of the fetus reacting to the invading needle. The surgeon goes on to attempt to imagine just what this fetus might be doing and experiencing, and it is the emotional resonance fostered by this sympathetic imagining of the plight of the innocent and helpless fetus that rebuts the persuasive force of the rational arguments referred to above. The surgeon seems incapable of mounting a rational argument that might convince his emotional responses that they are flawed or secondary, but this does not imply that his emotions have

transcended the possibility of rational control or that they are somehow untrustworthy. Rather, the reader is more likely to give such an emotional response the benefit of the doubt given the numerous sources that have contributed to its refinement: tradition, experience, rationality, and sympathetic imagination. Even if the surgeon somehow misimagines the experience of the fetus, it remains that his attempts at sympathetic identification are reasonable and not beyond the realm of possibility. It is not at all difficult to imagine that a fetus might suffer during such a procedure, and, therefore, it is not at all unreasonable to expect that one ought therefore to exercise extreme caution before proceeding with such extreme measures. It is emotional knowledge that provides the surgeon with this information, and it is this very resource that literature has the potential to refine through the imaginative experience of such events.

In conclusion, throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to demonstrate, both theoretically and practically, that literature in general, and Selzer's work in particular, possesses the potential to contribute distinctively and substantially to the conduct of ethical education and deliberation in medicine. With its unique perspective on the general culture of medicine as well as on specific medical ethical issues, Selzer's work provides an important source for the ethical criticism of the literature of medicine and the subsequent revelation of much of value in and for the contemporary practice of medicine. Given the contributions of each of the above theorists and critics, ethical criticism becomes a valuable tool that restores the practice of ethics to its origins in ancient Greece, when the tragic poets doubled as ethicists. With this return, the work of contemporary ethics becomes increasingly ambitious, seeking to answer not what is

good, nor what is right, nor even what one ought to do, but rather *how* one ought to live, and more specifically, *how* one ought to live *as a doctor*. Conceived this way, the dichotomy between behaving ethically and being a good doctor, put forth by the imagined clinician with whom I introduced this dissertation, becomes a false one, as ethics aspires to unite visions that have typically been considered separately in contemporary philosophical and medical thinking. Through the ethical criticism of literature, ethics has the potential to contribute significantly to an enriched conception of living, and perhaps within this vision of medical ethics, the humanist need no longer seem a curiosity to the practice of modern medicine.

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VITA

John Caskey was born on June 2, 1977, in Vermillion, South Dakota. He is the son of David and Susan Caskey and the husband of Melinda Caskey. In 1999, he graduated *magna cum laude*, from Baylor University in Waco, Texas, with a B.A. degree in University Scholars. His Honors Program thesis was titled “Perspectives on the Integration of the Humanities into Medical Education and Practice.” While at Baylor, John served as President of the Honors Program Student Advisory Committee and was inducted into a number of academic honor societies, including Gamma Beta Phi, Alpha Chi, Alpha Epsilon Delta, Golden Key, and Mortar Board. Also, in his senior year, he was selected as the College of Arts and Sciences Student of the Year.

In the fall of 1999, John matriculated into medical school at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB) and was accepted into the MD/PhD Program in the spring of 2000. After completing two and a half years of medical school, John began his graduate studies at the Institute for the Medical Humanities (IMH) in the spring of 2002. He completed his graduate school coursework in the fall of 2003 with a 4.0 grade point average and two major areas of specialization, Literature and Narrative Studies in Health Care and Health Care Ethics. John also completed a minor area of specialization in the History of Medicine. He passed his qualifying examinations with distinction in the spring of 2004.

During his tenure in graduate school at the IMH, John has been the recipient of a number of academic honors and awards, including the UTMB Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (GSBS) Medical Humanities Endowed Scholarship, the GSBS William Bennett Bean Scholarship in the Medical Humanities, the David C. Eiland, Jr., MD, Award in Humanistic Medicine, the Truman Graves Blocker Jr., Scholar Award, and the American College of Legal Medicine Schwartz Medical Student Essay Award. In 2003, he was invited to present at the national meeting of the American Academy of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery. He has been inducted in the Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society and Who’s Who among Students in American Universities and Colleges and nominated for membership into the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. John currently serves as a member of the UTMB Honor Pledge Committee and the SACS Student Service Study Group. He has facilitated and co-facilitated small groups for the medical ethics courses taught at both UTMB and Baylor College of Medicine.

John returned to medical school in the summer of 2006, having passed his dissertation defense with distinction. He will graduate from both medical school and graduate school early in the summer of 2007 before beginning Brown University’s combined residency program in pediatrics, psychiatry, and child psychiatry.

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