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# On the Banality of Literary Truths

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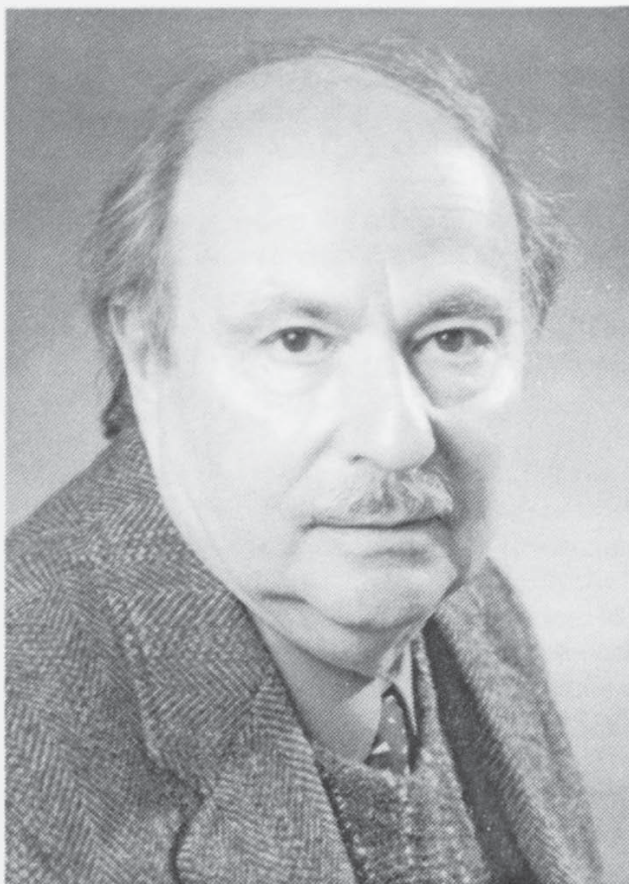
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*Peter Kivy*

# ON THE BANALITY OF LITERARY TRUTHS

Peter Kivy

I am going to defend in this paper a version of what is sometimes called the propositional theory of literary truth, which, I take it, is part of a truth theory of literary value. My goal is a limited one. I intend to defend a very modest version of the propositional theory, and hence a very modest version of the truth theory of literary value. Furthermore, I am not going to defend either of these theories in any kind of thoroughness. I merely want to defend them against *one* possible objection. I have, in another place, already defended them against a different objection.<sup>1</sup> My intention is to continue in this way, objection by objection, until both theories are secure. At my present rate, if my interest does not flag, I estimate the task will take one-hundred-and-fifty years.

Let me begin by stating, in their most general form, the propositional theory of literary truth, the truth theory of literary value, and the objection to these two theories that I want to try to answer here. This will give you some vague idea of where I am headed. After that I will have to do a good deal of refining of all three of the above mentioned before I can get to my real business.

The propositional theory of literary truth says that the purpose of literary works is to express propositions, frequently, but not solely of a philosophical or moral character, which are offered up as veridical. The truth theory of literary value says that a literary work is of high literary value to the extent that these expressed propositions *are* veridical, of low literary value to the extent that they are not. And the objection to this bipartite theory I want to respond to is that, in general, the propositions defenders of the theory extract from great literary works are so banal, so trivial as to be impotent to bestow any palpable value on the works that express them, even when true—hence cannot possibly account for the high literary value of said works.

The first refinement I must put on this general statement of the proposed argument is to greatly reduce the scope of the propositional theory of literature. The version I wish to defend merely says that *part* of the purpose of *some*, but by no means *all* literary works is the expression of true propositions.

The second refinement is to greatly reduce the scope of the truth theory of literary value, which, clearly, is made necessary not only by the reducing in scope of the proposition theory, but ordinary philosophical prudence as well. Because the expression of propositions is neither the sole purpose of *any* literary work nor a purpose at all of *many* literary works, the value of literary works *tout court* cannot possibly rest solely on truth and falsity. Rather, we want to say that *one* of the good-making features of *some* literary works is that the propositions they express are true, and *one* of the bad-making features of *some* works is that the propositions they express is false.

A word now must be said about the scope of the phrase “literary work,” and the ways in which literary works “express” propositions. I am taking the concept of literature and literary work broadly, to include not merely fictional works, like plays, novels, and narrative poems, but nonfictional works, such as didactic poetry and philosophical poems, lyric poetry, literary essays, and orations. I do so because, from antiquity until the development of the modern novel, and modern reading habits, philosophers and critics have done the same, and I think we can learn something from that. (I will return to the point later on.) But I do want to emphasize that fictional works of literature will be, unless otherwise obvious from the context, uppermost in my mind. For they are the controversial cases. It is easy to see that and how Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* or Pope’s *Essay on*

*Man* express propositions, and why one might want to say that that is an essential part of the exercise in these cases, less easy for *War and Peace* or *Hamlet*.

This brings me to the question of *how* literary works express propositions. Following Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, in their important work, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, I shall say that a literary work can express propositions either directly or indirectly: stated outright or "implied" (in some non-formal sense of that latter term).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Lucretius' great poem, on my reading of it, anyway, expresses directly, just as the works of Kant and Hume do, propositions about human nature and the nature of the world, whereas Dostoyevsky's novels do so not directly, for the most part; rather, indirectly, by implication or suggestion. In what follows I will assume that everything I say about the propositions that literary works express concerns fictional literature, and indirect expression, but assume also that everything I say, if true, is true a fortiori of nonfictional works and direct expression of propositions.

I must now say a word or two about "truth," although the secret of what it is, you may be sure, is safe with me. For, to be perfectly accurate about it, I am not really defending, even in a modest way, a theory of literary truth but, rather, what might, I suppose, be called a theory of literary *plausibility*. Let me explain:

Many of you will recall that William James, in what is perhaps his most well-known essay, "The Will to Believe," introduced a distinction between what he called "live" and "dead" hypotheses. A live hypothesis is one that appears to the person who contemplates it as at least a viable candidate for belief, even though he or she might not presently believe it. A dead hypothesis, on the other hand, is one that has no such appeal at all, but is taken to be not a possible option, that is to say, not possibly true.<sup>3</sup> In my version, the truth theory of literary value is not the theory that states that expression of true hypotheses is a good-making feature, expression of false hypotheses a bad-making one; rather it is the theory that expression of live hypotheses is a good-making feature, the expression of dead hypotheses a bad-making one. But, I should add, the considerations on the part of the reader or spectator, as to whether an expressed hypothesis is true or false, is part of the literary experience, *both* because such conditions are necessary in determining whether a hypothesis is living or dead, as well as because, so I shall argue later on, it is *part* of the purpose of *some* literary works to get us to think about whether the hypotheses they express, if they are live ones for the reader or spectator, are true or false.

One further general comment on the hypotheses expressed by literary works, before I get on with other matters. I said that, according to what I guess I should now call the plausibility theory of literary value, it is a good-making feature of a literary work that it expresses a live hypothesis as part of its purpose, a bad-making feature if it expresses a dead one. But liveness and deadness are not the only value considerations with regard to hypotheses. Content also counts, and I have, as yet, said nothing at all about that. Simply put, what needs to be said is that for the expression of a live hypothesis to have any palpable literary value, it must be a hypothesis about something that deeply matters to us. "Perennial themes" are what Lamarque and Olsen call such hypotheses.

Now this stipulation, that the hypotheses that bestow palpable value on literary works expressing them must be important, deeply significant ones, may strike you as in direct conflict with the objection I want to try to deal with here. For the objection is that the hypotheses extracted from the literary works said to express them are too banal to be taken seriously as bestowers of value. But if these hypotheses, when value bestowing, are stipulated by me to be important, deeply significant ones, I am contradicting right from the start the objection I am supposed to be assuming here. Either there is no such



objection, or I am begging the question against it.

The problem, however, is only apparent, being generated by an equivocation. Two senses of “banal” are involved here, in the claims that the hypotheses expressed by literary works, in order to bestow value, must be both live and of deep concern, therefore *not* banal, and the objection that these same hypotheses always turn out to be banal. I shall in the course of my talk, dissolve this apparent tension. For now I let it stand with a promissory note in need of redemption.

It will not have escaped your notice, perhaps, that, in placing some, although by no means all literary value in the liveness of expressed hypotheses, and in the significance of their content, I have, to some extent, relativized literary value. For what is a live hypothesis to one group of people may very well be a dead one for another, and what is significant content for one group of people may well not be for another. The passage of time, cultural changes, the advancement of learning, and many other factors are to blame for that.

Whether anyone will be shocked by this result I don't know. But certainly it coincides with some of our pre-systematic beliefs about value in general, and artistic value in particular. For certainly no one thinks that how we value literary works remains static over time – the fact that the canon changes being ample evidence that it does not. Now whether works gain and lose value, or whether their value is constant, and sometimes we get it right, sometimes wrong, is a nice question. I will not try to answer it here, except to say that if one thinks there are perennial themes, deep philosophical and moral theses that have *always* been of major concern to *all* peoples, and have remained living options always, which may not be an unreasonable thing to claim, then there may be some literary values, according to the proposition theory of literary plausibility, that are permanent, enduring ones.

At this point let me now summarize, in the wake of these rather rambling introductory remarks, what I intend to do in this paper, and then, without further delay, get on with doing it. I want to defend a version of what is called the proposition theory of literary truth, which I will call, rather, the proposition theory of literary plausibility. In defending it, I will also be defending the truth theory of literary value, which I will call, to be consistent with my re-naming of the proposition theory of literary truth, the plausibility theory of literary value. In effect, I will be defending the two-part theory that *one* of the purposes of *some* literary works is to express propositions, frequently moral or, broadly speaking, philosophical ones, which present to us live hypotheses concerning matters of deep and abiding significance. When a literary work succeeds in doing this, it possesses thereby literary value, which I might as well call propositional value. This is by no means the only kind of literary value it possesses, and many literary works do not possess propositional value at all. Propositional value is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for a literary work's being a good or even great work of art. It is but one value among many that a literary work might possess.

I am, then, going to defend the proposition theory of literary plausibility, and, in consequence, the plausibility theory of literary value. But my defense is *specific*. I will be defending it against the charge that the propositions advocates of this view extract from literary works are too banal to be any part of their purpose to express, or any part of their value. I will deal with some related objections as well. But the charge of banality is my **main target**. And now I want to begin my defense by stating the objection in more detail.

## II

Perhaps the best way to present the banality objection is to produce a sample proposition that has been identified as being expressed by a great literary work, and, in relation to it, see what the charge of banality amounts to. I will take a fairly obvious one. Certainly many literary works have expressed it.

Many literary works have, I take it, expressed propositions that center around the issue of freedom and determinism, or fatalism. Some have implied the proposition that determinism or fatalism is true, some the proposition that there is human freedom (supposing the two to be incompatible).

But, surely, it needs no ghost to tell us either of these two things. They are utter philosophical banalities.

Now, clearly, the problem of determinism and free will is a problem of deep concern to people. (Introducing it is one of the easiest ways of generating vigorous discussion in an undergraduate philosophy class.) And for most people, determinism and free will are live hypotheses, which, of course, is why they are seen as constituting a form of philosophical dilemma.

So the freedom/determinism pair satisfies our previously stipulated requirement that for an expressed hypothesis to bestow value on the work expressing it, it must be both live and important. How, then, can it be *banal* as well?

The answer is that it is *philosophically* banal just because everyone who has an acquaintance with philosophy has been acquainted with the problem of free will and determinism since philosophical babyhood. What would make it philosophically unbanal, philosophically interesting would be a novel *defense* of one or the other hypothesis, or a novel defense of their compatibility – or, if not novel, then more thorough and convincing than previous ones. What makes Kant's or Hume's statement of the freedom/determinism issue interesting rather than banal is that each provides a deep and/or original analysis and defense of compatibilism. But that's the problem. Argument and analysis are not the stuff of literary works, at least the fictional kind, which are, it will be recalled, the crucial kinds for anyone desiring to make out a case for the propositional theory of literary plausibility and the plausibility theory of literary value.

Thus, what the defender of these theories must show is how such philosophical hypotheses as "Determinism is true," "Determinism is false," "There is no human freedom," or "Compatibilism is true" can escape the charge of banality, when expressed in literary works, where what makes them philosophically interesting in philosophical works, namely analysis and argument, are absent.

To begin with, it is important not to over state the case for banality by suggesting that the "familiar" philosophical and moral hypotheses expressed by literary works are familiar to *everyone*. The banality thesis is usually put forward by academics – philosophers and literary theorists—to whom these hypotheses *are* "old hat." And we should perhaps remind ourselves that they are not the only audience, indeed not the principal audience at which our great literary works were aimed. To underscore this it might be useful to take a look at the "institution" of literature in some historical perspective.

What I would like to remind you of is that in the ancient world, it was customary to propagate knowledge "at the cutting edge" – philosophical, moral, cosmological, "scientific" – in poetic form. The pre-Socratics, Empedocles and Parmenides, for example, both expressed their world views in poems (now of course available to us only in isolated fragments); and although Lucretius was, in large part, expressing the world view of others, he expressed it in literary form. Literature and knowledge, literature and

truth were not, in those times, sundered.

Nor, as we know, was poetic “fiction” thought separated off from philosophical, cosmological or moral knowledge in the ancient world, much to Plato’s dismay. There may have been, as Plato said, an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy; but there was an ancient alliance as well. Poets were “seers,” and therefore were purveyors of knowledge, whether in a “philosophical” poem like Parmenides’ *Way of Truth*, or in narrative ones like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

I do not pretend to know why poetry was a standard mode of philosophical expression in the ancient world but not in the modern one. Obviously, it has to do with the comparatively small number of people, in ancient times, who could read at all, all in the “educated,” leisured class, the growth of science, scholarship and specialization, the dissemination of the printed word, a middle class, increasing literacy in the modern era – and, I presume, much much more. But the *institution* of literature is an unbroken tradition for us from Homer and Parmenides to the modern novel.

Now it would clearly be committing the genetic fallacy to argue that because there was an ancient alliance between poetry and philosophy, and an unbroken tradition of literature from then till now, there must *still* be such an alliance. But I think the ancient alliance and the sustaining tradition are at least evidence in favor of the notion that, to some degree anyway, that alliance is still in place. So I am much inclined to share the sentiments of Martha Nussbaum, when she writes that

After reading Derrida, and not Derrida alone, I feel a certain hunger for blood; for, that is, writing about literature that talks of human lives and choices as if they matter to us.

This is, after all, the spirit in which much great literature has been and is written and read. We do approach literature for play and delight, for the exhilaration of following the dance form and unraveling webs of textual connection....But one of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game...is that it...speaks *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections.<sup>4</sup>

But if the alliance between poetry and philosophy, or, more broadly speaking, the alliance between literature and knowledge, remains in place, it clearly does not remain unchanged. In particular, it is not customary to present philosophy, or cosmology, or science, at the cutting edge, in literary form. And so philosophers and cosmologists and scientists do not read novels, or attend plays, with the intention of advancing their particular specialties.

What I would like to emphasize at this point, however, is that novels and plays are not written solely for philosophers, and other specialists. They, even the serious and great ones, are written for a general, educated public that did not exist in the ancient world, or for that matter, until the eighteenth century. And for those folks a play or novel may very well be the place where determinism and freedom of the will, the problem of evil, or the counter-examples to utilitarianism as a moral theory are first encountered. So we are well advised to ask, when we are told that the philosophical or moral hypotheses expressed in literary works are banal because “old hat,” “Old hat to *whom*?” In this respect literature remains, as it was in the ancient world, the educator of mankind.

But merely to point out, important though it may be, that the “old hat” conception of the banality of moral and philosophical hypotheses expressed by literary works is,



really, an academic objection that touches academics alone, is not enough, I do not think, to redeem these hypotheses from the charge of “banality” in the deeper sense of lacking the careful analysis and argumentation one has a right to expect in serious philosophical discussion. What further can be said?

As a delaying action, one can point out, I suppose, that literary works are not totally without argument and analysis. Examples like the Grand Inquisitor Sequence in *The Brothers Karamazov*, or the extensive discussions between Naphta and Settembrini in *The Magic Mountain* immediately come to mind. I don't think such examples should be underestimated, either in frequency or in importance. But alone I do not think they can sustain the claim of literature to philosophical and moral depth. They should be added to the sum. They will not, however, tip the scales.

The mandated philosophical move at this point is to claim that literary works, particularly works of fiction, possess methods for accomplishing the same goals that analysis and argument do in standard philosophical and moral discourse, which is to say, clarification and rational justification. Professor Nussbaum has tenaciously pursued one such method, which she describes in two claims: “the claim that there is with respect to any text carefully written and fully imaged, an organic connection between its form and content”: and the “claim...that certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist.”<sup>5</sup> I shall say no more about this strategy except that Professor Nussbaum has employed it with considerable skill and ingenuity. I want to pursue another.

### III

In the book of Lamarque and Olsen's, which I mentioned before, they present the following objection to the propositional theory of literary truth. “The issues of literary criticism,” they say, “concern aspects of literary works, and among these issues will be their handling of certain types of themes and concepts, but there is no accepted place for debate about the truth or falsity of general statements about human life or the human condition,”<sup>6</sup> the underlying premise being that *if it were* a purpose of literary works to express such propositions as candidates for acceptance or rejection by the reader, debate, in the critical literature about their truth or falsity would be a prominent feature. For, as Lamarque and Olsen add, “The lack of debate in literary criticism and critical discourse in general about the truth of such general propositions must therefore be understood as a feature of the literary practice itself.”<sup>7</sup>

But if there is no argument for the philosophical and moral hypotheses expressed by literary works, *either* in the works themselves *or* in the critical and interpretive writings about them, it *does* seem as if they are easy prey to the charge of banality, in just the sense we are now considering. They lack any of the accompanying philosophical debate that makes them live and live again in the philosophical literature: the *new* interpretation and *novel* argumentation that renew our interest in them. Suppose, however, as I have suggested elsewhere, the place in literary practice, for analysis and argument, is neither the literary work nor the critical work; rather, the mind of the reader herself.<sup>8</sup> Let me dilate upon that for a moment.

If one compares the experience of reading a serious novel with the experience of listening to a serious musical work, say, a symphony of Beethoven's, where the reader or listener is a member of the general public, not an “expert,” we might, with some justice, describe the former, the literary experience, as “gappy” and “sloppy,” the latter, the musical experience, as relatively “self-contained.” Here is what I mean. In reading a



novel of even moderate length, one picks it up, puts it down, picks it up again, without any feeling of narrative discontinuity. There are, thus, gaps in the literary experience. Furthermore, the literary experience has what might be compared to the aftertaste of a good wine, although considerably longer in duration. Call it the "afterlife" of the reading. It is a period, subsequent to the completion of the novel, during which the images and content linger on, to be savored and thought about. A literary experience, where it is of a serious work of art, that lacks this postpartum period of contemplation, lacks something that is, I want to suggest, an integral part of the literary experience. Serious literary works, then, have a sloppy outer boundary.

Both the gappiness and sloppiness of the literary experience are in sharp contrast to the self-containedness of the musical one. A musical work, such as the usual four movement symphony, is not meant to be heard, movement by movement, like chapters of a novel, with wide intervals in between, nor, for most of us, does it have any palpable afterlife; for few music lovers have either the musical memory or the musical training to hear any significant part of a complex musical score "in the head."

What I want to suggest, then, is that in the gaps and afterlife of the literary experience, the reader is meant, among other things, to mull over and consider the truth and falsity of those live hypotheses that the literary work expresses, as part of its artistic effect. The reader, I want to suggest, is meant to reason over the hypotheses that serious literary works present to him or her for acceptance or rejection; and it is in so doing that these hypotheses gain the depth and breadth that lifts them from banality.

Now of course no one has ever denied that literary works can, and indeed *have* suggested moral and philosophical theses to readers. And if those readers are talented, they may even use such theses to build moral and philosophical systems of their own. But, the skeptic may insist, that does not mean that the *work* has done anything but express these naked, hence banal philosophical or moral theses that the reader - philosopher has transformed, in another work, into deep and interesting ones.

This, I think, gets to the heart of my proposal. It is perfectly true that what I have just described is not only a possible scenario, but one that has been played out many times. One is reminded, for example, of the tribute Freud paid to Dostoyevsky as an inspiration to his work. Yet it would be nonsense to suggest that Freud's lifetime of thinking on the unconscious and the rest was just one long literary experience of the novels of Dostoyevsky.

But I am urging here that we not confuse two related, but entirely distinct phenomena: the case in which a literary work provides inspiration for a philosophy, or other system of thought, as in the case of Dostoyevsky and Freud, and the case in which the educated general reader, as a legitimate and necessary part of the literary experience, is stimulated, in the gaps and afterlife of reading a serious literary work, to thinking and reasoning about the moral or philosophical hypotheses expressed therein. The former clearly is *not* an instance, at least in its entirety, of literary appreciation, although it may certainly begin as such, as I presume it did with Freud's encounter with Dostoyevsky. The latter, I insist, is just that; and I find the notion of literary appreciation *without* it, where the work is such as to invite this kind of philosophical or moral thinking, as artistically impoverished as the listening to a Beethoven symphony in bits and pieces would be. Just as continuity and self-containedness are the hallmarks of the appreciation of serious music, philosophical and moral contemplation in the gaps and afterlife are the hallmarks of literary appreciation, where the work demands that. That, at least, is my claim.

If I am right, then the defender of the proposition theory of literary plausibility has

this reply to the charge of banality. Where the banality is alleged to result from the lack of argument and analysis in the literary work, as it would in many novels and plays, the reply is that argument and analysis occur, in the gaps and afterlife, in the reader's mind, as part and parcel of a legitimate artistic experience.

Now at this point I can imagine two possible objections arising. They are related objections, and I think ought to be dealt with together. A consideration of them shall conclude my remarks.

#### IV

In the previous section I was defending the proposition theory of literary plausibility against the charge of banality. But, it should be recalled, that theory goes in tandem with the plausibility theory of literary value, which holds that the expression, in literary works, of live and deeply significant moral and philosophical hypotheses is a good-making feature of literary works. And I can imagine the following objection being raised.<sup>9</sup>

If the expression of live, deeply significant moral and philosophical hypotheses is a good-making feature of literary works, it certainly can't impart very *much* value. For it seems that trivial and even downright bad literary works – maudlin tear-jerkers, pulp fiction, cheap detective stories, low-grade science fiction – can express important moral and philosophical hypotheses that are living ones for readers of these time-wasters. Yet these works hardly seem much the better for it than others of the same kind that express no such hypotheses. Doesn't this suggest that whatever there may be to the propositional theory of literary plausibility, there can't be very much to the plausibility theory of literary value, hence, not much aesthetic significance to the propositional theory of literary plausibility, even if true?

The response must be that it is the *way* hypotheses are expressed in literary works that determines whether the expression imparts great value, or little to them. For what lifts them from the banal to the interesting and significant is what happens to them in the gaps and afterlife. And what happens to them there is a function of the reader's obsession with them, which leads to, indeed compels analysis, argument and evaluation. But what leads to the obsession? What encourages and sustains thought about the implied hypotheses, in the gaps and afterlife, or, for that matter, thought about the various other aspects of a serious literary work that it demands and encourages – thoughts about plot, character, language and the rest?

The answer is both easy and at the same time difficult to give. It is easy to give because we all know the *general* answer. The *great*, the serious literary works are thick with artistic and aesthetic artifice. Their linguistic fabric is eloquent, complex, intriguing. Plot and character are convoluted and deep. When moral or philosophical hypotheses are conveyed by such artistically and aesthetically rich materials, they become imprinted upon the reader's consciousness with an indelible brand. We find ourselves compelled, as it were, to think and reason about what we have read. That is the easy answer.

The difficult answer, of course, is to spell out in detail what specific artistic and aesthetic artifices perform what specific functions, and how, in the process by which the reader is led, or, perhaps more strongly, even *compelled* by the great author, to think and reason, in the gaps and afterlife, about the moral or philosophical hypotheses expressed in the literary work of art. To spell those things out is the work not just of another paper, but perhaps of many papers to come. So I must really leave you here with an unpaid debt. But I think I owe you at least one example, by way of a down payment. So let me adduce

an obvious one.

One of the most frequent forms of praise given a work of fiction is that its characters have complexity and depth. "The characters are alive, multidimensional: I really cared about them," reads an advertising message on the back cover of a novel I am presently reading.<sup>10</sup>

Let me suggest that when we receive live and deeply significant moral or philosophical hypotheses from the discourse of fictional characters who are "alive" and "multidimensional," characters we really care about, we are encouraged, even compelled to take these hypotheses seriously, the way we tend to take the opinions to heart of friends and family whom we respect or hold in high regard. They lodge in our minds, and, inevitably, we think about them. Perhaps we say to ourselves, "If an admirable and deep person like that, whom I really care about, holds this opinion, then perhaps it is an opinion worth considering seriously." But if the character is one-dimensional pasteboard, why should I be persuaded to take him or her seriously? Surely that is *part* of the reason *Crime and Punishment* compels me to take the question of crime and punishment seriously, and *The Maltese Falcon* does not, as entertaining a confection as it may be.

Much more needs to be said on this regard. But I must press on to my concluding remarks.

I said that I would make an end by considering two *related* objections. The first has been dealt with. The second remains.

It has been my contention, in the preceding remarks, that great works of literary fiction have the power to encourage, even *compel* us to think and reason about the live, deeply significant moral and philosophical hypotheses they are meant to imply. And I have argued that this thinking and reasoning, which take place in what I have called the gaps and afterlife of the reading experience, must be considered as a legitimate and necessary part of full literary appreciation. But I am surely not the first person to suggest that what happens in one's mind during times when one is not *directly* experiencing a work of art, in the present instance, during the reading or the attending a performance of it, is to be considered part of aesthetic appreciation.

In the late eighteenth century, the Scottish aesthete, Archibald Alison, wrote a book of considerable merit called *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, which set forth such a view, based on the then highly influential doctrine of the association of ideas that had been laid out in great detail by David Hartley in 1749. And in our own century, the American philosopher, Stephen Pepper put forth a not dissimilar view.

In something I wrote many years ago, I was pretty hard on Pepper.<sup>11</sup> And the reason for that constitutes the objection I now want to answer. For the view I have been developing here (and elsewhere) seems to me inconsistent with my previous objection to Pepper, at least in the rather uncompromising form in which I formerly posed it.

Basically, the objection is this. If we allow that part of the literary appreciation of a novel or play consists in thought processes set up by the work, which take place in the gaps and afterlife, and not during the reading itself, are we not opening the flood gates to the reader's free fantasy, and putting ourselves in the position of having to say that *any thoughts at all* set in motion by a reading or viewing of the literary work are part of the work, regardless of text or authorial intent? There are theorists today for whom such consequences hold no terror. I am not of that number.

But nor can I now avoid the conclusion that at least *some* of the thought processes that the literary work sets in motion, in the gaps and afterlife, are an integral part of the artistic and aesthetic experience of the work. To deny that is to miss the crucial difference between the clean, self-contained character of the musical experience with the gappy, sloppy character of the literary one: to choose, in a word, the wrong artistic



and aesthetic model. It seems to me that a literary experience without the *relevant* thought and reasoning going on in the gaps and afterlife is an impoverished one, and fails to be faithful to the facts of literary appreciation.

But there's the catch. What *are* the *relevant* thoughts and reasoning, what the *irrelevant*? How do we distinguish between them? For distinguish them we must. We cannot throw all of them out, without seriously impoverishing our appreciative experience of serious literary works, and closing off not only the possibility of our understanding the role played by the moral and philosophical hypotheses that some literary works express, but other important aspects of serious literature as well. Nor can we let them all in without making the experience of literature simply an elaborate fantasy in which anything goes.

Indeed, even if one dismissed what goes on in what I have called the gaps and afterlife, the relevance problem would not go away. For one must, after all, think and reason *during* the reading process as well. And what are we to say of *that*? One cannot draw a one-to-one relationship between words or sentences of a text, and the thoughts of a reader. Our conscious experience during the reading process is a complex one, not completely under the control of the author, needless to say. And so here as well we will need to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant things that we think and reason about. The reading period, no less than the gaps and afterlife, is thoughtful.

Neither Alison nor Pepper developed, in my view, a successful criterion of relevance, although both were aware of its need. Nor, am I inclined to think, can a hard and fast criterion be forthcoming. All that can be done – indeed *must* be done – is to rely on literary interpretation and criticism, case by case, to try to determine what is relevant and what is not, by all of the usual methods and means open to them. That literary criticism deals with the complete experience of literature I take to be axiomatic. That thinking and reasoning about moral and philosophical hypotheses, when they are live and of deep concern to us, is part of a complete literary experience, and an answer to the charge of banality against the proposition theory of literary plausibility and the plausibility theory of literary value, I have been trying to convince you of in this talk. Whether I have succeeded in that endeavor, I guess I am about to find out. I shall be much surprised if I have, but not disheartened if I haven't. For, as every angler will tell you, it's the fishing, not the catching that's the sport.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Chapter 5.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 324-325.
- <sup>3</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner, 1951), p. 89.
- <sup>4</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and*

*Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 171.

- <sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," *Love's Knowledge*, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>6</sup> Lamarque and Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, p. 332.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- <sup>8</sup> Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts*, Chapter 5.
- <sup>9</sup> Indeed, I don't have to imagine it. The objection was raised in the question period that followed my presentation of another paper on the subject, "The Laboratory of Fictional Truth," at the Philosophy Colloquium of Notre Dame University. I hope the response I give now is better than the one I gave then, "off the top of my head."
- <sup>10</sup> Madeleine L'Engle. back cover of Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984).
- <sup>11</sup> See Peter Kivy, Retrospective Review of Stephen Pepper, *Aesthetic Quality: A Contextualist Theory of Beauty*, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XL (1981), pp. 201-206.