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## **Beyond a Call to Action**

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# Beyond a Call to Action

Quinn Bohner

## Introduction

This paper is intended as a critique and development of morality in literature, seeking to prove that literature can have deep effects on a reader's moral character. The stakes for such research are rather high: especially during the pandemic, our culture is heavily informed by social and mass media, and it is hard to imagine a good future for the world if these mediums cannot shake the status quo.

Though this paper takes a narrower scope of investigation than moral progress itself, the reader should keep in mind that all of our practices of communication can and should be informed by literary tradition, among other practices. For art is our name for the most refined and deliberate artifacts of human expression, capable of great scale, subtlety, and mass dissemination. Morality in communication is explored here through literature, but I hope the reader will make an attempt to apply any knowledge gleaned to as diverse a range of their practices as is possible.

The basic issue of my research is that conventional calls to action, for example Sarah McLachlan's famous SPCA commercials, are not terribly effective. This is obvious insofar as there is a saturation of these calls to action, and a shocking lack of action or concern from many, but I will also seek to justify this in the theories of Immanuel Levinas, then develop a solution from a more philosophical framing of the problem, with Louis Althusser's writings on ideology, as well as case studies from literature.

Eventually, this all leads to the question: how do we address ideology in art? Which will hopefully be somewhat answered by the development of the question, and further addressed by the case studies comprising the latter half of this writing.

## Criticism From Levinas

Immanuel Levinas, a 20th century moral philosopher (Bergo 2019), raises some compelling criticisms of art in his provocatively titled paper 'Reality and Its Shadow.' 'Reality and Its Shadow' discusses art in relation to reality—a term that is frequently used across the paper but in a very murky fashion. Levinas says that 'an artwork prolongs, and goes beyond, common perception... what

common perception trivializes and misses, an artwork apprehends,' that it is 'more real than reality.' However, he does not have only good things to say about art. As the paper develops, he positions criticism as a necessary complement to art, to bring its 'inhumanity and inversion' back into life and understanding.

Levinas lays out the problem this way: art originates from somewhere outside of 'being in the world' and truth; he says that the moment when the art is a finished product, frozen in time, it becomes essentially disengaged from readers or viewers. Art follows a different destiny than the things around it (117). Obviously this wording is very obscure, so I will try to furnish a better explanation.

### **The Image**

Further on he gets more direct, saying that art itself is contrasted with knowledge, an 'invasion of shadow,' its lifeblood being obscurity. This seems controversial, but the point he is making here follows very well from his earlier definition of art: something that goes beyond common perception. In other words, art succeeds by going beyond our regular perception of the world, but in the process brings in something uncanny and unreal.

Art substitutes an image for reality. Not necessarily a visual image, but an image in the sense of something which is perceived, yet not understood. The image-characteristic of art viewing or reading divorces art from our living world, in contrast to scientific knowledge or 'truth.' Rather than being information that suffuses and enriches our existing knowledge and reverberates into our world, like an understanding of inertia or chemistry will affect the way we perceive a wide variety of situations in the future, art exists in its own private world, and does not readily mix with the outside. However, this has an important upside for an artist in that it also engenders passivity and attention towards the art experience in the viewer: Levinas calls our intention to the captivation of music, and we can recognize similar situations (he calls them 'waking dreams') in viewing other kinds of art.

### **Stillness**

The second criticism Levinas raises at art is its existence as an object frozen in time. Levinas says that the image is the shadow of being, defining this shadow as a caricature of being that lies on top of it. Art, this invasion of shadow, is characterized as a 'stoppage in time', calling back to his framing of art as essentially disengaged.

Levinas describes this stoppage of time as the continuance of an eternal duration: 'eternally Laocoon will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally. Eternally, the future announced in the strained muscles of Laocoon will be unable to become present.' This is telling— art, its image and characters, are all bound to the status of caricature, to a static fate antithetical to life and being. Levinas contrasts this to being, which is an appropriate place to introduce the rest of his philosophy.

## Levinas's Ethics

Levinas's criticisms of art are concerning at face value because he advocated for 'ethics as first philosophy'; Seán Hand's introduction to a so-named paper (Levinas 1989) says as much: 'responsibility for the Other preexists any self-consciousness, so that from the beginning of any face to face, the question of being involves the right to be.' While this does not clearly elaborate on 'Reality and Its Shadow,' it does emphasize that for Levinas, ethical issues were involved wherever he wrote about philosophy. If someone's interest in philosophy centers around ethics, we should be concerned about art, ethically, if they are criticizing art—how likely is it that this paper will be the one where they abandon any ethical concerns.

So how does Levinas's characterization of art connect to his ethics? A good starting point is another term used in Hand's introduction: the 'face to face', and the 'face's epiphany.' Levinas's moral theory is phenomenological, meaning that it describes things as they appear to a person, in as accurate, if not easy, terms and concepts as possible.

Levinas's general philosophy, as developed in 'Ethics As First Philosophy', contests the dominance of knowing and understanding in philosophical characterizations of human living, 'the identification of being *and* knowledge.' In this essay, he begins his main argument with the observation that knowledge is a relationship of consciousness to an Other, developing from Husserl's theory of intentionality the idea of a persistent consciousness existing alongside intentional consciousness, passively aware of the workings of consciousness. Levinas argues that this consciousness is purely passive, and unhappy (he says *mauvaise conscience*, literally meaning guilty conscience, but also that it is not guilty, so I have chosen 'unhappy' after Hand). It feels accused, permanently feeling a lack of its own justification, making us question our own right to exist.

The face of the Other is first mentioned in this paper as signifying the Other's proximity, 'from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask.' (p. 81) Plastic in this context meaning visual, Levinas positions the face (that I have referenced in the 'face to face') as a symbol of the intrusion of the Other into our consciousness that prompts it to draw our place in the world, our 'being at home', into question.

Levinas in fact uses 'being at home' both literally figuratively: figuratively in the sense of feeling comfortable and secure in some place or another, and literally in that he is aiming at colonialism and imperialism. He says that our safety at home, our comfort, is felt also as an 'usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world.' This is a deliberate reference, and he makes it even more poignant in his essay 'Peace and Proximity' which directly deals with the place and history of Europe in historical and continuing evils.

And, he says, our sensitivity to the Other comes out of *fear* of the monstrosity of

this history and the possibility of more violence to be come. This fear manifests itself for me personally in terms such as ‘could someone else do more with what I have?’ ‘what are the costs of my continued first-world existence?’ and ‘why am *I* here, and not someone else?’ This is all prompted by the face to face that goes beyond the visual, these fears are all summoned in the face to face. This is the origin of responsibility for the other, the prerequisite for ethically motivated actions (in the Kantian sense where they are a detriment to me, and a benefit to another).

Levinas says ‘the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in doing so recalls my responsibility and calls me into question.’ It is also important to note here that the ‘me’ that is called into question is not a superficial I-am-I, the questioning is more thoroughgoing than that, as indicated by his mention of ‘my place in the sun’, meaning my life, my habits, my subsistence, my family, my comfort.

### **The Object of Levinas’s Concerns**

I have just laid out a rough sketch of Levinas’s ‘moral’ beliefs, in order to explain their relationship to his theory of art. As I have alluded to already, ethical events— situations where someone’s everyday life and existence are called into question on the basis of their effect on another— are on face value what we need in order to convince someone to change their life for the better of others. Changing your life can mean many things, but whatever the content, some amount of adjustment is the goal and it is seemingly achieved by the ‘face to face’.

Taking a cue from Hanoch Ben-Pazi’s analysis of ‘Reality and Its Shadow’, Levinas seems to be concerned with art because it visually and metaphorically covers over the face. He references plastic forms as covering the face in ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, and he is even more explicit (as Ben-Pazi cites from ‘Reality and Its Shadow’) in saying that ‘[artistic] representation expresses just that function of an image that still remains to be determined.’ We can surmise from this statement alone that there is something dilute about the Other encountered in art, and this obviously has an effect on the ‘face to face’.

As Ben-Pazi again puts it, ‘aesthetics produces a representation of reality and, by doing so, conceals it.’ The concealment of reality is concerning, but so far there isn’t really any actionable information for an author or artist. Here are my suggestions.

### **My Expansion**

Reading between the lines— considering Levinas’s concern with duration as it relates to Husserl and his focus on our pre-intentional fear of harm coming to the other— the crucial problem with art is its stillness. Art objects are described early on in ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ as being finished; Levinas points out ‘the completion, the indelible seal of artistic production by which the artwork remains

essentially disengaged,’ and that ‘the artist stops because the work refuses to accept anything more.’ In art, Laocoon’s muscles are eternally straining.

Art is at risk of being ethically impotent because there is no urgency in it. It may describe an urgent situation, theoretically demonstrate a constant stream of plights or tragedies, but in its stillness, this urgency is not felt at all. Art is out of time— there can be no urgency if there is no future at all, and art can never have a future of its own. This is concerning because images are a major ingredient of journalism and political communication.

But how is this interpretation compatible with examples of moving art like Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother*? An explanation for this can be provided by Levinas: these images have their force not because of their aesthetic beauty, but because of the human implications of what they visually represent. Levinas says that images can be enlivened through criticism (‘Reality and Its Shadow’, section ‘For Philosophical Criticism’), through an engagement with art that ‘treats the artist as a man at work’, a technique that Levinas describes as putting an immobile statue in motion. This is what I imagine when I consider the influence that many artistic renditions of fraught scenarios have on society and politics: they depict something that has already happened and are visually stagnant, but provide a space for a viewer to reinterpret and discuss still emerging dangers, fears, and tragedies.

### **Art is Still Fraught**

Footage of tragedy is striking when we are willing to see it as representative of a broader picture, much more urgent than any individual case, a throng of Others who beg for our aid. But because interpreting art in this way is up to the viewer, not to the artist, many are not affected. However, there is another likelihood: that many who are unaffected by a given call to action in art, would be affected if they encountered the subject of some call-to-action art (such as a drowning refugee) in the flesh.

### **Escape Into the Real**

In the prototypical (yet uncommon) ‘in the flesh’ ethical moment, the sufferer is in front of us. We are not peering through the keyhole or hearing a faint voice from far away, we are sharing a moment with another person, and there is no escaping it. In a film, by contrast, the experience is of an image suspended in front of a viewer, bordered by dim curtains and seats, and the sound of the film is interleaved with popcorn being eaten and whispers.

From an escapist perspective, these distractions are detrimental. An escapist wants a bigger screen, more accurate colors, less background noise. They want to sink into the world of the cinema. They want to be free from the remaining traces of the outside, and distractions are to be avoided because they disrupt the viewer from the (art) world they want to inhabit.

However, you may observe that these desires are inverted when a film becomes especially frightening or disturbing. When there is a scene of violence in a film, my mind will jump to the feeling of the armrest in my hands, the texture of my pants, and I will think ‘thank god.’ Either way, we are taking ourselves from a challenging (frightening, saddening, exhausting) place to somewhere else, because we would rather not deal with those challenges.

‘In the flesh’, we have a lot of trouble with this. Everything available to our senses carries the residue of the situation, pointing back to the reality in front of me, and the urgency of the other’s plight, and I can’t close the book, pause the movie, or step out of the theater. The urgent nature of the situation is much harder to avoid, so it is more likely I will end up addressing it.

The inversion of escapism, avoidance, is flight from the fictional and challenging, and it is born from the same basic desire as escapism: flight from the current world and seeking security in another. When the art-world frightens us— remember that the root of obligation is fear for the other— we escape to our carefully constructed ‘real life’ that contains no trace of the other’s plight.

But how is this ‘real world’ sustained? Foreign wars provide cheap plastic products and shipping for the majority of consumer goods, sweatshop labor keeps down clothing prices, and neighborhoods are kept ‘safe’ and segregated by historical redlining. Were it possible to see these traces in the ‘real world’, every aspect of the home you are safe in would remind you of the plight of the other that sustains it, a phenomenon prefigured by Levinas describing the ‘usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world.’

### **Indeterminate Real**

In this way, the real and the traces discernible in it are the product of a viewer’s knowledge and disposition, their ideology. Escapism is so easy for the modern spectator, and the way to weaken this mechanism in those whom it is strongest is not just to display of the My Lai massacres of the world, but to deconstruct their habits of moral sensitivity, interpretation of material goods, and concrete practices: their supposedly-real life.

This is an appropriate juncture to present Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology. Althusser frames his theory of ideology (Althusser 1971) the way the current relations of production reproduce what they need to produce and consume goods: laborers and consumers.

Obviously almost any laborer will be a consumer, and vice-versa, and these beings will be produced sexually— but they also have to be reproduced as obedient and skillful laborers as well as enthusiastic consumers. The values and ideas that are imparted that make continuing the present relations of production and consumption possible are described by Althusser as ideology. Students are taught technical knowledge (p7), in a way that ‘ensures subjection to the ruling

ideology or mastery of its “practice.”’

Althusser, a Marxist, positions the State as a violent and repressive apparatus whose purpose is to continue the relations of production, and puts under it different departments that accomplish this goal, like the police and military. Existing alongside the State and its violent apparatuses are ideological state apparatuses that inculcate beings with ideology: churches, schools, family, and culture are some examples. Althusser says that these institutions can themselves be ‘the site of class struggle’, and that statement places this paper.

Ideology, the ‘imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,’ (p36) as Althusser puts it, is the culprit behind the presence or absence of these traces that constitute the moral charge of our ‘real’ world and surroundings. It is ideology that determines whether a printed circuit board first registers to me as a product of child and/or slave labor, or an exciting new motherboard for my computer, whether I notice just that something is ‘hand-stitched’ or wonder whose hands stitched it.

For many, these traces (or their absence) certainly serve the repressive State. Wherever they erase the ‘externalities’ of our ‘consumer products’ (because they are certainly not products for the laborer) they maintain these monstrous conditions by suppressing a rage that should be instinctive. They wash off blood diamonds.

This cleansing effect explains the persistence of these awful conditions, and fits into Althusser’s model very well: the diamonds staying clean is a necessary condition of the reproduction of the relations of production.

### **Traces as a Mechanism of Ideology**

Althusser later goes on to describe ideology as fully manifested in the material behaviors, practices, and feelings of a subject, so it’s also appropriate to characterize avoidance as a mechanism integrated into ideology. Escapist practices form attitudes and practices: celebrity culture exploits our desire to escape, exposing us to the imaginary future that never comes: indulgent wealth, commodified and engorged. Hetero- and cis-normative narratives of romance, sex, and family alienate us from the possibilities we are actually working with, shaping our attitudes and practices to those most compatible with indolent overconsumption and wage slavery. Avoidance of art, as a widespread phenomenon, also solidifies the role of art as commodity rather than reified expression, feeding fast fashion and easy entertainment while socially and politically neutering those who create it.

Most would be unwilling to partake in these practices to the extent that they do if they understood the consequences, and these practices exacerbate blindness to their own effects, among other things: we are more willing to consume material products when we are unaware of their origin, and we are more willing to ignore their origins the more embedded our habits of consuming things without regard



for their origins. This is true for food, media, clothing, and everything else. Complacency and escapism beget more complacency and escapism, all in service of a status quo that does not serve us.

### **Because of Avoidance, We Must Attack Ideology**

Considering the constitutive role ideology has on our world as consumers and producers, and the deep sensitivity one person naturally has for the Other's suffering, I hope it is clear that avoidance of this suffering is absolutely instrumental to the continuance of the relations of production, and because it relies on and perpetuates an imaginary and sanitized understanding of our real living conditions.

This recognition gives birth to a question: how might we address ideology in our art? If this distortion can be deconstructed through art, a viewer can become ready to respond to more specific calls to action, so the stakes are quite high.

Theory can only get us so far here: I will now present some case studies of literature that variously does this well and poorly, and then present some common points between them to conclude my writing.

### **Case Studies**

#### **The Tunnel - William H. Gass**

In *The Tunnel*, William H. Gass investigates the character of the everyday to great effect. The main topics of the novel are bigotry, resentment, and everyday life, through the first-person narration of one William Frederick Kohler, an American historian and professor writing a book on Germany during the Third Reich. It gradually becomes clear over the 652 pages of first person narration that Kohler is a 'disappointed person.' Specifically, he is full of disappointment and hatred towards all of humanity in a way that makes Nazism attractive to him.

*The Tunnel* itself is an introduction to Kohler's research that he has turned into a diary. It describes Kohler's entire life, and him digging a tunnel under his house to bury it.

Kohler and Gass are both cagey about the content of the book itself (which is not included in *The Tunnel*), but a reader can infer that it belies Kohler's feelings of disgust towards Jews and what he perceives as their 'passivity' towards their mass killings at concentration camps like Auschwitz and Dachau. His strong disgust with Jews is not related to Jewish faith or culture, or any anti-semitic stereotypes— it reflects Kohler's general disgust with humanity and himself, as he sees their supposed passivity as representative of the disappointing character of humanity itself.

He attributes this disgust to a lifetime of 'disappointing' experiences that have sapped his faith in himself and humanity. A broken marriage, childhood expe-

rienced during the Great Depression, and military service have all left Kohler feeling that his life is not what it should be, and he has placed the blame on everyone else.

There are two striking details of this book which are relevant: Kohler, despite all of this, being a very relatable character to me, and the nature of the events that constituted Kohler's development into a resentful and miserable person.

In the first issue: Kohler is easy for me to relate to because his childhood is mapped out in such detail, and his character at that time is weak and unvirtuous, but with enough small and resonant details to remain sympathetic. He is tempted to gamble at a predatory candy store, he spends much of his allowance on books, and he is strongly attracted to learning. All of these events and more were strongly reminiscent to me of my own disposition as a child.

His bile and fear are clearly traceable to his parents' cruelties and follies, and they are mirrored in the tragic development and descent of his marriage, which provides one of the main conflicts of the novel. I'm sure many readers, given enough courage, can see the beginnings of their own follies in their childhood fears and lessons, and I can acknowledge the pull many of his smaller vices have on my own psyche, as proud as I am of resisting them— particularly his sullen vindictiveness.

Kohler is passive, and as he is surrounded by tragedy and cruelty, he is seemingly unable or unwilling to stop himself from inflicting the same on others. This brings me to the next major point: Kohler's experiences (and the whole book revolves around these) are mundane: the scenery for his conflict with his wife is their hallways clogged with antiques, the kitchen, the bedroom, and his office. There are no grand political Events that affect his psyche, his experience is informed by much more mundane interactions: sleeping with a student, picnicking with his family, arguing with his wife, watching his mentor die of syphilis. His narcissistic thinking anchors the events of the book around his inner life, which doubly illuminates its pettiness in its focus itself, as well as the detail provided, keeping the reader clear of any ultimately irrelevant details like the fate of nations, focused on Kohler's flaws and their origins in his friends, family, and self.

As a reader, this taught me in an intuitive way what I believe to be an important lesson: our personal development and everyday world are deeply affected by seemingly minor everyday conversations and the dispositions other people display towards us, not just by political events, material conditions, and our own pursuits. Kohler's disturbing life and death are emotionally fraught, and served as a call to action for me to improve even the minor ways I treat others, because of the shocking resolution with which these events were depicted in *The Tunnel*.

**How?** Why was this book so effective? Despite it being beautifully written, gripping, and appropriate to my interests, I think it was especially striking because its ideas were hard to avoid. As I have already mentioned, we tend to seek refuge in the real world when an art-world becomes challenging, and Gass

locked down that possibility by making the main topics relevant to my daily life: racism, ego, and family life are all things I am regularly concerned with.

Further, Kohler, though an extreme example of humanity in many respects, had many features I could recognize in myself, especially at the beginning of his life: it was hard to avoid the consequences of Gass's art because when I turned my mind back to my daily life I still involuntarily saw the topics in myself. My academic interests also drew me back to Kohler— I sometimes have the same feelings of being beaten down by life, and I also struggle with passivity in my personal life.

Furthermore, the ideas *The Tunnel* expressed to me weren't easy to forget or ignore once I accepted them. I couldn't say 'yes, this is a problem, but I can and will ignore it', because the problems keep coming up over and over then and now, because when I consider them, the lessons I have learned from *The Tunnel* come to mind, regardless of my wishes, and I can't help but understand them. I better understand the way my day-to-day mindset is a product of the little ways people treat me, and as long as that comes to mind in those 'small moments', I can't help but want to be better.

### **Song of Solomon - Toni Morrison**

*Song of Solomon* tells the story of Macon 'Milkman' Dead as he grapples with his family history, place in community, lovers and friends, and racial experience. Milkman is Black, and much of the conflict of the book is informed directly or indirectly by a history and present characterized by racial violence and struggle. Specifically, Milkman's place in his family (a conflict center for much of the book) is indirectly informed by the murder of Macon's grandfather by a group of white people, and their theft of his land, and Milkman's father's behavior in reaction to those events.

The story describes Milkman's birth, upbringing, and early adulthood in the city of Mercy. Eventually Milkman heads to seek out some gold to the east and explore his family history, a product of his growing need to find his place in life.

The story is rich and dense in narrative, but the important moment for me is around the middle of the story. Up to that point, Milkman's sisters and mother play inconspicuous roles. They are mentioned, but they are not given any significant space. This changes, when Milkman's father, Macon, attempts to hit his mother, Ruth, for the last time. Milkman reacts by shoving his father into a radiator, but this doesn't get the reaction he expected. As the narrator remarks that Milkman has never been able to distinguish his sisters from his mother, they both shoot him looks full of burning hatred. As a reader, this moment was enlightening, because it was the first time his sisters really became noticeable to me, and it is implied that this was Milkman's experience as well.

Milkman leaves for his room, and his father follows, to tell a disturbing story of death and incest involving Ruth and her father. The strength of all of the other

characters comprising the household are illuminated in this episode, except for Milkman himself, despite his ‘active’ involvement in the situation. Their desires, life trajectories, and flaws are all on display to him and he doesn’t really have any of his own.

Another third of the book passes and Milkman’s older sister Corinthians gets a boyfriend, Porter, who is not exactly wealthy or dignified. While she likes him greatly the difference in their status troubles her. After some internal struggle, she appears to become happy with him despite this— but their relationship is a secret from her father, who would undoubtedly not accept it.

One day, Milkman realizes Porter that is a member of an organization of killers alongside his friend Guitar. Troubled, Milkman puts himself in a stupor of weed and alcohol for a few days, and then his eldest sister, Lena, calls him into her room. We learn that Milkman has told his father about Corinthians and Porter, and Macon (senior) has forced Corinthians to quit her job, and has not let her leave the house since. He has evicted Porter from his apartment, and garnished his wages.

Lena poignantly frames this event as one in a series of many abuses by their father: ‘he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon.’ ‘Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you.’ Throughout their lives they have been subordinated to Milkman and his father Macon. Reinforcing the radiator incident and the narrator’s noting that Milkman has never been able to tell his sisters and mother apart. While this may have been more deliberate on Macon senior’s part, it has obviously been unconscious on Milkman’s part, evident from the lack of attention this phenomenon has enjoyed in the narration and Milkman’s behavior.

**What?** What about this narrative is meaningful to me as a reader? The beginning of the significance is (similarly to *The Tunnel*) is my resemblance to Milkman. While I have only one sibling, and a much different relationship, I have enjoyed a similar status in my family. My brother (13 years older) left home when I was very young, and I am my mother’s only son, affording me a similar level of doting care and financial consideration.

The way Milkman is presented initially seems to reflect how he appears to himself: he is happy, but aimless, through no fault of his own. His life is ‘set up’ and he’s not exactly fulfilled but not wanting for anything really concrete. Despite his relative privilege, his mind is occupied with his own problems, and as the story develops we begin to see his self-centeredness in contrast to the strong sense of place every other character has in their family or community. Guitar has friends at the barbershop and in the Days, not to mention a strong purpose, though it is killing. His sisters have a well-defined, if very undesirable place in the family, giving them a much clearer sense of motivation once they fully step into the frame.

Though Milkman has a place in his family, he isn’t conscious of this initially,

and his understanding of it (or lack thereof) is one of the issues *Song of Solomon* focuses on. There are a number of reasons why one might benefit reading this but it was enlightening for me primarily because it provided me with new perspectives on a ‘charmed life’ like my own, albeit in a family and community situation with many more outside pressures. This made the perspectives other characters present on Milkman’s personality and life situation all the more engaging.

**Why?** What made *Song of Solomon* such a good learning experience? The combination of breadth and depth in the perspectives offered across the course of the narrative, and the relatability of Milkman’s character. If Milkman never left and comfortable situations (for him and for me), there would not be any difficult issues to consider, yet if he was introduced as the totally wayward and useless person he is, he would not be relatable for those of us who do not consider ourselves that way, even with many useful points of comparison. He is just relatable enough, at just the right times.

Throughout the narrative, a connection is made between Milkman’s home life and his social context, revealing the history of pain and struggle in his family history and the lives all around him. *Song of Solomon* goes beyond a story about an individual character or situation, reflection on the viewer’s own interpretation, making a statement about the reader’s own ideology. Do we learn about Milkman’s sisters before he does, or at the same time? Do we side with his father or his mother? Is Guitar a serial killer, a hero, or both?

Because they are unveiled gradually and skillfully, the extremities and challenges of Milkman’s situation enable the reader to imagine that they are too these morally challenging situations in Milkman’s place, rather than considering someone’s life on a page like a detective. Forcing a reader to reflect on their own assumptions about Milkman’s and family can (and did in my case) generate surprising conclusions about their ideology. This knowledge is a lot harder to avoid than knowledge of an individual situation, because, like in the case of *The Tunnel*, because I cannot avoid these lessons if they come to mind in my daily life— and they do.

### **Dispatches from Pluto (Richard Grant) & The Buddha in the Attic (Julie Otsuka)**

*Dispatches from Pluto* describes journalist and author Richard Grant’s move to and life in Pluto, Mississippi. It is a biographical account of an outsider surveying the politics (especially racial) and social life of the Mississippi Delta region. While its biographical nature is sometimes at odds with its being informative, the structure of the narrative serves to clearly and carefully introduce historical details as well as vignettes of contemporary politics and society in the Delta. While providing a clearly individual and limited scope of information, it was still informative and thoughtful enough for me to consider myself better off for having read it. It discusses gender, church, religious faith, cuisine and celebration,

and most particularly race and class, especially as they relate to the Delta's progressing economic decay.

The narrator was relatable for me to a degree, and many of the issues the book covers are profoundly urgent and compelling. The varied and concerning ways racism manifested in the different characters in the story, and the ways people struggled to address it were relevant to my personal interests and concerns, but I didn't come away from the book feeling challenged, despite the challenging nature of the issues discussed.

The same is true for Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*, a fictionalized account of real 'picture brides' on the west coast of the United States in the early 20th century. The narration follows a group of Japanese women who travel from Japan to the US to marry Japanese laborers from whom they only have photographs and letters, in the hopes of a better life in America. They have a variety of life paths, narrated in the format 'Some of us did x. Some of us did y. Some of us did z.' and so on.

Some are happily married with children, one ends in infidelity then suicide, many are very bleak. It is hard to identify a person between paragraphs, but it is easy to tell that their lives are varied, up to a point: internment. After Pearl Harbor, all of their lives shift into fear, paranoia, and outright danger as many white people and politicians around them become increasingly hostile. Some are abducted at first, and then they all begin to shutter their windows and live in fear, then are all interned, and the final chapter is narrated from the perspective of everyone who is left, worrying, wondering, looting, and eventually forgetting about the Japanese people who once lived beside them.

This story was incredibly moving, bringing me to tears twice in 130 pages, but, like *Dispatches from Pluto*, it was also not challenging in the way *The Tunnel* and *Song of Solomon* were.

### **Why?**

To make a clear note of it: while I am charting failure with respect to ideology and the changing of it, there are other ways to measure the worth of art. History textbooks and Kandinsky paintings are still important, even if they did not contribute to moral education in the respect that I am analyzing in this research. However, more than a visually stunning painting or intellectually enriching textbook is necessary, challenging ideology is both more important and has more specific requirements not met by *Dispatches from Pluto* or *The Buddha in the Attic*, at least with respect to myself as a reader. These books were not up to challenging ideology, or at least not mine.

The themes and events a reader notices in a work of literature are always a product of their cultural background: linguistic, emotional, and educational. While the abstract idea of a theme might be thought of as universal, a theme in literature (from a phenomenological perspective) is a pattern between events

within and beyond the narrative that are recognizable to the reader. Since themes (like conflict) relating to a certain feature of a character's disposition (like Milkman's relationship with women) are up to the reader to recognize, we must consider all of these case studies in the context the viewer, in this case myself, which is why I have tried to mention the relevant features of my life in the first two case studies. In the negative case studies (*The Buddha in the Attic* and *Dispatches from Pluto*), what connections are missing? What lacks is a relationship between the ideologies of the protagonist and the reader, and moral conflict where that relationship exists. In other words, the character needs to be relatable to the reader, in a way that is directly relevant to the conflict/s of the story. If the character likes the same music as me, but their listening to music has nothing to do with the situations that create conflict, the similarity has little meaning with respect to attacking ideology.

*Song of Solomon* and *The Tunnel* are effective because they attacked ideology, specifically mine. This is another way of saying that the books are challenging, but it suggests the premise that tactics are necessary for the deconstruction of an ideology, rather than a direct approach. A direct approach would be something like a pure call to action or a simple criticism: 'you need to donate money to the Lebanese red cross.' Well, maybe I do, but just knowing someone else thinks that is not going to convince me one way or the other, and crucially, even if they tell me something new about the degree of suffering that Rohingyans are experiencing in Myanmar, escapism is quite easy— if it doesn't come up in my daily life, I can just ignore it, because I'll only feel bad about it if I think about it, and I won't think about it. I can distract myself for the next few minutes, and then very little in my world around me will remind me again, and I can continue with my game of solitaire undisturbed.

So we have to draw ideology out to attack it, by creating characters that see things in ways that are relevantly similar to our readers, and presenting them with the morally challenging situations they aren't having in real life, teaching them lessons about the relationship between their vision of 'real life' and how it is actually constructed: deconstructing their imaginary relationship to their living conditions. This is where *Song of Solomon* and *The Tunnel* both succeed while *The Buddha in the Attic* and *Dispatches from Pluto* fall short. An ideology is certainly present in all four of them, because all of the characters have imagined relationships to their living conditions, but the parts that are put under stress in the latter two are not relatable to my own ideology.

This is more serious than just making any ideological challenges happening to any characters in *Dispatches* less interesting for me as a reader, it makes them impossible to engage with as a morally challenged person, rather than an observer. It's like watching a horror movie where a character does something you would never do. You might still be worried about them, but you aren't fearing for your own life, you are fearing for theirs. Substitute life for ideology, and you have *Dispatches from Pluto*, at least as I experienced it.

## Conclusion

Some conclusions: first, knowledge of the Other's suffering is frequently insufficient to inspire change. Suicides at Foxconn are common knowledge, and so are deadly sweatshop fires, but both Foxconn is still running, and so are countless dangerous sweatshops.

Second, that this is all made possible by our distance, physical and mental, from those who suffer most from these arrangements. And because we can escape from the natural horror these moment inspire in us, we can also avoid them in art the same way. Because of this, readers need to learn lessons that strike at the core of their house and home— that come to mind when they have a conversation with a family member or buy a new pair of shoes.

Literature is important because it can provide these kinds of lessons. The verbal and durational and durational characteristics of the format give a reader enough time to identify with a character, then follow them through a dramatic challenging dilemma. They might end up making the same decision, or come to a totally different conclusion, either way they are confronted with a situation they have not met in their own lives, and will be armed with a new lesson henceforth.

It might be painful financially or emotionally, but it will stay with them in a way that knowledge about another person can't. Once learned, lessons about yourself are very hard to forget.

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