The Orphic Liar: The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

July 2017

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The University of Melbourne
Abstract

Though Plato claimed the quarrel between poetry and philosophy was already ancient, his exile of poets in from the republic marks an important foundational gesture for philosophy. This thesis suggests the quarrel is foundational in at least some of philosophy's prevailing modes of practice; and seeks to characterise the nature of the quarrel, and to consider what is at stake in philosophical practice where the exclusionary gesture is maintained. Chapters on Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Poetics and Kant's Critique of Judgement consider three sites in the history of philosophy where its relationship with poetry has been constitutive. The later chapters, on the work of Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita, consider some implications of philosophy's exile of poetry for its current modes of practice and suggest possibilities for reflective spaces philosophy might inhabit that are not dictated to it by the terms of the quarrel.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. This thesis comprises only my original work.

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

iii. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

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11 July 2017
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my supervisor Chris Cordner for his unfailing patience, and support. Thanks to my Co-supervisor and friend Adam Bartlett for his support and encouragement. Thanks also to Justin Clemens for his input. Thanks to my parents Mary and Patrick and my brother Daniel Kearney without whose indefatigable faith in me this undertaking would not have been possible. Thanks to my husband Jaymi Lawrence for the love and friendship, for all the cooking and especially for Henrietta. And thanks to my friends Rebecca, Helen, Richard, Toby, Louise, Annabel and Kate.
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Introduction

There is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

—Plato\(^1\)

I take philosophy to be... part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves.

—Bernard Williams\(^2\)

Since poetry deals with the singular, not the general, it cannot – if it is good poetry – look at things of this earth other than as colourful, variegated, and exciting, and so, it cannot reduce life, with all its pain, horror, suffering and ecstasy, to a unified tonality of boredom or complaint. By necessity poetry is therefore on the side of being against nothingness.

—Czeslaw Milosz\(^3\)

If a good characterisation of philosophy is, as Bernard Williams suggests, that it forms part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves, then philosophy’s relation to other kinds of attempts to make sense of life, its relation to other intellectual activities such as science, history, anthropology, psychology, and literature, is at issue. This is because ‘what philosophy is’ remains a live philosophical question and because part of philosophy’s self-definition and self-understanding has always been shaped by the ways in which it distinguishes itself from other reflective activities. One of the most important and fundamental of such distinctions for philosophers' characterisation of the subject’s aims and methods is, and

has historically been, its distinction from poetry. In this thesis I look at the
relation between philosophy and poetry in terms of what is perhaps the
most familiar and persistent characterisation of that relation – Plato’s
insistence that there is an ancient quarrel between them.

Returning to some of the first origins of philosophy as a discourse in
classical Greece – first efforts by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – to designate
the objects and methods of philosophical enquiry, we find there a special
relationship to literature: poetry is the thing which philosophy demarcates
itself most forcefully from, so that poetry has a special significance in
philosophy’s initial efforts to define itself. In *The Republic* Plato sets out to
found the discourse of philosophy. Central to this endeavour is the
distinction that he labours to draw between philosophy and poetry in the
form of the attack on poets in which he states in no uncertain terms that
they cannot stay; that there is no place for them in the ‘republic of
philosophy.’ Since Plato made it a founding delineation for philosophy the
question of the nature of its relationship to poetry has been an internal
question for philosophy; a question concerning, at the very deepest level,
what philosophy is and what modes of practice it is aligned with or at odds
with.

My objective here is to provide an illuminating characterisation of the
nature of the quarrel – the nature, that is, of philosophy’s exclusionary
gesture; and to articulate what is at issue in their long running dispute,
from the Platonic censure to the way that censure is retained in certain
modes of philosophical practice. I maintain that from the historical
recommendation that poets be banished from the *polis*, this conflict has
pervaded philosophy; I aim to show how this ancient quarrel is operative in
contemporary philosophical contexts, and to count the cost, for philosophy,
of its exile of poetry. That the quarrel is foundational for philosophy raises
meta-philosophical problems: ‘what philosophy is’ is a question about which
it always harbours a certain anxiety. The traditional way of marking the
difference between philosophy and those things from which it may wish to
be distinguished is to recognise strategies of argument, logical inference,
ratiocination, application of general rules or principles and critical conceptual reflection as philosophical; and those of image, cadence, ambiguity and metaphor, expressive forms of language, narrative, fiction and drama as something ‘merely’ poetic or aesthetic. Hence the opposition that emerges between philosophy and poetry is paralleled and underpinned by other oppositions: reason to imagination, intellect to emotion and literal to figurative language.

Philosophy’s pretension to methodological supremacy, in the exile of poetry, is motivated by the assumption that philosophical thinking is clear and objective in contrast to literary forms which always give us something less than that – something fuzzy or lacking in secure foundations. A reason, I think, for that persistent assumption is that literature tends to be grounded in the concretely human forms of life as we live it, and therefore is not universalisable in the way philosophy tends to be. To the extent that poetry generalises (or is generalizable) it does not do so in a way that is objective or systematic – it does not and cannot, as Milosz says, “reduce life, with all its pain, horror, suffering and ecstasy, to a unified tonality.” This clearly puts poetry at odds with a conception of philosophy whose aim is to unify particular, concrete forms of life into something that is rendered objective and universalisable. While I do not want to obliterate the differences between the philosophical and the poetic cast of mind by suggesting that philosophy somehow become poetic, I do want to question philosophy’s tendency to appoint itself adjudicator of other styles of thought, other reflective activities, and other attempts to make the best sense of our life in the situation in which we find ourselves.

Throughout these chapters I refer to ‘poetry’, ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’ variously. Though the ancient quarrel is between philosophy and poetry, I do not confine my discussion to verse forms, and I have written as though the points I make about the discourse of poetry applies also to other forms of imaginative literature, such as fiction, drama, narrative etc. When I use the term ‘literature’, unless otherwise specified, I refer to imaginative literature generally, inclusive of poetry and the literary arts; and not to the broader
sense of literature that designates all written works. I must acknowledge
that the distinctions between what we may regard as belonging to the
literary arts and to other genres, sometimes including philosophy, are often
far from clear. I have not made much of that fact, for I do not regard it as an
issue that need be directly engaged for my discussion to proceed.

The first three chapters, on Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Poetics* and
Kant's *Critique of Judgement* respectively, are an engagement with three
foundational moments in the history of philosophy where its relationship
with poetry has been articulated in a constitutive way. Plato’s attack on
poets and Aristotle’s reply (or what has at any rate often been construed as
a reply) together form what I take to be the original statement of the
quarrel. My approach here differs from other critical readings of the
relationship between these two texts in that I take *The Poetics* as the
completion of the quarrel rather than as a defence of poetry. Kant’s writings
in aesthetics represent a modern reiteration of the elements of that original
quarrel.

**Chapter One** is a reading of *The Republic* that shows how Plato’s
banishing of the poets has defined philosophy from the outset; and so
establishes that the quarrel with poetry has a special, foundational role in
philosophy’s delimitation of the objects of its critical attention and the
methods of their acquisition. I show that the well-known attacks on poetry
in Books III and X are supported by the subtler ways that poetry is
unseated by philosophy through the whole dialogue. I argue, against the
grain of a large body of interpretation that seeks to downplay or excuse the
attack on poets, that the indictment against them is utterly serious, and
that the usurpation of poetry by philosophy is vital to Plato’s aim of
establishing philosophy as the discourse of knowledge and the dialectical
labour as its method. Thus, I suggest, this gesture is utterly integral to
philosophy’s self-image as the discourse of truth, and also to subsequent
philosophical responses to poetry.

In **Chapter Two** my reading of *The Poetics* finds that far from
defending poetry, Aristotle completes its takeover by philosophy, partly from
his effort to correct Plato’s philosophical assumptions. I argue that in *Poetics* poetry is granted a certain reprieve from the moralism and didacticism of the Platonic censure, and though this may seem to give something back to poetry it does so only with one hand, while taking something more fundamental away with the other. Poetry does not win out in Aristotle’s defence of it because it is shielded from the Platonic censure by being domesticated into philosophy – in Aristotle’s characteristic strategy of categorisation and formalisation. This he achieves by the most familiar elements of his ‘defence’: that, he says, poetry is more philosophical than history since it deals in universals; that it is spiritually beneficial through *catharsis*, and that it is amenable to formulation and analysis. Furthermore Aristotle subordinates, one might even say eliminates, the creative imagination with his formalistic concerns – remarking that the ability to produce metaphor is the only thing that can’t be learned, that it is ‘a sign of natural talent.’ Insofar as *The Poetics* seems to be a defence of poetry – made (as Plato insisted it must be) by a philosopher – it reflects the expectation not that poetry will be acquitted, but that, if it is to be readmitted, it will have to be reformed and effectively civilised.

It may seem a big leap from there to Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, but there are good reasons for critically engaging with this text as another, but modern, moment in what, by this point, really has become an ancient quarrel. To make that case I show (in outline since I cannot hope to show it in detail) that there is an important link between the categories and concepts of modern aesthetics and those of *The Poetics* (which might, with some caution, be regarded as an early aesthetic text). If it were possible to trace a trajectory of the quarrel from its classical beginnings then one would have to follow that trajectory into – and through – the domain of philosophical aesthetics since a good deal of philosophy's engagement with poetry came to rest in that philosophical domain. One might be tempted to think that the quarrel with poetry has in some way been answered, or ameliorated, in the discourse of aesthetics – that philosophical delimitation which undertakes to characterise the nature and functions of the fine arts...
and to place them in the context of other modes of thought such as epistemology and ethics. I will argue, however, that aesthetics is too much a philosophical discipline to help us illuminate what is most deeply at issue in this quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

Having said that The Poetics is one kind of reply to Plato’s criticisms, and having suggested that it is an early form of aesthetics insofar as aesthetics is an extension of philosophy’s attempts to explicate poetry (and art) by placing it in a broader system that is philosophically given, in **Chapter Three** I argue that Aesthetics as a branch of modern philosophy came into its own with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. I show that a paradox about how art is treated surfaces in Kant’s thought that looks very like the one encountered in Aristotle’s: that art is recused from censure only in a gesture that subordinates it to philosophy. As I will show, the mechanism here turns out to be quite different – where Aristotle thinks poetry is proto-philosophy, this is not what is going on in Kant. Disinterestedness, one of the cardinal categories of Kantian aesthetics, not only protects poetry from philosophy, but protects philosophy from poetry. Kant encourages the idea that poetry is, as the other fine arts, an object for aesthetic reflection. This, I think, is problematic – but philosophically convenient because it eclipses the way in which poetry is not much like other arts (for example the plastic arts), and is, in one important sense at least, much more like philosophy – sharing with it the medium of language. Plato was worried that poetry would mistakenly be taken to be doing the things that philosophy does; in Kant’s formulation this possibility is excluded.

**Chapter Four** mediates between the first and second halves of the thesis. Having characterised the discourse of philosophy in terms of some of its historical and foundational relations and responses to literature this chapter focuses on literature from the point of view of ways we might conceptualise and speak about it that are not dictated to by philosophy. In this chapter I suggest some concepts – types of concepts – that can open up a way to talk about poetry’s vital responsiveness to the world in a way that acknowledges (what Seamus Heaney has called) its ‘truth to life’. This is
necessarily an open-ended discussion. The terms I use are not meant to be
definitive, formulaic or final, but examples of the kind of approach we might
take to the forms of thinking about life that poetry and literature show us.
‘Witness’ I borrow from Czeslaw Milosz; ‘redress’ from Seamus Heaney;
‘invocation’ from Robert Graves. I begin in this chapter to consider how our
life with concepts is shaped by literature. The cost for philosophy of its exile
of poetry is its exclusion of certain forms of attention to life – like those
suggested by the concepts of witness, redress and invocation, as part of our
attempts to make the best sense of things.

The final chapters of this thesis move the discussion from an
historical to a contemporary setting, to consider the implications of
philosophy’s exile of poetry for its current modes of practice and to suggest
some possible reflective spaces philosophy might inhabit that are not
dictated to it by the terms of the quarrel. **Chapter Five** focuses on the
philosophical thought of Cora Diamond, in particular on her paper *Anything
but Argument?* Against Onora O’Neill’s insistence that in order to make a
convincing appeal to a better moral view that appeal must be made by
argument, Diamond points out that literature is a different sort of appeal,
which does not go by argument, and she questions the cogency of the
philosophical tendency to rule literature’s modes of reflection out on narrow
philosophical grounds. I argue that Diamond’s probing of the issue reveals
philosophy’s tendency (in a certain mood at least) to simply rule literature
out, *ipso facto*, as another kind of attempt to make the best sense of our life.
This chapter shows that the philosophical censure of poetry is alive and well
in philosophical practice even (perhaps especially) where literature, per se,
is not itself at issue for philosophy, by pointing out the limitations of some
prevailing methods of contemporary analytic moral philosophy that stem
from the exile of poetry. It suggests the conception of moral thinking on
which that exclusion is based, is subject to certain delusions about what
argument can accomplish. I suggest also that analytic styles of philosophy
operate under assumptions about what philosophy is, and what reflective
engagement in moral thinking is, that suffer from a chronic blindness to
forms of thinking and forms of life that are morally salient and that are frequently explored in literature. In this chapter I count the cost, for philosophy, of its exile of poetry in terms of a narrowing of the moral sphere. I argue that redress can be sought by looking at the modes of moral attention and thought in literature. As Iris Murdoch suggested, “...we must come back to what we know about great art and the moral insight which it contains and the moral achievement it represents.”

In Chapter Six I look at the work of Raimond Gaita as someone whose writing seeks to bring authentic reflection on lived-ness as another, different mode, to bear in a philosophically reflective space. In The Philosopher’s Dog our conception of the possibility of friendship with animals, and more broadly, our moral relation to them, is explored by exploring the depth of our conception of friendship that is given meaning by all our relationships, or all our encounters with the possible meanings of friendship for us. Not, Gaita shows, by deciding what friendship between people means and then deciding whether it can apply to our relations to animals. The aim of this chapter is to show that there are other spaces which philosophy can occupy; spaces informed by thinking about life in a way that poetry and narrative make possible, rather than by the tendency to conceive of philosophical practice in narrowly argumentative, epistemological terms.

It may be objected that I have, in adopting this particular approach, passed over or ignored compelling alternatives – alternative conceptions of the relations between philosophy and literature in philosophical contexts in which literature finds a more favourable reception: that I have passed over vast areas of continental philosophy – of German romanticism, existentialism, and deconstruction – to name only three obvious areas in which a quite different sort of interaction between the discourses takes root. To such an objection I can only say that no starting point in philosophy is likely to be uncontroversial and my way of formulating the issues and

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tracing them is just one way of doing so. The question is vast and in the absence of anything to recommend my approach over other possibilities to those for whom it will seem that I have arbitrarily chosen my points of engagement, I can only reply that I have tried to show how they are – or can be – connected, though I am bound to admit that there would have been many alternatives. Rather than argue too forcefully for the path I have taken, I hope to support it by showing that is critically and reflectively salient without intending to imply that there would not be other, alternative ways of thinking about the connections and disconnections between the discourses of philosophy and poetry.

Yet I maintain that my particular approach yields some important insights: that there is, at the heart of a good deal of philosophical practice, an historical and renewed exile of literature and that there is a cost for philosophy in this exile. Therefore in order to raise certain questions about the philosophical discourse we need to see how its relation to literature bears on it, and I suggest that a conception of philosophy not defined by literature's exile can offer a reflectively compelling view of certain ideas and concepts which philosophy has tended to claim analytic exclusivity over. I want to engage with philosophy's aim to contribute to ordinary ways of going on in the world; to making the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves, as well as contribute to philosophical understanding of the concepts involved in some of philosophy's particular kinds of attempts.

This work makes a contribution to philosophical thought in several particular areas: it makes a contribution to general meta-philosophical reflections, by a series of reminders that the personal and cultural space for the practice of philosophy has never been fixed. The concerns I address also contribute more specifically to the particular areas of aesthetics and moral philosophy. For instance, my reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* and of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* suggest there is a paradox at the heart of aesthetics whereby it recuses poetry of censure by domesticating it into the philosophical discourse. This work contributes to the area of moral
philosophy and critical questions concerning its aims and methods in the analytic tradition by looking at some of what is inherent in philosophy’s prevailing modes of practice in this area. Here, the kinds of philosophical blindness which I suggest are constitutively related to the philosophical exile of poetry are neither minor nor isolated debates but endemic in a style of philosophy that is, if not ubiquitous, then often dominant in the academy and highly influential in contemporary moral philosophy. It is not just about philosophy paying more attention to literature, it’s a criticism of that way of doing philosophy, a philosophical criticism that the prevailing modes of practice in this area are insufficiently attentive to certain things and the cause of that inattention is the quarrel with poetry.
Chapter 1.

The Bitch that Snaps at her Master: Plato’s Attack on Poets

1.

It is well known that Plato enacts a particularly harsh judgement on poetry and poets in *The Republic*, and claims that there is an ancient conflict between poetry and philosophy. Elsewhere he connects poetry with divine inspiration, and that theme returns in various guises throughout the Platonic corpus, but Books III and X of *The Republic* are where he metes out his most sustained discussion of poetry; and his harshest criticisms. The attack is scathing: Plato censors the greatest poetry of his culture virtually out of existence before banishing the poets from the city. Whether this can be taken as his final word on the matter across the whole of his writings is outside the scope of this chapter, but the question remains whether it can be taken as such even in the dialogue under discussion. Given Socrates’ penchant for irony, is there any reason to take his attack on poetry seriously? And given Plato’s hesitancy, his minimal preservation of poetry, his allusion to certain conditions under which its re-admittance may be considered, should we not perhaps think that he doesn’t quite mean it? I will argue that Plato does mean it; that his attack on poets is uncompromising; their banishment unmitigated; and that there is less inconsistency between the substance of the attack and the ways in which it appears to be tempered than is often supposed.

The literature on Plato’s quarrel with the poets is voluminous, comprising a great variety of interpretations of its basis and significance in Platonic thought.¹ It is true, as noted by Havelock and others, that a vast

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¹ G.M.A. Grube writes: “In *The Republic*, art is discussed entirely from the point of view of the educator and statesman.” G.M.A. Grube, *Plato’s Thought*, Methuen, London, 1935, p182. Iris Murdoch emphasises the moral dimension of Plato’s critique: “Much of what Plato says about art is concerned with the results of its consumption in terms which are
quantity of this literature seeks to downplay Plato’s critique of art, by such strategies as interpreting it within the framework of a utopian vision; arguing that Plato means only to condemn ‘bad art;’ (for instance, certain types of mimetic art); or that Plato is primarily concerned with its detrimental moral effects, and thus with its pedagogical power within the existing social structure. My own view of where these arguments fail is that they tend to overlook the point that that the quarrel with poetry is essential to philosophy as Plato means to define it. Certainly morality and education may be the main battlegrounds, but they are not the whole reason for the conflict. Plato does engage poetry on all of these fronts, but he also, crucially, engages it at the level of its essential nature – at the level of the kind of thing that it is. Plato’s gravest worries concern poetry’s effects, but (for him) it is philosophy that in the first place is capable of raising those concerns and philosophy that is capable of ameliorating them. The Republic sets out to show why poetry cannot be a discourse of knowledge, and this opposition between philosophy and poetry is needed to show what the discourse of knowledge is: the philosophical state is founded by virtue of its distinction from poetry.

Plato clearly struggled with the antipathy between poetry and philosophy in his own work; himself having been at one time a composer of lyric verses, and his poetic proclivity having survived, albeit transformed by philosophy, in his dialogues. Hans-Georg Gadamer introduces his analysis of The Republic with an anecdote which has it that in his youth Plato wrote several tragedies which, after becoming a disciple of Socrates, he burned. Gadamer suggests that this is the key to understanding the attack on poetry: Plato burned his poetry not because he could not be a good or successful poet, but because he no longer considered it a worthwhile goal.


With particular specificity in his argument from the third remove mimetic relation of art to the forms outlined in Book X.
and Gadamer puts this in terms of his having made a choice against poetry and for philosophy. But why burn his poetry, why not just discard it? That Plato made a choice for philosophy against poetry is clear, and is instructive on the tensions between poetry and philosophy in his own work. If this story were true then it would suggest a very personally felt reason for Plato to bring philosophy to life out of the ashes of poetry: that he brought himself into being as a philosopher through the purgative effect of this act of burning. In any case, Gadamer’s anecdote aside, given Plato’s status as a great artist (and a great admirer of the poets) it does appear as though there is a dimension of personal struggle for Plato in the quarrel. Grube also notes the personal nature of this choice: “It is in his own mind, we may believe, that the quarrel between art and philosophy had to be fought out in the first instance.”

There is of course a great deal of the poet left in Plato the philosopher, and this makes us feel uneasy about the ferocity of his attack – but it similarly appears to have made Plato himself uneasy, and, for this reason, may account for that ferocity; perhaps he is not wholly able to resolve the fight he has picked with poetry, perhaps he does not want to. This tension is integral to the quarrel, and tends to plague the critic: given Plato’s frequent and adroit use of the resources of poetry, the attack on poets and indeed his general hostility to art seems to warrant an explanation, one that will have to account for the reasons he may have for employing poetry in order to condemn it. The contradiction Plato presents us with is, I suspect, intractable as he seems not to have made peace with it himself. Nonetheless, I will argue, Plato’s use of poetry in his philosophical writings should be read through the quarrel as the philosophical usurpation of poetry; and in The Republic where he appears to mitigate poetry’s

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3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato, P. Christopher Smith, Trans., Yale University Press, London, 1980, p40. Gadamer offers no documentation for the source of this anecdote, and acknowledges that the story may be ‘some fictitious formulation.’

4 Grube, 1935, p179. Grube reads the quarrel as a justification by the philosopher of his victory over the artist.
banishment, it is only at the behest of philosophy – so the terms of its re-admittance are at the same time those of its condemnation.

My aim in this chapter, then, is to present a reading of The Republic that takes the quarrel with poetry as central to the philosophical aims of this dialogue, an approach which offers an advantage in grasping the reasons for the attack and in revealing the nature of the antipathy between poetry and philosophy – why there is a quarrel and what is at issue between them. On this reading the quarrel with poetry is not confined to the parts (mostly Books III and X) where it is made explicit by Plato’s particular grievances, but those arguments can be seen to be situated in the performative aspect of the dialogue in which philosophy is shown to be the discourse of knowledge and in which the displacement of poetry is fundamental to that endeavour. In other words, the quarrel with poetry is not merely incidental to the (theoretical or practical) existence of the philosophical state, but a necessary condition of it; the displacement of poetry is vital to the philosophical labour of The Republic. That the quarrel with poetry should appear in its strongest form in a dialogue that is widely acknowledged as one of the most explicit, and important statements of Platonic philosophy is highly significant.

My argument opens up a tentative distinction between on the one hand the particular and well-rehearsed arguments Plato marshals against poetry in Books III and X, and on the other, the way in which poetry is unseated in favour of philosophy throughout the whole dialogue. Such a distinction, of course, can’t be too starkly drawn and I don’t assume that it would have been explicit in Plato’s mind. The arguments he raises against poetry prefigure and justify this unseating, but if one identifies the quarrel only with these arguments, the broader aims of the dialogue and the role of the quarrel in those broader aims might be missed. Indeed I think this is especially important given the tendency within the scholarship to explain away the attack on poets.

Some of the arguments Plato raises against the poets are clearly situated in particular historical, cultural or idiosyncratic contexts and may
therefore seem uninstructive or irrelevant to a contemporary audience, yet as we shall see, others are easily recognisable in a contemporary context. But focusing on the content of Plato’s arguments alone will not suffice to capture the nature of the quarrel with poetry, and of what is at stake in it. The usurpation of poetry by philosophy is the aim of *The Republic*, inasmuch as its aim is to establish philosophy as the discourse of knowledge and the dialectical labour as its method. The role of poetry is central, since a new ruler must depose an old one, but also because Plato brings it about by dint of his effort to define philosophy out of his rejection of poetry. What can be called philosophy before Plato? At this stage, philosophy is not a fully constituted entity, and Plato’s aim is to constitute it; to found a discourse that is not subject to the vicissitudes of poetry.

Plato puts considerable juice into his arguments concerning just what is wrong with poetry and why it must be struck out, but if his arguments seem overstated, they are supported by the far more subtle way in which poetry is unseated: a gradual unseating at work through the whole dialogue; a Socratic winnowing away of the husks of seeming and appearing, in which poetry’s presence is constantly felt (even, at times, where it is absent) as that from which philosophy is distinguished, and in being so, comes to be what it is. But to say that the judgement in *The Republic* stands, is not to say that Plato’s attitude to poetry, even there, is unambiguous. And the issue of this ambiguity is in many ways the most difficult but also the most revealing aspect of the quarrel. The attack is vehement, but at the same time its ambiguity shows up in the hesitancy of its delivery, and in Plato’s own use of the resources of poetry. There have been attempts in its wake to smooth over this ambiguity, but I will argue that it is the key to understanding the strength of Plato’s attack on the poets.

A close reading of the polemic against poetry in this text will reveal many of its complaints to pertain to particular facts of Ancient Greek society, (the pedagogical dominance of the poets for instance); or alternatively to Plato’s metaphysical commitments – and their implications for a mimetic characterisation of poetry. It will similarly reveal that many of
his arguments against poetry are highly questionable, (that dramatic imitation is morally and metaphysically suspect); or peculiar, (the suggestion that poets write about beds and tables). The content of the polemic is familiar: the arguments are first made on moral and epistemological grounds, and finally on metaphysical grounds, progressing from censorship to exile. Poetry is revealed to be the worst kind of illusion – falsehood masquerading as truth, its dangers of persuasion and intoxication are exposed; poetry is vanquished. The clemencies are familiar enough too: poetry can be permitted to return, provided a case can be made for it on philosophical grounds.

Plato’s scathing indictment of poetry warrants an explanation that resists resolving the question by reading it primarily as a moral argument or a social critique, both of which represent standard critical approaches to the text. If what is at issue between poetry and philosophy is confined to Plato’s arguments in Books III and X, then the possibilities for such an explanation will be limited. That is, the quarrel with poetry in this dialogue is indispensable to the dialogue’s philosophical purpose, and we need to look at the whole text to see that for Plato something fundamental to the nature of philosophy is at stake in it. He defines philosophy in opposition to poetry, out of its ashes, because they share so much in common. There’s no problem distinguishing between things that are obviously different, and no pressing need to do so. But for philosophy and poetry there is considerable shared territory, and to establish philosophy as the discourse of knowledge Plato will need to claim it. So the quarrel is a colonising of poetry’s territory, and at the same time it is the contestation of poetry’s claim to reveal the deepest and most inaccessible truths.⁵

2.

Plato’s arguments against poetry occur primarily in Books III and X of The Republic, and of themselves represent a relatively small proportion of the

text, but the quarrel begins in the initial exchanges between Socrates and his first interlocutor, Cephalus; who remarks that with advancing age, and the nearness of death, he finds:

The stories about another world, and about punishment in a future life for wrongs done in this, at which he once used to laugh, begin to torment his mind with the fear that they may be true.⁶

And this, he implies, is what prompts one to consider whether he is conscious of any wrongdoing. These stories, Socrates will stress soon enough, are those of the poets, but the issue is not taken up here. This exchange however foreshadows a specific complaint made in Book III: that the poets’ terrifying accounts of the afterlife cause fear of death and encourage cowardice in their audience. As such it prefigures what is really the pinnacle of Plato’s arguments against poetry: his belief in its deleterious effect on the very soul of man. Plato isn’t worried just that poetry is frequently mistaken; he thinks it is misleading and dangerous. Plato still appreciates, even reveres, poetry (an attitude which haunts the dialogue) and we might imagine his being able to forgive some of its transgressions from his enlightened vantage of seeing it for what it is – the philosopher has no illusions about the power of poetry. But everybody lauds the wisdom of the poets, and ‘everybody’ is a thing in thrall to poetry as its source of knowledge and truth. Thus in this early passage we learn of the way that poetry has engendered in Cephalus what will only gradually be revealed as a misconception of justice, one that Socrates will spend a great deal of the ensuing dialogue trying to debunk: that justice arises out of fear of reprisal, or some other self-interest, rather than out of a desire for justice itself.

Socrates, a little further on in this opening exchange, checking that the definition of justice first defended by Cephalus is sufficiently rebuked, says: "well then, telling the truth and returning what we have borrowed is not the definition of doing right."⁷

Upon Cephalus’ assent Polemarchus

⁷ 331d.
interjects: "Oh yes it is...at any rate if we are to believe Simonides."\(^8\) This remark, almost flippant, which might easily be passed over without notice, augers the grounds on which the quarrel will be contested: knowledge. It is of enormous significance that the very first thing that Socrates’ youthful interlocutor does is appeal to the authority of the poets. The ‘yes it is’ seems emphatic, yet it is immediately tempered by the somewhat ambiguous tone of the qualification ‘if we are to believe Simonides.’ so that Polemarchus both asserts the poets authority and seems at the same time to retract it just a little; to falter just a little on that assertion. This faltering represents the faltering of poetry at the authority of philosophy as the dialogue progresses.

Socrates replies to this interjection with characteristic irony, managing to both revere and ridicule the poet in the same breath: “It is difficult to disagree with Simonides...he had the poet’s wisdom and inspiration; but though he may know what he meant by what he said, I’m afraid I don’t.”\(^9\) So the interrogation of the conventional view of justice takes off from an interrogation of Simonides, and the method of its philosophical realisation will be the discrediting of the poets. “It looks” says Socrates (a few lines on) “as if Simonides was talking about what is right with a poet’s ambiguity.”\(^10\) Plato will elaborate on the nature of this ambiguity in Books III and X; and return to it as the thing against which philosophy struggles to define itself in the intervening books where he will lay out his view concerning the proper object of knowledge and the proper method of its acquisition.

With the development of the conversation about justice in the first book, the work of poets is frequently cited to illustrate views which, whilst being popular, will be exposed by Socrates as ultimately untenable. This tension shows up again and again throughout the dialogue. On the subject of unworthy motives commonly given for right conduct Glaucon has this to say:

\(^8\) 331d.  
\(^9\) 331e.  
\(^10\) 332b.
For fathers tell their sons, and pastors and masters of all kinds urge their charges to be just not because they value justice for itself, but for the good reputation it brings... and they go on to enlarge on the importance of reputation, and add that if a man stands well with heaven there is a whole list of benefits available for the pious, citing the authority of Hesiod and Homer. For Hesiod says that for the just, the gods make the oaks bear “acorns at the top, bees in the middle”, while his wool bearing sheep are weighed down by their fleeces”. And Homer speaks in similar terms of “some perfect king, ruling with the fear of god in his heart, and upholding the right, so that the dark soil yields its wheat and barley, the trees are laden with ripe fruit...”

Here Plato shows that the appeal to the poets is ubiquitous in giving authority to the social structure as it stands – fathers, pastors and masters of all kinds rely on poetry to mediate their own didactic aims; but more importantly it shows that the poets’ works are used in service of spurious ends. In Book III Plato will show that poetry has the power to cause mischief and strife, but before we even get there, we are shown that even if poetry can instil a sense of justice, as this passage suggests, it does so for the wrong reasons. Philosophy entails that one is clear about one’s motivations for right conduct, and that this clarity is achieved by transcending the kinds of motivations that rely on self interest in favour of the thing itself. Not only can poetry not give rise to that kind of clarity, but it frustrates its acquisition by drawing us back into the panoply of worldly concerns. This, we might object, isn’t the fault of the poets, but that of the fathers, pastors and masters of all kinds who appropriate their works; and indeed, Plato will begin his attack on poetry by trying to wrest education from its clutches, through a series of charges against its content, but the attack on poetry at this level is readily surpassed by an attack on what poetry is in form and nature; the kind of discourse that it is – and Plato's worries about its content and form are overshadowed by his worries concerning its effects.

Further on into Glaucon’s speech it is suggested that if one aligns oneself with the poets, one had better devote oneself entirely to

364a-c.
appearances, since “the sages tell me that appearance has more force than reality.” (Following a reference from Pindar: Shall I by justice reach the higher stronghold, or by deceit?) In the text leading up to Book III, where the attack on poets begins in earnest, there are many such morsels, which demonstrate the opposition Plato is trying to set up between the clarity achievable by the philosophical labour of the dialogue and the obfuscations of poetry. Rather than rehearse them all here I prefer to sketch the role that they play: in these opening passages the odd comment about poetry here or there in the course of a conversation otherwise focused on the nature of justice might seem like minor asides, the hostility towards poets might slip under the radar, but by Book III we have been exposed to just enough examples of the disingenuousness of the poets that we are sufficiently plied and presumably ready to accept the attack. And plied we will need to be; Plato is all too aware of how shocking his treatment of the poets will seem, but that will only add to its urgency.

In Book I, the conversation about justice is introduced as the principle theme of The Republic, and the background against which the struggle to define philosophy, and against which its tussle with poetry will take place. A just society will need to be one which operates with a solid notion of what justice is – what it is in itself, and it will be a function of the philosophical labour to establish the nature of the ‘in itself’ as the true nature of justice. The deposal of poetry is, in this dialogue, occurring in stages, beginning with Cephalus, upon whom the Socratic questioning is relatively gentle. Cephalus is old, and soon leaves the conversation, to attend to the sacrifices. The old order is content with old pieties, and it is left to the young – Polymarchus and Thraxymacus, to battle over the question of justice in a dialectical fashion. The point for Plato is that poetry fails to speak coherently and consistently about justice, and as such a new discourse is needed. The whole dialogue is a demonstration of how poetry fails in this regard. The structure of the dialogue is instructive and significant. As we’ve seen, the poets’ presence is felt from the outset as the thing against which

12 365c.
philosophy will rail. The setting out of requirements for the just state begins and ends with (is bracketed by) the attack on poetry, which, it is made abundantly clear, is the most important initial step, and the most important concluding one. In the intervening books the picture of the just state is gradually filled out in an assiduous process of defining the nature and objectives of philosophy. Poetry is largely absent from these parts of the discussion. In them Plato is effectively claiming the territory that it occupies for philosophy by dint of the form of the dialogue itself, in which he demonstrates the philosophical dialectic in. This dialectic includes, in many places, elaborate metaphors and allegories (such as the metaphor of the cave) in which Plato adroitly uses the resources of poetry in establishing the philosophical discourse and demonstrating its primacy. Thus *The Republic* can be read as a gradual sifting of the falsehoods and excesses of poetry out of those aspects of it which can be efficacious for philosophy.

In Book II the first principles of social organisation are introduced beginning with the bare minimum conditions for a society to exist at all, followed by the minimal conditions of ‘civilised society’ which will include luxuries like perfumes and furniture, and such non-necessary occupations (in the arts) as that of the poets. The suggestion that poets are not necessary, that poetry is not a necessary part of society, would have sounded quite radical; even to us it should sound strange, but to Plato’s contemporaries the idea would have been difficult to comprehend. In the context of recommended (proper) social organisation Plato introduces the ‘guardian class’, and since his main concern is with the production of philosopher rulers, the rest of *The Republic* is largely devoted to the educational measures needed to turn the guardians into philosophers. Thus a great deal of the focus in this dialogue is on education, and a great deal of the attack on poetry takes off also from there. One of the problems of poetry being the educator is that it can so easily be turned any which way, as Socrates is always showing, and so a main preoccupation for Plato, in seeking to establish the ideal state – which is that based on philosophically
established concepts such as 'justice itself', is in showing the dangers posed by poetry as educator.

3.

In Book III, with the preliminaries out of the way, the setting out of the conditions for the ideal state begins in earnest, and takes off from a harsh criticism of poetry where an uncompromising programme of censorship is enacted on existing poetry. For the new thing to be built the old thing will have to be torn down, (or burned); poetry represents the old order and it obstructs the creation of the new one. Plato's arguments against poetry are situated in the context of the pedagogical role of poets in his culture, and take the form of stipulations concerning education.

There are three main strands of argument in this section. In the first place Plato complains that poets make up fictions; they distort things as they 'really are' by portraying the gods and heroes as mischievous and licentious, and by representing God who is changeless and the cause only of good, as deceitful and wicked. In the second place he finds these stories are morally unsuitable: both because they are false (a peculiar stipulation since poetry is not a documentary exercise), but also because of the morally inappropriate nature of their content, and the latter, it turns out, is a more important criterion for censorship than poetry's lack of factuality. Particular issue is taken with the story of the emasculation of Ouranos by Chronos (told by Hesiod); concerning it Socrates says: “even if it were true it would be best to say nothing about it”13 Just in case such stories are true they are nonetheless excluded, to “persuade (the citizens) that no citizen has ever quarrelled with any other.”14 Plato's worries about the factual fidelities of poetry are similarly overshadowed by the qualification that lies and fictions are permissible when they are deemed necessary to encourage the desired characteristics in the citizens. Here, again, Plato is gradually appropriating or owning certain aspects of poetry which he puts finally to use in the 'noble

13 378a.
14 378c.
fiction’ with which the dialogue concludes. In the third place, Plato moves from criticising the content of poetry to its form, in particular its use of dramatic representation. (Here he introduces mimesis as a pejorative description of poetry but the term lacks the content it gains by Book X where it will be informed by the theory of forms introduced in the intervening sections.) His criticism is that speaking (ie. acting or writing) outside one’s own character is courting falsehood, and is destructive of self-unity and self-restraint. Obviously there is a conflict here since nearly all Plato’s own philosophy is written in the form of dramatic dialogue, and the suggestion that such imitation is morally suspect is quickly tempered by the qualification that this form of mimesis is particularly harmful when it is used to represent persons of bad character. The right sorts of characters may be represented – characters like Socrates for instance, but representation of the morally degraded character is undesirable.

The overarching concern of Book III is therefore with the detrimental effects of poetry. It is insisted that “the poets stop giving their present gloomy account of the afterlife”\textsuperscript{15} because it instils fear and erodes courage. Plato recommends that censorship ought to: “cut out pitiful laments by famous men”\textsuperscript{16} and “all the weeping and lamenting that the poet describes,”\textsuperscript{17} Also that “we don’t want our guardians to be too fond of laughter either,”\textsuperscript{18} as excessive outbursts of woe or mirth causes the like in its audience, to deleterious effect on their temperance of mind and self-restraint. Plato’s moralistic proclivities reveal him as something of a puritan, about which he is unapologetic, but the stakes for him are high: the prize is justice in itself (the prize is the ‘in itself’) which he labours to show can not be found in the protean nature of poetry.

What are we to make of this polemic against poetry? It can’t go without saying that Plato’s arguments here are meant as an indictment on contemporary Greek society, and of the dominant pedagogical role of poetry

\textsuperscript{15} 386b. \\
\textsuperscript{16} 387d. \\
\textsuperscript{17} 388b. \\
\textsuperscript{18} 389a.
therein. Plato's response to particular aspects of his society is certainly strong enough to suggest that the polemic against poetry is predominately a function this social critique, as Eric. A. Havelock argues: “The Republic sets itself a problem which is not philosophical in the special sense of the term, but social and cultural,” and “The Republic is an attack on the existing social apparatus.”

Havelock is correct that Plato is having a go at contemporary society, and that the polemic against poetry is central to that end, but he has overlooked the broader aims of the text, which are precisely philosophical in that ‘special sense’ and which in point of fact aim to define that special sense in which something is philosophy. The moral and pedagogical aspects of the attack are features of this emerging distinction. But Havelock's observations do explain some of the particular, and perhaps peculiar, aspects of the arguments given in Book III. If Plato seems overly anxious about the content of the Homeric epics, for example, it is because they were the mainstay of Greek education and tradition, and the locus for its moral and religious teachings. If he seems overly preoccupied by poetry's emotional excesses, it is because every educated citizen had learned to recite the epics and their performance would likely have often been a bawdy and boisterous affair.

The most surprising thing about these arguments is the level of censorship they call for. Once the Socratic scalpel is finished its work not much is left. The ferocity of the attack is remarkable; in just a few short pages Plato provides in excess of forty quotations in order to discredit them and suggest their excision; the censorship is harsh and exacting. Plato clearly has his reasons, and perhaps he isn't wrong to worry about the malign influences of popular culture, but we shall have to decide whether to agree with his arguments for censorship on the basis of whether he was right about the kinds of harms he accused poetry of inflicting. If there is a case for some censorship on the grounds that he suggested, I think he has grossly overstated it. The production of new poetry adhering to the stringent code suggested by Plato would result in a banal, morally sanitised literature.

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for the purpose of exacting in the citizenry “obedience to their rulers.” 20 We need only imagine the anaemia of our literary inheritance if by some horror of history classical civilisation had only managed to bequeath to us a Platonic redaction of the great Homeric epics, or the works of the tragedians.

4.

The significance for poetry of the intervening sections of the dialogue, between Plato’s arguments against poetry in Book III, and his return to the polemic in Book X, is largely borne by its absence. Indeed, Alexander Nehamas notes that “The major burden of the proscription is carried by Plato’s silence as to the role of poetry in the city’s life.” 21 As the details of the state are filled out the role of poets (or artists of any kind) is almost never mentioned – an omission that would have been striking to Plato’s contemporaries. Poetry is absent because philosophy is filling its social and pedagogical place. But Plato does remark that there will be “considerable scope” for the “right use” of poetry. 22 Poets will be permitted, in the ideal state, to write songs for ceremonial occasions, festivals and weddings. Aside from its performance of official duties however, poetry in its capacity as poetry will be omitted. It is also in these intervening books that Plato sets out the foundations of how philosophy as a discourse is to be understood. Book V introduces the tripartite theory of the soul. A distinction is made between faculties. Desires and appetites are distinguished from reason and from spirit. Reason, we are told, is the reflective element in the mind, and appetite the desirous, irrational element closely connected with the satisfaction of pleasures. 23 Reason ought to rule, 24 and poetry is connected with the appetites and desires, that will be disciplined by it. (Spirit, which is

20 389e.
22 459e-460a.
23 439d.
24 441e.
connected with 'the power to reflect about good and evil'\textsuperscript{25} is reason's natural auxiliary.\)

In Book VII, Plato introduces the concept of 'the philosopher ruler' telling us that:

There will be no end to troubles of states, or indeed of humanity itself till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers.\textsuperscript{26}

The distinction is made between knowledge and opinion (\textit{episteme} and \textit{doxa}) as the modes of apprehension corresponding to the two levels of reality: that of the forms and the world of appearances. Knowledge is related to what is (knows what is as it is), ignorance to what is not, and opinion to ambiguity.\textsuperscript{27} Opinion grasps something,\textsuperscript{28} but can only grasp it ambiguously between what is not and what fully is. Conventional views held by most people hover somewhere in this “fluctuating intermediate realm.”\textsuperscript{29} And, it will be recalled, we have already been told that ambiguity is connected with poetry, and that poetry is the keeper of such conventional views. In the simile of 'the divided line' this distinction is further refined into hierarchical subdivisions: ‘knowledge’ (\textit{episteme}) is subdivided into ‘intelligence’ or ‘dialectic’ (\textit{noesis}); and ‘reasoning’ (\textit{dianoia}). Opinion (\textit{doxa}) is divided into ‘belief’ (\textit{pistis}) and ‘illusion’ (\textit{eikasia}). Belief corresponds to physical things, and illusion to shadows and images. It is to this bottom most division, that of \textit{eikasia} (illusion), which poetry belongs, as Plato will clearly imply in Book X. Book VIII introduces dialectic as the method of philosophical discourse, the exercise of pure thought through the process of rational argument.

Despite having little to say about poetry directly, between Books III and X, Plato takes the opportunity to show how the resources of poetry will, almost surreptitiously, become part of the philosophical dialectic. Plato’s worries about the factual fidelities of poetry in Book III are tested, and perhaps tempered, by the qualification that lies and fictions are permissible

\textsuperscript{25} 441a
\textsuperscript{26} 473e.
\textsuperscript{27} 578a-e.
\textsuperscript{28} 478c.
\textsuperscript{29} 479d.
when they are deemed necessary to encourage the desired characteristics in
the citizens. So having just criticised poets for proffering falsehoods, Plato
sanctions his own form of myth, the purpose of which is to “increase (the
citizens) loyalty to their rulers and each other.”30 The ‘magnificent myth’ or
'noble lie' indicates that it is not truth in an everyday (factual) sense that
Plato is after, and that philosophy serves a higher master: an abstract,
transcendent truth. Notably also, Plato employs allegory and metaphor (the
similes of the sun, divided line and cave) precisely at those points in the
dialogue where he means to explicate some of the most difficult, and also
most fundamental, aspects of his philosophy. Plato clearly acknowledges
that mythos is a powerful medium for transmitting knowledge and as such
he will have to disentangle it from poetry. This will not be an easy feat; he
will run the risk of being accused for ever after of resorting to poetry, or
worse, of being mistaken for a poet. Plato needs to draw a distinction
between poetry and philosophy, but it can not be one that gives poetry too
much ground, which is why his use of the resources of poetry is a condition
on his rejection of the poetic discourse.

5.

In Book X Plato returns to the subject of poetry. Having begun with an
attack on poets, and having proceeded through his philosophical system,
Plato takes up the quarrel with poetry once again, in a series of attacks in
which the very nature of poetry is now at stake, to finally sum up the proper
role of philosophy. In this section of the dialogue poetry is shown to be
inferior to philosophy by virtue of its relation to truth, and therefore by
virtue also of its capacities of apprehension, after which the poets are finally
banished from the state altogether. The dialogue's penultimate conclusion
begins with the remark “Among all the excellent features of our ideal state,
there's none that I rank higher than its treatment of poetry.”31 In Book X we
return from the giddy heights of the ideal philosophical state, to the grubby

30 415d.
31 594a-595e.
streets of Athens, but from where we’ve been “we can see more clearly how essential it is to exclude [poetry].” In order to define itself through the discussion since the initial attack on poetry in Book III philosophy has been pushing against some (often invisible) thing, and now we are reminded that that thing is poetry; and that poetry is a conjuror of illusions which holds the common man in thrall to its deceptions and charms.

Plato is not going to banish the poets lightly, and he indicates this, of all the stipulations of The Republic, will be the most difficult to gain agreement for – indeed, that is part of the problem – it will not be easy to show that poetry is on the side of illusion when it so convincingly masquerades as truth. Socrates expresses personal trepidation over having to enact the coming judgement on poetry, given the love and respect he professes to have always had for Homer, who is “the original master and guide of all the great tragic poets.” But his reservations should not be taken as a sign that he is not utterly serious, nor that he means to qualify the expulsion with anything that would appear to mitigate it; they should be taken as a sign of how onerous the task of disciplining poetry is. It is not a victory gloated over, but one that can be claimed only with considerable loss.

Plato is expounding a general theory of art along with poetry, (which concerns how mimesis in art is related to the metaphysics of the forms, and modes of apprehension) and reaches his most damning criticism of poetry by analogy with painting. Employing the rather banal example of beds and tables (which makes for an ill-gotten characterisation of poetry) he suggests that the craftsman who makes these objects does so by copying the Form bed or table. Being a copy, the object resembles what is, but that copy is already “a shadowy thing compared to reality.” (Plato is not too clear on this but he seems to conceive of the relation between the Form and the craftsman’s object as one of ‘appearance’ or ‘resemblance.’) The third kind of bed is that produced by the artist who, it is agreed, although it is not clear why it should be, creates a ‘representation’ (or imitation) of the object that

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32 594a-b.  
33 395b-c.  
34 597b.
the craftsman has made. Thus “...the artist’s representation stands at third remove from reality.”35 The nature of artistic representation is mimetic, as is its mode of apprehension, and as such it is imitative and necessarily generative only of illusion. (The mode of apprehension of art and the state of mind associated with it is eikasia or illusion.) Plato is labouring to make the point that poetry is just a method of representation, not of apprehension. In this connection, Iris Murdoch writes that:

Plato does not actually say that the artist is in a state of eikasia, but he clearly implies it, and indeed his whole criticism of art extends and illuminates the conception of the shadow-bound consciousness.36

Plato is at pains here to preclude the possibility that poetry, by nature of what it is, can lay any legitimate claim to knowledge; and this is indeed a puzzling conclusion. As it happens, he has not been too successful in disciplining poetry on these grounds. Many poets have accepted his version of the relationship of the forms to the world of the senses, without accepting his view of the role that art plays in the ontological hierarchy. Platonic metaphysics has been interpreted, despite Plato, as a way to account for art’s relation to truth – in which artists copy the forms themselves, and in which art is therefore capable of a more direct knowledge of universals. Plotinus was prepared to claim that: “The arts give no bare reproduction of the thing seen, but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives.”37 And Grube thinks that the Neo-Platonists had nothing to teach Plato on the relation of the artist to the forms because art as imitation is not excluded by Plato’s theory of mimesis.38 But it seems to me that Grube is mistaken here, as Plato’s account of the mimetic relations of which art is capable exists primarily to rule out any possibility of poetry as a discourse of knowledge. Does the artist know he is producing a copy? Plato is not too clear on this, perhaps it doesn’t matter to him; the poets aren’t banished because they are deluded, but because everyone else is deluded by them.

35 598e.
Painting is included in Plato’s criticism of *mimesis*, and his views on the troubled relation of representations to knowledge, but he never suggests banishing painters or other artists; he reserves this privilege only for the poets. (The poets have a special no-place in the Plato’s utopia.) But why does Plato use the analogy with painting to expound his account of the nature of poetic representation? Nehamas proposes that the term *mimesis* did not originally contain the particular connotations that Plato required of it: “Poets imitate the look, not the nature of things... to argue that poetry isn’t just imitation as likeness, but imitation of appearance, Plato appeals to painting.”\(^{39}\) This is a convincing argument, but I would add that I suspect it helps him to create a distance between philosophy and poetry that is otherwise difficult to manage, because of the ways in which they are, or can be made to appear, similar. Dalia Judovitz writes, on the strategic relation of poetry to painting, and its epistemological implications, that: “Plato’s shift of register to painting... distances poetry from philosophy... at the point they share a medium of representation – language.”\(^{40}\) This, she thinks, is vital to Plato’s being able to exclude poetry. In my view this is right: Plato’s struggle with how a distinction can be drawn between poetry and philosophy is present throughout this dialogue; the analogy with painting helps him to drive them farther apart.

Why is it poetry in particular that Plato is worried about? Poetry, he declares, has no skill; is ineffectual; it has reformed no constitutions, claimed no victories; founded no schools; nor gained any disciples.\(^{41}\) Yet poetry has a ‘natural magic’ and ‘persuasive ability.’\(^{42}\) Presumably one could not be deceived for too long by a painting, but one can easily remain captive to poetry. Plato is worried because poetry’s relation to illusion goes in both directions; poetry is in thrall to illusions but it also creates them. And further to tricking the senses, it tricks the desires. That is why “the gravest

\(^{39}\) Nehamas, 1892, p58.


\(^{41}\) 599c-600d.

\(^{42}\) 601a.
charge against poetry still remains. It has the terrible power to corrupt even
the best characters.” 43 But also it is because he is keeping some aspects of
poetry very near to philosophy, or acknowledging that they are so, that he
has to draw the line all the more severely. And this, finally, is why it must
be banished.

When you meet people who admire Homer as the educator of Greece, and
who say that in the administration of human affairs and education we
should study him and model our whole lives on his poetry, you must feel
kindly towards them as good men within their limits, and you may agree
with them that Homer is the best of poets... But you will know that the only
poetry that should be allowed in a state is hymns to the gods and paeans in
praise to good men; once you go beyond that and admit the sweet lyric or
epic muse, pleasure and pain become your rulers instead of law and the
rational principles commonly accepted as best. 44

Plato mentions the existence of “an old quarrel between poetry and
philosophy” 45 in defence of the banishment of poets, citing several fragments
of poems, remarks that have been directed against philosophy by the poets,
as examples of this ‘ancient antagonism’ 46 beginning with the image of the
“bitch that growls and snaps at her master.” The insubordinate here is
philosophy, snapping at the heels of poetry. Plato’s objective throughout the
whole dialogue has been essentially to reverse their roles; making poetry
submit to its philosophical master. But the strength of his attack on poets,
and the sincerity of his desire to banish them is here and there tempered:
Poetry which does not require or resist censorship is at times permitted, and
in the course of the whole dialogue there are a (small) number of favourable
appeals to the works of poets An exception is made for the imitation of noble
characters from the dangers of mimesis. (This is of course important as the
whole dialogue is an imitation of Socrates.) Even as poetry is being
condemned as the purveyor of falsehoods it is decided that under certain
circumstances beneficent fictions are permissible, and Socrates invents two

43 605c.
44 606e-607a.
45 607b.
46 607b.
such (didactic) myths: ‘the myth of origin,’ (Book IV) and the ‘myth of Er’ (Book XI, at the conclusion of the dialogue). Taken together with the meagre suggestion that poets remain in the state to compose verses for ceremonial occasions, and the flourishes of regret over their expulsion, it may not seem as though the attempt to vanquish the poets is quite sincere. We can’t help but notice the unease with which the banishment of poets is exacted, and the various qualifications that appear to mitigate it. There is, as Iris Murdoch observes, a certain politeness with which Plato escorts the poets to the boarder.\textsuperscript{47} Their expulsion is assuaged by the concession that “poetry should return if she can make her case in lyric or other meter.”\textsuperscript{48} Or, better still that, ‘men who aren’t poets themselves but who love poetry, (be given) a chance of defending her in prose.”\textsuperscript{49}

But Socrates’ appeal to the poets is always to lend authority or illustration to his arguments; (contra to Book I where the authority of the poets was invoked ‘in the first place’ by the other participants in the dialogue). Where poetry is allowed to remain or re-emerge in the state it does so in an official capacity; in service of the state and in service of philosophy. Therefore the judgement against poetry and the exile it recommends stands, because the removal of poetry qua poetry is total. That the case poetry is invited to make may be ‘in lyric or other meter’ is beside the point that it has to be made at all. Poetry has to justify its re-admittance, but justification is what philosophy does, and the demand for justification is a philosophical demand. Poetry therefore can not be permitted to return except on philosophy’s terms. And Socrates final word on the matter is a word of caution: in the absence of ‘a poetry that has high value and truth,’ read: in the absence of a poetry that is constructed upon philosophical principles, poetry is a vulgar passion, as such has no serious value or claim to truth, and “we shall warn its hearers to fear its effects on the constitution of their inner selves.”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Murdoch, 1977, p1.
\textsuperscript{48} 607d.
\textsuperscript{49} 607e.
\textsuperscript{50} 608a-b.
The idea, found in several of Plato's other dialogues, that poetry is divinely inspired, is a noticeable omission from *The Republic*. The thought that poetry might be of divine origin might support a claim on its behalf to knowledge, a possibility Plato has been at pains to preclude. The view that poetry is inspired is not inconsistent with Plato's treatment of poetry in *The Republic*, since poetry that is divinely inspired, he suggests in *Phaedrus*, issues from a kind of madness. If poetry could yield knowledge that was thus inspired, it would only do so by circumventing the contemplative process; the hard philosophical work that is the true pathway to knowledge. Inspiration is a kind of intoxication, and as such can not arise out of the restrained dialectic that properly apprehends philosophical knowledge. That is to say, philosophy is precisely knowledge which is reached via the rational process of philosophical labour; poetry, even if it is good poetry, (the condition of good poetry, so says Socrates in *Phaedrus*, is that it is inspired) can not yield philosophical knowledge because its creation would always bypass this dialectical labour.

6.

Many commentators have noticed Plato’s refusal to take art on its own terms. Socrates has painstakingly demonstrated that poetry is already subservient to the demands of morality and custom, as the work of the poets is always being taken up by everybody for such purposes. Grube writes that: “In *The Republic*, art is discussed entirely from the point of view of the educator and statesman. ... it is not concerned with the excellence of a work of art, but its social value”\textsuperscript{51} He is right in the sense that Plato refuses to think about poetry on its own terms – but he thinks its own terms are corrupting – at least in Book III, and so much of poetry that is readmitted at the conclusion of Book X performs a social function. This implies a denial of any function or objective of a work of art outside of the measure of its social function. Book III prefigures the exclusion of poetry from the state, but if we

\textsuperscript{51} Grube, 1935, p182.
still wonder why it is strictly necessary, Book X gives us an explanation. Perhaps there are too many possible ways that poetry may come to evade or perhaps redress the deficiencies identified in that first stage of Plato's attack; Book X therefore takes the attack further by insisting that poetry, indeed art in general, can't be taken seriously as a thing in itself. It will be judged, if not in the end by its social and moral effects, then against philosophy: on whose authority it cannot, by nature of the kind of discourse it is, convey any stable knowledge. When Grube says that art in *The Republic* is discussed entirely from the point of view of the educator and statesman, what he misses is that Plato's is not just a social but also a spiritual concern. He is concerned with the well-being of 'men's souls', as prone to error and illusion as he thinks they are.

As Murdoch points out “the Greeks lacked (what Bosquant calls) the 'distinctively aesthetic standpoint','... so their attitude to art tended to be rather more moralistic than formalistic.”52 But she adds that “It may seem odd that Plato is unwilling to admire imitation even as craft.” and

Moreover, to regard art as simple reduplication ... seems to beg the whole question of what art is to an extent which seems to demand comment, even granted the lack of the aesthetic standpoint’... surely art transforms, is creation rather than imitation.53

But we also find the answer Plato wants to give on this point unsatisfying. The argument in Book X does take an aesthetic turn, and considers art from the point of view of what it is in form, or by nature, but still not on its own terms; as a discourse it is judged on philosophy's terms. And this is how Socrates banishes poetry, by refusing to hear it speak and by excluding, from the very outset, the possibility that poetry is a self-sufficient discourse. The pleasure we derive from poetry presents Plato with a similar problem, in that it seems to require its own (what we might come, later, to call aesthetic) solution, but Plato is at pains to discount this. His solution will be that pleasure must be understood in moral and epistemological terms, and Plato is clear on the place of pleasure in its relation in the soul. If poetry is

52 Murdoch 1977, p7.
associated first with sensation and appetite, then it is doomed by finding itself on the wrong side of the divided line, aligned with the irrational and lower reaches of the soul. Pleasure, although Plato admired poetry’s pleasure giving aspect, is not the grounds on which poetry will be readmitted.

Critics have been unwilling to wholeheartedly accept Plato’s decree that the poets be banished, and in an effort to tame it have attempted to confine the attack on poetry to an argument concerning the differing type, or role, of poetry in Plato’s own time, concluding that it therefore bears little relevance outside that stated context. There is certainly a puzzle here for modern readers, and Havelock rightly claims that it can’t be solved by assuming that Plato is being disingenuous, but he does suggest that the solution consists in recognising that: “The poetry [Plato] is talking about isn’t the kind of thing we identify today as poetry... Plato is talking about an over-all cultural condition which no longer exists.”

Havelock’s argument is that the poetry of which Plato speaks (Homeric epic is he thinks, a case in point) is fundamentally didactic in its method and purpose, having been created to record and impart morality and tradition. Thus, he thinks, the attack on poets is “an indictment of the Greek tradition and the Greek educational system.” Havelock attempts to demonstrate that Homer is a didactic poet, and that the narrative is “subservient to the task of accommodating the weight of educational materials that lie within it.”

Havelock offers a protracted argument, by way of accumulating examples of the ways in which custom, law (public law, personal morality) and procedure are built into the Homeric Narrative – so that “the bard is at once a storyteller and a tribal encyclopaedist.”

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55 Havelock, 1963, p12. Havelock argues that Greece was, in Plato's time, still a predominately oral culture, that “tradition requires embodiment in some verbal archetype...” p41, and that in the absence of documentation, the apparatus of civilisation is preserved, in this case, by the oral recitation of the works of the poets: “The ’poetic’ or ’oral’ state of mind, which constitutes the chief obstacle to scientific analysis, to the classification of experience, to its rearrangement in sequence of cause and effect. This is why the poetic state of mind for Plato is the arch enemy.”p47.
57 Havelock, 1963, p83.
indeed it illuminates some of the stylistic peculiarities of the Homeric epics. But the conclusion he draws turns on his view that “Artistic creation as we understand the term is a much simpler thing than the epic performance and it is one which implies the separation of the artist from political and social action” 58 He isn’t wrong about the weight of tradition, ceremony, rite, and historical and mythological record that the Homeric epics bear; there is clearly a didactic element to this poetry that is unfamiliar in modern contemporary lyric poetry, and for every dawn spreading her rose coloured fingers in *The Iliad*, there are a thousand ships catalogued; but Havelock’s conclusion implies that he takes Plato’s refusal to consider poetry qua poetry at face value.

Why take the documentation of the often perfunctory details of everyday life (descriptions of, and perhaps if Havelock is right on this, prescriptions for the performance of rite and ceremony; preservation of historical and mythological record) as a signal that the text’s primary aim is to convey information? Of course literature documents and conveys information, in more or less detail, and with more or less accuracy. Literature is always in some embedded in the textures of life lived. One may read *War and Peace* and learn what goes on inside the closed world of freemasonry, or *Moby Dick* and learn some finer points of whaling, just as reading *The Iliad* conveys certain details about how ancient Greek sacrificial ritual was conducted; but this is not usually why one reads them, nor presumably is conveying such information the reason they were written. If such poetry / literature is primarily documentation, it is clearly not the ideal medium. This of course is Plato’s view, but it is one that can only be maintained if one reads this literature from the demands of the conveyance of information. After all, Plato thinks of poetry as a corrupting discourse. That certain facts concerning the differing style and role of poetry in ancient Greece have a lot of explanatory power helps us to digest the severity of the attack, but it should not goad us into thinking that its application is limited for all that, or that any poetry is exempted from exile. Lyric poets want

58 Havelock, 1963, p90.
poetry to be judged on its own, poetic, terms; and they operate as though lyric poetry is a discourse of truth; yet where poetry makes this claim, implicitly or explicitly, Plato is there to refute it.

An equally complex critical problem is encountered in the peculiarity of Plato’s judgements against poetry in light of his own literary accomplishments. Is there an irresolvable contradiction, or is Plato’s employment of literary devices consistent with his banishment of poetry? The simple answer is that the allowances and exceptions he makes (in the form of the didactic myths) for poetry serve to legitimate Plato’s own literary approach to the creation of the philosophical text. He can use allegory, myth, dialogue and dramatic representation and be vindicated. This, I think, is right, but not for the obvious reason. That is, Plato is not trying to excuse himself; Plato’s characterisation of Socrates is permitted, since Socrates is just the sort of character who ought to be represented – the arguments are doing their job – but the philosophical aims of this dialogue are achieved as much through the dramatic representation of Socrates, in the performance of the dialectical method. It operates therefore, on a fundamentally literary principle. This does not pose any real problem for Plato; a literary principle does not by itself predicate poetry as such. And there is no reason to suspect that literary principles can’t be put to work in the philosophical acquisition of knowledge. His use of literary devices underpins the judgement against poetry, rather than dilutes it; and the banishing of poets occurs in virtue of, not despite, the literary form of the text. It is a territorial scuffle over disputed ground between poetry and philosophy. (Plato doesn’t banish painters because painting isn’t much like philosophy) and Plato is staking philosophy’s claim over their contested geography.

Plato’s use of the resources of poetry raises the question of the extent to which it is central to, and inextricable from, his philosophy, and the extent to which it is decorative. Each possibility seems to put Plato in a difficult position. If it is window dressing it contains an acknowledgement of some measure of value in poetry for its own sake, unless it is pedagogical,
which gives it a use, but still doesn’t satisfy the question of what value it has which renders it so capable of conveying philosophical content. If it is central, then Plato must indeed, perhaps despite himself, acknowledge the indispensability of poetry. Julius Elias argues that Plato’s writings do contain an implicit acknowledgement of the indispensability of poetry. Elias’ argument ranges over the whole corpus, but his point can be made in the confines of *The Republic*. Indeed, the problem of consistency between what Plato says about poetry, and what he does with it, finds an elegant resolution in Elias’ thesis that “Plato supplies a defence of poetry in response to his own challenge.”

Murdoch makes the point that “Art is the most educational thing we have – far more so than its rivals philosophy, theology and science.” Plato was painfully aware of this and it accounts for his efforts to wrest education from the clutches of the poets and rhapsodists. Plato does not of course feel comfortable with this state of affairs, and in the philosophical republic the guardian / philosopher class will be made of such mettle that transcends the need for allegory in place of abstraction, so it seems reasonable to assume that the presence of poetic resources in Plato’s philosophical writings are accounted for by his recognition that for the majority of citizens, the pure dialectic of philosophy, and the abstract philosophical knowledge to which it leads, is simply inaccessible, and perhaps his acknowledgement too that, except in the ideal state, poetry will always exist, and so it had better be able to account for itself. In any case it seems obvious that Plato thought that a spoon-full of poetic sugar might help some of the more difficult of his philosophical medicines go down. The tropes of poetry constituted a language that people were familiar with and responsive to, and perhaps much of the time, the only one they would ever grasp. The argument that Plato wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible, and that to this end he uses poetry, is what Elias calls the ‘weak defence’ in which “poetry is indeed indispensable for those individuals too emotional, or too dull, lazy or

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60 Murdoch, 1977, p86.
busy to grasp rationally what is demonstrable by rational means.”\footnote{Elias, 1984, p38.} And as far as it goes it is probably quite correct.

Elias goes on to make a ‘strong defence’ of poetry on Plato's behalf, based on the argument that Plato recognised that dialectic is “unable to sustain the claims made for it as a method adequate to the attainment of knowledge.”\footnote{Elias, 1984, p38.} Elias argues that dialectic is inconclusive, that Plato remained aware of this, and that as a result his use of poetry supplements it, even takes over from it where it falls short. His thesis is compellingly argued, and I raise it here because it comes very close to my own argument concerning the way that Plato appropriates and colonises poetry’s territory, although for Elias this is ultimately redemptive for poetry, whereas for me it is ultimately destructive of it. The defence may be made, but that isn’t the point, or rather it is. Plato is not so much defending poetry as redefining it, or appropriating it. Plato’s acknowledgement of the indispensability of poetry is the colonising of poetry’s territory by philosophy; poetry is readmitted, only after being removed. Elias argues that we need not rely on a distinction between \textit{mythos} and \textit{logos} but I would add that we are meant to understand that there is a hierarchy, because emotion and mythos must be disciplined by reason and logos, in pursuit of the ‘in itself’: the thing that does not change and can not be made to seem.

Where Plato’s philosophy contains an implicit acknowledgement of the indispensability of poetry is where the seeds for poetry’s banishment may be found. His use of the resources of poetry is the way in which he disciplines it; that this gives the distinction he is making between them the burden of tenuousness, accounts for the vigour of his insistence that poetry must be banished. In this sense the attack on poetry is predicated on Plato's ‘acknowledgement of its indispensability.’ What Elias sees as the defence of poetry is more likely its dismemberment. It is true that philosophy can’t do without some of the resources of poetry, but henceforth poetry will be subject to philosophy. That poetry and the role of poets will have to be
transformed by philosophy, and that only then will some possibly be re-admitted according to the principles, and requirements, of the philosophical state, should suggest to us that this is no defence at all. Plato can banish all poetry because poetry, transformed by philosophy, isn’t poetry anymore, but didactic discourse.

A recent publication by Sonja Tanner makes a similar attempt to grapple with this problem. She notices the performative contradictions of *The Republic* (the disparity between what Plato says and does about poetry) and rightly points out that this text is infused with the tensions of the quarrel: “Despite claims in *The Republic* to the contrary, the dialogues suggest possibilities of how poetry and philosophy can re-establish an alliance.” She treats this as a ‘resolution’ of what she says could be a hostile antagonism, and she makes the suggestion, somewhat oddly, that the quarrel is resolved by the preservation of mutual animosity. The animosity of which she speaks is of course the heart and soul of the quarrel, but whether it can be said to imply some kind of resolution, I am not so sure. In my view Plato was not wholly able to resolve this for himself, and this irresolution accounts for the strength and emphasis of his attack. Rather than this mutual animosity being preserved purposefully as a literary device, it appears to be more a symptom of Plato’s failure, despite the resolve of his declaration otherwise, to banish the poets. Yet he struggles to resolve the tussle by appropriating the resources of poetry and subordinating them to philosophy. There is less inconsistency between the ways the attack appears to have been tempered and Plato’s banishment of the poets, than has usually been supposed because all of the terms of re-admittance are philosophy’s.

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7.

The decree that poets be banished from *The Republic* marks an ignominious moment for poetry, whose claim as a legitimate source of knowledge and truth falters on the judgement that Plato enacts. He is unsettled by how close poetry and philosophy are, or seem, and this accounts for the strength of the attack. Making his distinction between them defensible requires Plato to demonstrate that what we might call poetic devices: allegory, fiction, rhyme and meter, and dramatic representation, can also be conduits for philosophical thinking. (They may only get you part of the way — *but they get you part of the way.*) The problem then, with which Plato has been concerned throughout this dialogue, is how to distinguish between the ways in which poetry is necessary, and the ways in which it is ruinous. This problem accounts for the oscillation between sentence and clemency, and for the strength of the attack against poetry. Thus his writing is full of poetic devices, but they are already disciplined by philosophy — Socrates is speaking, the myths are didactic and the allegories philosophically illuminating. His verdict on poetry is sincere, but he banishes the poets only after colonising a great deal of their territory.

I have said that poetry and philosophy have something in common, and that it is that common territory that is at issue in the quarrel; poetry seems to reveal the deepest and most inaccessible truths — so it’s a tussle over truth, and over ways of knowing. Though Plato seems in Book III to criticise art for not conveying accurate knowledge, we find out in Book X that he does not think poetry can convey knowledge at all — so why criticise poetry for not doing what it can not, by nature, do? It must be because either poetry purports to be knowledge or people commonly take it to be so. Even if poetry, for argument’s sake, could sometimes convey truths, the problem for Plato is not only that poetry can be turned any which way (sometimes willingly, but just as likely by inculpable ignorance borne by tradition, as in the case of Cephalus); but more importantly the problem is that poetry lends itself to such varying interpretations.
Certainly Plato’s moral, social and pedagogical vision makes poets prime targets, and this is given its urgency by the general appeal to poets as a source of moral authority, and because what is at stake in the founding of the philosophical state is nothing less than the soul of man. But ‘justice’ or ‘the good,’ Plato suggests, is fixed and knowable, and the rejection of poetry on moral and pedagogical grounds in Book III, becomes firmly grounded in Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology in Book X. Thus it is made clear that poetry is the wrong kind of discourse with which to attain truth. The bad effects of poetry, for Plato, flow from its inferior epistemological and ontological status; therefore though poetry may conceivably mend her ways and desist from telling the unexamined lie, or the harmful fact, it cannot defend itself from this metaphysical indictment. His arguments therefore cannot refer only to intemperate or immodest poetry; Plato wants the whole artichoke. The distinction that Plato draws between poetry and philosophy on the grounds of poetry’s third remove mimetic relation is, I think, rather unforgiving, though it seems to have been necessary to make all other kinds of distinctions between them hold; but it has come at a cost, which is that Plato is not wholly able to square his argument regarding the ontological status of poetry with his own use of poetic resources.

Plato makes large philosophical demands on poetry, but the quarrel is somewhat one-sided. There are plenty of examples of where poetry, for its part, has been outspoken in the quarrel, but, significantly, these examples show poetry ridiculing philosophy (As Aristophanes does in The Clouds) or using some other rhetorical approach. Poetry refuses to concede to the terms of philosophical debate which have been used to discipline it; with a recalcitrant unwillingness to submit to the demands and methods of philosophy, poetry refuses to argue. When Plato introduces the guardian class, he describes their ideal character via analogy with a good guard dog, who, he thinks, has the disposition of a philosopher because it “distinguishes between the familiar and the unfamiliar on the grounds of knowledge or

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ignorance (so) must surely be gifted with a real love of knowledge.” We might be reminded of this when we read about ‘the yelping bitch’ in Book X. But in the end philosophy is the bitch that does more than just snap and snarl at her master – she aims to reverse the relationship and to claim mastery.

\footnote{376a-b.}
Chapter 2.

The Case for Poetry: Aristotle’s Defence

1.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* is generally taken as a reply to and defence of poetry from Plato’s attack in *The Republic*. It will be remembered that there are two different but related parts to Plato’s attack on poetry: firstly that it is morally detrimental because it tends to condone bad actions and bad character, and because it encourages emotional effusions which Plato associates with the degradation of reason; and secondly that poetry, by virtue of its mimetic character, and its subsequent ontological distance from the Forms, is a discourse which produces only falsehoods dangerously capable of deceiving the non-philosopher by masquerading as truth.

Plato was clearly unable to reconcile the peculiar power and pleasure of poetry, the allure it had for him personally, with his mistrust of its motives and uneasiness about its effects in matters of morality and pedagogy, a situation that added urgency to his censure. Though he mistrusted all art, it is only the poets who threaten the philosophical state immanently enough to warrant banishment. To Plato the poets are dangerous, and he treats poetry with a gravity that it lacks in many of its defenders. In *The Republic*, philosophy has to face poetry in its effort to formulate new conditions for the production of truths that will debunk those professed by the poets, and the state emerges from, and is structured by, philosophical principles by dint of its exclusion of poetry. But Plato anticipates, even invites, a philosophical case to be made on behalf of poetry. Here it seems that he supposes it is possible, even minimally necessary, that some meagre portion of poetry return – be readmitted into the structure of the newly organised state. But only so much of poetry that can soberly assist the smooth functioning of education, statecraft and official ceremony shall be brought back.
Aristotle sees a much larger role for poetry in the state than Plato does, but he ultimately satisfies this demand by shifting the terms of what would satisfy it. That for Aristotle poetry is a natural activity, one with a particular aim and effect, orients his whole approach to the subject, as a subject in its own right, and places his views on poetry at a very different point from that of his predecessor: he is not labouring to disassociate and distinguish philosophy from poetry, in the first place, but rather to investigate the nature, function and purpose of poetry, under the implicit assumption that poetry has a purpose, form, and effect which can be analysed. Aristotle picks up on some of the terms and categories through which Plato forms his view of the inherent harms of poetry with the intention, I think, of correcting them and in so doing, of setting philosophy aright, as much as defending poetry, by considering the possibility that literature can be edifying. Thus Aristotle favourably interprets *mimesis* as a natural activity with a certain level of cognitive value, connecting the pleasure poetry elicits to that value, and introduces the notion of *catharsis* to show that the emotional effects of poetry can be, in some cases, beneficial. He famously declares poetry to be more philosophical than history thus bestowing it with a (perhaps quite minimally) philosophical bent.

My argument will be that though this satisfies many of Plato’s critics, poetry does not win out, so to speak, in Aristotle’s defence of it; so much so, that what appears to be a defence of poetry is really its domestication. In the end Aristotle shares, though somewhat muted, many of Plato’s anxieties concerning poetry; but he keeps them largely at bay by his treatment of poetry as a formal discipline with structural rules that contain its propensity to excess. What interests Aristotle and confines his thoughts on poetry is ‘form,’ which for him is primarily expressed in the way that poetry can and ought to reveal the structures of human action with respect to probability and necessity. As an answer to Plato, and as a contribution to the ancient quarrel between the discourses, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is double edged. His formalism does in one sense establish poetry as a discourse in its own right, extricating it from the Platonic complaints against it of wayward
moralism and didacticism. But that is not all it does. In taking up Plato’s challenge to exonerate poetry, Aristotle’s formalism places the limiting conditions on poetry (that we might imagine Plato approving of) to make way for the re-admittance of the poets into the polis. It was stipulated in *The Republic* that poetry’s defence be made by a philosopher precisely because its exoneration demands not that it is acquitted of the charges but that it is amended, and this, so I will argue, is Aristotle’s aim.

The paradox at the heart of Aristotle’s defence of poetry is that to set it free he clips its wings and to do so he safely inculcates it into philosophy as a subject for philosophical study and as a rudimentary form of knowledge which is philosophically sanctioned. Poetry may be capable of imitating universals and it may be more philosophical than history, but such truth as poetry is capable of imparting is subsumed under philosophical truth. The net effect of Aristotle’s *Poetics* on the quarrel with poetry is to complete the takeover of poetry by philosophy that Plato’s critique began; to cement the distinction between philosophy as the discourse of reason, and poetry as an unreliable if not fallacious source of knowledge. But, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle holds poetry, particularly tragedy, in high regard and clearly recognises that it is a worthwhile subject for philosophical study because for Aristotle the study of poetry is a question of what its interest for philosophy might be. This is a very good question which *Poetics* gives a complex answer to, for there is much in poetry of interest for philosophy on Aristotle’s account. Still, there is a sense in which this question is asked in safety, since what is of interest for Aristotle specifically sets aside those aspects of poetry that threaten to contravene, or are in excess of, the confines of poetry, of tragedy, and of philosophy as Aristotle wants to present it.

In this chapter I aim to highlight the finely balanced yet double edged nature of *Poetics*, showing how it really does answer for poetry against Plato’s censure, and how it also, and in the same breath, tames poetry by inculcating it into the philosophical discourse. To this end I proceed by first discussing what, on Aristotle’s account of poetry, is of interest to philosophy, by looking at a number of aspects of the text: the way in which Aristotle
treats mimesis, the defining characteristic of poetry, as a kind of recognition, capable of a kind of truth; his view that poetry is capable of imitating universals, making it a rudimentarily philosophical activity; his view that the effects of poetry can be psychologically, spiritually or emotionally beneficial supported by his positive view of the role of emotions in practical knowledge; and his confidence in the analysis and teach-ability of the formal aspects of poetry. Poetics gives us several important, though ambiguous, terms which have generated a great amount of controversy but added to the richness of our understanding of poetry and the genre of tragedy: namely (but not only) catharsis and mimesis. The exegeses of and debates that surround these familiar terms are of major importance to aesthetics and critical theory. In the second part of this chapter I raise the question of what, in Aristotle’s estimation, as far as the Poetics goes, is not of interest to philosophy; what, that is, is left out of Aristotle’s treatment of poetry – but not only what is knowingly (in his estimation) left out. It may turn out that at least some of what is not of interest to Aristotle about poetry is precisely what interests us.

2.

As a defence of poetry Aristotle’s text looks strange: first Plato the poet kicks the poets out of the state, then Aristotle the scientist ushers them back in again; as a fairly dry, methodical reply to an impassioned invective it’s a defence of poetry that seems more philosophical than the effusive attack it holds off. The contrast between an attack on poetry with such literary flair and a defence of it with such dry systematicity is worth pausing over. Of course the text of The Poetics is likely to be compiled of lecture notes, not produced as a written work, so we cannot make too much of its stylistic dryness, as such, but the methodical attention to defining and explicating types of poetry and its effects, the linking together of form and function, is of the essence in Aristotle’s treatment of poetry.

There is some disagreement over the precise nature of the relation of Aristotle’s Poetics to the invective Plato directs against poetry in The
Republic. Stephen Halliwell (for instance) writes that: “in The Poetics it is not difficult to discern... a constant implicit engagement with the terms and the conclusions of the Platonic case against poetry.”¹ Though Aristotle, notably, never makes explicit reference to the attack on poets. Paul Woodruff (for instance) argues on the other hand that there is no evidence Aristotle wrote Poetics in response to Plato.² It is true that much of what Aristotle says in Poetics does not appear even to indirectly address Plato’s concerns, and much of what is often taken to be his answer to Plato is predicated on different questions, ones which begin by assuming poetry has some edifying value, rather than by assuming it is dangerous. But it is equally true that Poetics can be easily and effectively marshalled against many of Plato’s arguments for poetry’s banishment. In my view it is highly unlikely that Aristotle did not have the Platonic case against poetry in mind in his analysis of poetry, however my reading of Poetics and my conclusions concerning its paradoxical role as emancipator and domesticator of poetry, are not tied to the question of whether or not Aristotle was directly addressing Plato. My contention is that the quarrel between poetry and philosophy will be animated in a particular way wherever philosophy takes up the question of the nature and function of poetry. That is to say, to paraphrase a remark of Seamus Heaney’s, that ‘behind all justifications of poetry, at any number of removes, stands Plato.’³ It is in this sense that Aristotle’s Poetics, at just one remove, has to be seen as part of the quarrel which Plato has insinuated is not specifically his, but philosophy’s (since the distinction from poetry is constitutive for philosophy).

Not sharing Plato’s anxiety about the virtually unmitigated dangers of poetry, Aristotle treats poetry as systematically intelligible to, and capable of being illuminated by, philosophical categories. The opening terms of Poetics state what is under discussion: the art of poetry and its species. There is no suggestion that what follows is a reply to or repudiation of any

particular views and *Poetics* unfolds as a thorough and methodical treatise whose aim is to study the subject of poetry without having to, in advance, justify the worth of the subject matter. In this sense the themes in the *Poetics*, which appear to pick up on or answer to Plato's attack, begin from the confidence of this premise, rather than the more shaky ground of a defence. The overall purpose of *Poetics* seems straightforward: Aristotle's enquiry, guided by the implicit question of the purpose of poetry, is a philosophical study of the structure and function of a range of poetic genres, with a focus on tragedy providing regional classifications, technical advice and an explanation of the way the central features of poetry fit into a broader scheme.

For Aristotle poetry is a natural activity, it springs from the natural order of things, and its purpose is to make that natural order more intelligible. But at the same time, Aristotle clearly thinks that poetry only achieves this under certain, quite tightly controlled conditions, and we can read the *Poetics* as laying those conditions down. In this way the text, besides being an analysis of the aims of poetry and how they are achieved, is at the same time an evaluative tool for criticism and an instruction manual on how to structure a drama so as to produce the effect towards which it should (naturally) aim, and thus (in its formalism) it has a strongly normative dimension. Of great importance is the centrality of form to Aristotle's theory of poetry. It is the notion of form that holds all the terms that elucidate the nature, function and effect of poetry together as the form is related both to what is created or made (*techne* / *poiesis*⁴) and the *telos* and intelligibility that guides and conditions its making.

⁴ As this is not a technical exegesis of the *Poetics* and I shall have to circumnavigate some of the thorny semantic and etymological issues which occupy, in-depth, the great amount of interpretative scholarship on this text. The term Aristotle uses that is translated in the text as 'art' is *techne*, which can be alternately translated as, and includes a sense of the notion of, 'craft', and is not an equivalent to fine art as we understand that notion. My discussion below picks up on some of the implications of *techne* as a category. The term translated in the text as 'poetry' is *poiesis*. *Poiesis* is a restricted type of activity that falls within *techne*, yet the link between *techne* and *poiesis* is forged by the notion of making central to them both. *Poiesis* was originally a term for productive activity, whose root-meaning is 'making' or 'producing' (see Halliwell, 1986, p44 & 56) and this sense of poetry as crafted, made, a practical skill realised according to principles rationally knowable and applicable, is the central tenet of *Poetics*. 
In making poetry the subject of a treatise, Aristotle acknowledges its independent status as a product of a kind of workmanship, a form of communication and as an art form. In an important sense, Aristotle’s formalism frees poetry from the ‘unmitigated moralism and didacticism’ of Plato’s critical demands while reinvesting it with social legitimacy. But, on account of that formalism, Aristotle does not achieve this freedom for poetry by returning it to the situation in which Plato found it, in which the poets had free reign, but by operating under the conviction that ‘rational and methodical understanding of poetic standards is important, attainable and teachable.’ Aristotle’s analysis of the formal structure of poetry comes mainly in the section on tragedy and in particular on the construction of plot, and I shall return further down to some of its specifications. First I want to turn to the defining characteristics of poetry as Aristotle sees it. There is no doubt that Aristotle holds poetry, and especially tragedy, in high regard, and is prepared to give a different kind of hearing to poetry than his predecessor. He attributes to it a cognitive value, and he values emotions as components of a virtuous character and as sources of action. He sees some sense in turning for moral improvement to literature. Poetry, for Aristotle, has something to do with, fits with, human good (a stark contrast to Plato’s fears), and this is manifest in the attitude and approach this text takes to poetry.

3.

Given Aristotle’s rejection of Plato’s theory of Forms, much of what he says in *Poetics* could be read not so much as a defence of poetry from Plato’s attack, but an attempt to establish philosophy aright. So Aristotle’s defence of poetry, if that is what it is, proceeds by a series of corrections to Platonic philosophy. The most glaring of these ‘corrections’ is in the concept of *mimesis*. What poetry imitates, and how it does so, is central to the three

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5 Woodruff in Rorty, 1992, p73.
aspects of this text which I want to draw upon: his overwhelming focus on the formal characteristics of poetry, the beneficial emotional effects, and the pleasures that attend it. In rejecting Plato’s theory of Forms, Aristotle is not committed to Plato’s views on the ontological and epistemological position of poetry and instead of connecting *mimesis* with deception and illusion, sees it as capable of being correct or truthful. Thus for Aristotle, in stark contrast to Plato, *mimesis* can be evaluated for its truthfulness.8

That poetry is a species of *mimesis* (of imitation) is the crux of Aristotle’s definition of poetry. *Mimesis* is the broad category into which the regional distinctions he makes between types of poetry (epic, comic, tragic dithyrambic) as well as some types of music, fit; and poetry is to be distinguished from other types of discourse specifically by its being a species of imitation, not by the use of verse form, which is, he evidently thinks, a common misconception:

Admittedly people attach ‘poetry’ to the name of the verse-form and thus refer to ‘elegiac poets’ and ‘hexameter poets’; i.e. they do not call people ‘poets’ because they produce imitations, but indiscriminately on the basis of their use of verse.9

Included in the definition of poetry are the Socratic dialogues. This is a situation of which it is hard to imagine Plato approving, but it is not meant to relegate the dialogues to an inferior status so much as correct Plato’s notion of *mimesis*. The dialogues are described only under the general category of “the art which uses language unaccompanied.”10 Their unclassified status appears not to reflect any anxiety about the distinction between poetry and philosophy, so much as a practical, taxonomical conundrum that they “remain without a name to the present day.”11 Nevertheless, the dialogues are an unclassified type of mimetic activity, and

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10 47b.
11 47b.
Aristotle here seems at once to be adjusting and empowering the place of *mimesis* in discourse by recognising in it a capacity for a kind of ‘true’ or ‘illuminating’ reflection and perhaps also to be having an ironic dig at Plato—in a way that might say ‘be careful what you wish for, you might have to end up throwing yourself out too.’

It is in Chapter Four of *Poetics*, during his discussion on the anthropology and history of poetry, that Aristotle makes plain the nature of his divergence from Plato on the concept of *mimesis*. Here he claims “Imitation comes naturally to human beings…” as does “the universal pleasure in imitations.” These claims address themselves to the question Aristotle has raised concerning the origins of poetry. In an oblique rejection of Plato’s view that mimetic art is a copy of a copy, third remove from the ‘real’ (the Form) Aristotle points out the significant role it plays in learning in childhood. Thus mimesis plays some, perhaps minimal role, in education, learning and habituation. By invoking the ‘universal pleasure’ we naturally take in imitations a connection is made by Aristotle between this pleasure, and learning or understanding. The connection in the text is tenuous between our “[taking] delight in viewing the most accurate possible images…” and “understanding [being] extremely pleasant.” Aristotle puts it this way: “…people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is…” Thus *mimesis* is natural, the pleasure it elicits is natural, and both these conceptions of it are connected with its having some kind of cognitive or epistemological value.

What Aristotle exactly thinks *mimesis* is, is not entirely clear from his text, and has been widely discussed and contested in the long tradition of exegesis and criticism that follows, is still following, in the wake of *Poetics*. However, it is clear that he cannot mean simple mimicry as he suggests that

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12 48b.  13 48b.  14 48b.  15 48b.  16 48b.  17 48b.
a propensity for mimesis (is one of the things that) sets humans apart from animals. In suggesting that it is an essentially human endeavour, he means for mimesis to be taken as a feature or predicate of our human uniqueness. Some of what Aristotle says in his early account of mimesis as the natural generative element for poetry seems to point to, or prepare by analogy, for the problem of the pleasure that goes with the spectacle of tragedy. “We take delight in viewing the most accurate possible images of objects which in themselves cause distress when we see them (eg. the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses).” It seems on this account that mimesis helps us to see; to look at in representation what it would pain or disgust us to look at in real life. In this sense mimesis does, for Aristotle, entail a certain, functional, distance between reality and the world. It makes gruesome or ugly things tolerable, or even beautiful; not aesthetically as such, but in that they can be recognised and understood. He defines tragedy as: “An imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable... effecting through pity and fear the purification (catharsis) of such emotions.” Aristotle regards mimesis as capable of imitating (or representing) universals by its ability to show the hidden necessary relations between character and action within a tightly controlled plot structure, and here mimesis is evaluated for truthfulness on the basis that it is truthful to an ideal – rather than to reality, as such.

The aspect of tragedy connected with the emotions of pity and fear, and the broader, difficult question of what the source of tragic pleasure is, does not seem to come naturally with the analogy from the viewing of 'accurate images' of gruesome things, including corpses. What seems to connect them though is that in its capacity as representation (as opposed to the mere mimicry by children) the nature and indeed function of poetic mimesis entails a certain reflective distance in respect of the difficult emotions that tragedy arouses: “in pitying and fearing the hero or

18 48b.
19 48b.
20 49b.
protagonist, we take the reflective spectator’s view.\textsuperscript{21} Aristotle thought \textit{mimesis} comes naturally, and that through poetry mankind is capable of utilising it for edifying ends, so that poetry can come to play a minimally philosophical role; he did not regard the development of the genre of tragedy as given or inevitable; he did however regard it as having developed naturally, out of the natural tendencies associated with \textit{mimesis}, by a gradual process of innovation. So for Aristotle, poetry, as imitation, is natural to humans, has an anthropology and an historical trajectory, and unfolds within a perfectly intelligible cultural paradigm.

Tragedy takes up the bulk of discussion in \textit{Poetics}, and it is clear that Aristotle takes tragedy to be the pinnacle of the poetic arts. In tragedy, we are told, \textit{mimesis} is of actions and agents. Of the components of tragedy that Aristotle identifies – spectacle, lyric and diction, plot, character, reasoning – the plot has primacy, and the elaboration of the proper plot structure and form occupies a large proportion of the overall discussion. As he famously claims: “The plot is the source … and the soul of tragedy.”\textsuperscript{22} The plot, we are told, is defined by the structure of events:

\begin{quote}
Tragedy is not an imitation of persons but of actions and of life. Well-being and ill-being reside in action, and the goal of life is an activity, not a quality; people possess certain qualities in accordance with their character, but they achieve well-being or its opposite on the basis of how they fare.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Aristotle’s ranking of and exposition of the component parts of tragedy along with his directions for plot structure provide a highly technical and formal critical tool or creative blueprint. The formula for the best kind of tragedy is firmly locked into his answer to the question of what the purpose, the function, of poetry could be. It is not, in the end, a philosophical function, though it has as we shall shortly see, a certain resemblance to philosophy. But poetry is in line with philosophy in the sense that it reveals what philosophy reveals; in line in particular with Aristotle’s conception of human action, and he sees an active, educative role for it as a sober reflector of how

\textsuperscript{21} Rorty in Rorty, 1992, p13.
\textsuperscript{22} 49a.
\textsuperscript{23} 50a.
we fare, and as an aid to coming to see the deeper structures of human action and the workings of probability and necessity as general forces to which all human action and destiny is subject are emphasised in tragedy over the particular elements of individuals and individual experience. It is the plot in its formal expression of the connectedness of things that gives rise to the various capacities and effects of tragedy that Aristotle wants to emphasise.

Poetry (poiesis) is made by imitating structures of action, not actions themselves. The account given by Aristotle of tragedy is guided by the principle of techne, which in the Aristotelian mould of thought involves production according to naturally given, teleological and regulated process, and it involves the realisation of potential in human productive activity. Steven Halliwell writes: “[Techne] is concerned with bringing into being, by intelligible and knowledgeable means, objects whose existence depends on their maker.”24 Halliwell points out that there is a ‘necessary entailment of rational objective standards in all techne.’25 The formal characteristics of poetry identified by Aristotle are crucial to the outcome of situating mimesis and techne in determined epistemological roles. The relation in The Poetics of poetry as techne to epistemology cuts both ways: poetry is knowable within the epistemic categories of philosophy, and is itself an epistemic category – so poetry’s emancipation is also its domestication.

Aristotle writes:

[The] 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.

[Poetry] is more philosophical and more serious than history. Poetry tends to express universals, and history particulars. 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.26

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24 Halliwell, 1986, p47.
26 51a-51b.
He did not hold history in especially high regard – something does not have to be very philosophical at all for it to be more philosophical than history. However, his statement crucially signals his shift away from Plato on the nature of poetic mimesis in pointing to poetry’s ability to express universals; as such it is how he rescues poetry from its designation on the lowest rung of the ontological ladder. History, on this view, is a kind of narrative catalogue of past events and deeds; the subject matter of history is also human action, but what bare history gives us, and this is Aristotle’s point, is particulars; a whole unruly amalgam of particulars. History has no capacity to winnow the morally corrupt from the virtuous, nor to discern the hero from the coward; a further operation of thought, something more philosophical, is needed for that. Thus poetry is capable of being ‘somewhat philosophical’ because it can pick out the universals of human action not necessarily, or even ideally, from events as they have taken place, but from the portrayal of events as they might take place. What is important here is his placing this within ‘what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity’, and the suggestion that poetry is not about documenting what has happened but what would happen within these stipulated parameters or conditions. Poetry doesn’t just mediate, by mimesis, the things of the world; it renders unsightly things endurable, even pleasant. This involves a kind of reflective distance and involves both the form with which the poem ought to be constructed, and the form of events as they ought, according to the natural principles the poem reflects, to unfold.

What structures the logic of the poem – not just of the poem itself but also of its reason for being, is the effect it is naturally designed to elicit on its audience, and the largely cognitive benefits of those effects. Tragedy is constructed so that its form elicits the proper emotions in the audience, and the proper response to them. Those emotions, as Aristotle’s definition has it, are pity and fear, and the proper response to them, if indeed it could be called a response is catharsis, as purification or purgation. Aristotle mentions catharsis only fleetingly in Poetics, without defining it and there is little agreement yet many salient and instructive possibilities for its
meaning. In *The Politics* Aristotle claims there is a fuller definition in *The Poetics*, which, it is assumed, is lost with the apparently missing second book. Any interpretation must rely on other claims Aristotle makes regarding *catharsis* elsewhere in *The Rhetoric* and *The Politics*. Nevertheless, *catharsis* is central to the Aristotelian theory of poetry and it is clear that the idea serves as an amendment to the Platonic charge that poetry is dangerous because it excites the emotions.

It will be remembered that one of the grievances to which Plato several times returns is: 'all the weeping and lamenting that the poet describes' and the detrimental emotional effect which the tragic occurrences that frequent poetic narratives may have on their audience; in this light it is hard to not to see Aristotle's theory of *catharsis* as evidence of an argument mounted against Plato's charge, though it is doubtless not straightforwardly that. Plato's complaint regarding excessive emotion is tied to his metaphysical and epistemological suspicions regarding the emotions, which lead him to place them in opposition to reason. Aristotle's theory imbues the emotions elicited by poetry with the capacity to ameliorate the soul, suggesting a curative function: the right kinds that will be elicited by the right kinds of poetry. Poetry is naturally intelligible and edifying because it deals with universals 'in accordance with probability or necessity.' It is these proper structures which will bring forth the proper tragic emotions – pity and fear, and which will effect their purification.

The claim that poetry is more philosophical than history represents a significantly different premise regarding the nature of poetry (and a very different criterion for its judgement) than that assumed by Plato. It will be remembered that in Book III of *The Republic* Plato traduces poetry for failing to give a true (that is factual) account of historical events. It is a puzzling assertion that poets’ narratives ought to be straightforwardly factual. For Aristotle *mimesis* has a cognitive significance and *The Poetics* sidelines the connotations *mimesis* carries for Plato with respect to its epistemic function so that imitation in this specialised sense acquires a
more complex meaning, which is connected with other concepts central to Aristotle’s conception of poetry.

In *The Poetics*, *mimesis* is conceived of as imitation that need not be actual: it is not imitation in the sense that the ‘mirror up to nature’ imitates, nor is it imitation in the form of the strictly factual; in the Aristotelian turn of thought mimesis ”frees poetry from the literalistic model of a transcription to material reality to which Plato had tended to restrict it.”\(^{27}\) Thus *Poetics* corrects Plato’s peculiar assertion that poets depict beds and tables, and it also seems to ameliorate Plato’s earlier complaints regarding the poets’ failures in historical accuracy, and even the moral ramifications of these fictions. Poetic *mimesis*, as the central concept in poetic *techne*, has a role to play in the organisation of knowledge that does not converge on the question of whether and how accurately poetry treats the facts; in this way Aristotle shifts poetry’s relation to morality onto a more positive footing. Aristotle is still preoccupied by the connection between poetry and morality, but he denies the Platonic opposition between them.

4.

Following the detailed discussion of plot and the proper effects a well-constructed plot elicits, Aristotle turns to diction, one feature of which I particularly want to mention is his treatment of metaphor, as it highlights an important aspect of what I have been driving at – which is that the system is revealed by what it includes, and by what it excludes. *Poetics* has thus far included poetry in a system of knowledge on a number of grounds on which it was excluded by Plato from counting as legitimate discourse – though, as I have pointed out, in a qualified way. So much so, that one may wonder, after reading about the types and components of poetry, the best kind of tragic plot, the subordinate role of character and diction, what has become of the poet. *The Poetics* is a set of instructions on how to create poetry, but that does not mean that just anyone could follow them. It takes a

\(^{27}\) Halliwell, 1986, p125.
poet to follow them – but then it seems as if the poet is just the one who does follow them; the one that has the necessary insight and the practical skill. However, though this is question-begging, that is not what seems most urgently wrong with it. As Halliwell writes:

Aristotle’s acceptance of the framework of techne for the interpretation of poetry and related practices imports an inescapably objectivist element, as well as naturalistic teleology, which is alien to the belief in creative imagination.28

This is salient to Aristotle’s discussion of metaphor, and more specifically his remark that making good metaphors is something that cannot be taught. However I do not want to get too much waylaid by the theory of metaphor Aristotle may be seen to be expounding. Like nearly every other skerrick of this text, it has been variously interpreted and further systematised on his behalf.

Aristotle’s treatment of metaphor considers its general relationship to language, its purpose in communication29 and its general structure. With the usual Aristotelian concern for categorisation, it is treated at length in the Poetics (at length that is in relation to the many aspects of poetry that Aristotle brushes lightly over in this brief text) and his discussion in the Poetics as well as the Rhetoric have remained influential in contemporary accounts of metaphor.30 He says:

A Metaphor is the application of a noun which properly applies to something else. The transfer goes from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or by analogy.31

Aristotle takes metaphor to be implicit comparison based on the principles of analogy, which translates into what in contemporary terms is known as the comparison theory of metaphor.32 Critical attention on Aristotle’s treatment of metaphor is not always favourable, but some studies work hard

30 Ortony in Ortony, 1979, p3.
31 57b.
32 Ortony in Ortony, 1979, p 3.
to show that with a bit of handling Aristotle’s theory of metaphor can be shown to be consistent.\textsuperscript{33} The more interesting question, which I think is not entirely resolved in the text, is whether on Aristotle’s view metaphor is simply ornamental or somehow cognitive. Can metaphor, once it has picked out the natural similarities between two terms, be replaceable by literal translation? Is metaphor integral to or incidental to the poem? What makes this question more interesting for our purposes, is what Aristotle says a couple of pages further on, in a discussion on the qualities of poetic style:

[The] most important thing is to be good at using metaphor. This is the one thing that can’t be learnt from someone else, and is a sign of natural talent; for the successful use of metaphor is a matter of perceiving similarities.\textsuperscript{34}

Is metaphor active in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, and how integral this is to poetry’s aims (its function and use)? If, as Ortony claims,\textsuperscript{35} Aristotle believed that the function of metaphor was primarily ornamental, then the claim that the skill cannot be taught does not translate or extend to the claim that there is something integral to poetry which relies on the originality of the individual poet and cannot be transmitted. This, I think is right, and it is reflected in Aristotle’s comment that one only need hear the plot of a tragedy, properly told, for the proper effect to be elicited.

Due to the way in which the structural rules for poetry are laid out, it is instructive that what comes out as ornamental is the point at which the poet – something of the individual imagination, vision, of the poet – enters the poem. What cannot be formalised or formulated, being unique, individual, unable to be predicted, cannot be inside the system, cannot that is, be integral to it, only incidental. It looks, putting it this way, as if the poetry of poetry, so to speak, may serve the poem gracefully, may beautify it, in a way that is outside it. We do not need, we have already been told,


\textsuperscript{34} 59a.

\textsuperscript{35} Ortony, in Ortony, 1979, p3.
anything extraneous to the plot in its right proportion and unity, for the proper effect of tragedy to take place. In this subtle way, Aristotle shares Plato’s anxiety concerning poetry. It is subtle because it is tempered: that Aristotle thinks that the ability to produce metaphor is an individual talent of the poet indicates that the poet has a heightened capacity to discern the natural similarities between things, which is also a kind of proto-philosophical operation of thought, a kind of universal.

Aristotle’s remark that metaphor cannot be taught is the only hint that there is anything at all unpredictable or unsystematic about poetry, yet being a part of diction, not being central to the unity of the plot nor to revealing the cause and effect of human agency, it is not central to the proper effect of good tragedy, it merely improves the enjoyment of the experience, it does not aid the overall proper effect of tragedy, notwithstanding the cognitive significance of likeness. This particular attitude comes to define a strong tendency in philosophical practice to use literature as source material for philosophy by treating its ‘literary features’ as inessential to the real substance of a text, or as what may have been otherwise said more plainly.

5.

I have said that there is a great deal in Aristotle’s account of poetry, in his defence of mimesis and with it poetry’s cognitive status, his account of catharsis and with it the defence of poetry’s emotional benefits, to redress much of the uneasiness one might feel towards Plato’s uncompromising treatment of poetry. Yet a fuller picture of Aristotle’s stake in the quarrel emerges from attention to what is missing from Aristotle’s account of poetry. Nowhere in the section on the anthropology and history of poetry, a section taken up mainly by the discussion on the nature, and naturalness of mimesis is there a skerrick of a reference to the religious, festival and ritualistic origin and performance of Greek poetry / theatre. In Aristotle’s text, and its treatment of tragedy, it seems (to put it in Nietzschean terms) the Apollonian has won out over the Dionysian. Aristotle utters not a word
about the inspiration, or divine aspect of poetry ... and in his text it is as though the element of mystery in poetry has disappeared. Plato, as noted, never mentions inspiration in the condemnation of poetry, but it haunts his text as the danger of poetry does. In Aristotle it is gone, and with it the danger that poetry poses. Poetry or tragedy that did not live up to the critical standards would not be a threat to the social and spiritual fabric of the polis, or the individual soul, it would just be a nuisance.

There is a connection, I think, between Aristotle’s statement that metaphor cannot be taught and must therefore be the product of the individually talented poet and the notion of poetic inspiration. That is, the idea of poetic inspiration so carefully avoided in The Republic because it threatens to pull the rug out from under Plato’s arguments against poetry, threatens to debunk the philosophical labour and destabilise the philosophical state itself, is absent in an entirely benign and toothless way in The Poetics. The poet’s relation to the poem is in his ability to bring to fruition the best possible plot structure (primarily) and (secondarily) the best relation of character to plot in order to bring out the universal structures of human action together with the proper effects of tragedy. His flair for metaphor is either creative and original, and if so it is particular and unimportant to the real work of the poem (it is decorative), or if it shows that the poet has a certain fine-tuned intuition to be able to notice similarities, then it appears that metaphor too has a certain proto-philosophical character. In any case, given that in the Poetics Aristotle does claim that metaphor cannot be taught, anything resembling poetic inspiration is shrunken into this relatively small space.

In line with the place metaphor holds for Aristotle, it is notable how little priority is given to the verbal text of a tragedy. Poetry (the tragic poem) is treated as an ordered structure, with a beginning, middle and end, possessing magnitude of the right kind and unity; producing the right kinds of emotions to the right spiritual, moral or cognitive ends. The suggestion seems counter-intuitive: that simply hearing the story of Oedipus, or Hamlet or Lear could produce the effect that they do when one reads or sees
them performed, unconnected with the language of the drama; counter-intuitive because a world imagined and instantiated in poetry is a world whose textures are created and imaginatively realised in language.

The tragic hero expresses their grief, laments with an eloquence, a depth of language, that the ordinary person does not. It seems obvious that eloquence and beautiful turns of phrase account in part for the pleasure of good poetry, and Aristotle marks that off, but for him language is subordinate to structure, and that reflects something important in Aristotle’s view of poetry, and in the view which philosophy takes up: That what a philosopher says, should aim towards a conception of truth the virtues of which include clarity and public accountability. But given that Aristotle thinks a poet’s language is in some way decorative, we may infer that he thinks the aims of the poets may be met, and better met – with more clarity perhaps – by philosophers. And this is related to another seemingly glaring omission: Aristotle conceives of tragedy being about action and agency, and yet fails to mention tragedy’s slippage between the world of human agency and that of the gods, supernatural entities and fate. As one critic writes:

*The Poetics* situates tragic action in the philosopher’s universe, a secular and intelligible world devoid of tragedy’s most powerful features: Divine incursions into human affairs, unsolvable conflicts, events that human beings cannot understand or control.36

Tragedy is, in a vital sense, denatured by being rationalised. One notices straight away with *The Poetics*, the cool tones of analysis; one feels safe and supported by The Philosopher in the secure architecture of form. We can’t help noticing the confidence it engenders that things, in general, are explicable. But there is, I think, a clash between the sense in which poetic form works through, shapes, en-forms, the mystery at the heart of dramatic tragedy and preserves the very way in which it is mysterious and thereby cannot be subsumed under or too neatly ordered by the form. That is to say, what is great and what is enduring about tragedy is its engagement with

what is really mysterious and unfathomable; those gigantic forces of human life, destiny and character; of fate and emotion and the human personality – engagement in a way that allows these forces to be as psychically (or psychologically) intelligible as they will allow themselves to be without diminishing them or subordinating them to intelligibility. From this perspective the Aristotelian formula for tragedy, such as it is, tends to sacrifice the mysterious at the altar of the explicable.

What we ultimately want to know is the capability of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy to illuminate what tragedy is for us. The authority of pity and fear as the tragic emotions, and of catharsis as their associated effect is pretty well cemented in the history of critical theories of tragedy.37 I have been pointing out the ways they work to mitigate or disarm the Platonic attack. In fact many critics have noticed the danger of formalism overshadowing, pushing out what cannot be formalised. Stephen Booth, defining tragedy, writes:

We use the word tragedy when we are confronted with a sudden invasion of our finite consciousness by the fact of infinite possibility – when our minds are sites for a domestic collision of the understanding and the fact of infinity. Tragedy is the word by which the mind designates (and thus in part denies) its helplessness before a concrete, particular, and thus undeniable demonstration of the limits of human understanding.38

Whether or not one agrees with this as a definition of tragedy Booth reminds us of something that Aristotle’s Poetics obscures. It is what Booth calls ‘an experience of the fact of indefiniteness.’39 Booth seems to me a little off key in his suggestion that tragedy is “a category for what cannot be categorised.”40 However, the salient point remains that Aristotle does assume with confidence that tragedy can be formulated, and rendered fully transparent to philosophical thought. The difficulty of categorising and of defining tragedy is the difficulty of ordering the most painful, most far-

38 Booth, 1983, p85.
40 Booth, 1983, p85.
fetched, most inexplicable experiences in human life. In the Introduction to her translations of Euripides, Anne Carson writes: “Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief.”41 This remark is perhaps unsatisfying as an academic description of tragedy, but then again perhaps what she points to is the possibility that academic description is not what tragedy requires, because tragedy is something which, by its nature, reaches down into the depths of us – down past where any definition could really fathom. Thus, for all of its regional classifications of poetry and of poetry’s component parts, and for the enduring critical terms such as catharsis, The Poetics leaves out something essential to the soul of tragedy.

Literature does many things; one of the things it does is to pick out, draw attention to, things we might call universals, and to do this it uses a certain amount of reflective distance. But it gets there by a different route to reflective philosophical processes. It tends to go by a sensual, and subjective route. This is what elicits Plato’s wholesale suspicion of it, and this is what Aristotle tempers it by ranking it on the ‘philosophical scale’ as just above history. Thus if poetry is freed from the direct moral demands of Plato, it is set into a structure where the moral possibilities for reflective distance are given in philosophical terms; Poetics, in this sense, preserves the distinction between the rational discourse and that of which it is purged – the poetic imagination. One of the many paradoxes that emerge from Aristotle’s somewhat oblique reply to Plato’s attack on poets is that in his rejection of the Platonic Forms, and his own ontological preference for universals as given by particulars, he inscribes poetry within an ontology that risks losing something vital and fundamental to its nature – something bound up with its special relation to the particular. Individual lives – as they occur (as forms of life) in poetry, (as poems) disappear in The Poetics behind the universals Aristotle insists they stand in for. The danger here is that individual lives, perspectives, particular experiences and details, exist only

as a palimpsest beneath what can be abstracted, that is, they may be taken to be valuable only insofar as they instantiate universal principles.\textsuperscript{42}

It suggests the need for a more holistic thinking concerning matters of specifically human interest than \textit{The Poetics} can accommodate. A poem can be, and doubtless often is, a reflection on universals, but that cannot be all it is, nor can the individual poem be regarded as merely an instance or case of the universal category ‘poetry’ without losing something vital to its nature, namely that the individual poem itself is a particular life or mode of life. This as I have suggested derives from Aristotle’s epistemic prejudice in favour of universals: for Aristotle, to see things from a poetic point of view is to see them from a partially philosophical one, one that is less developed than philosophical categories proper, but points us there – and in particular points the non-philosopher to philosophy, the ‘common man’ who will never become a philosopher can approximate a philosophical understanding through an appreciation of poetry. But it ought, on this account, to be possible to point to these universals, to extract them from the poem with nothing, or nothing of great significance, left over. However, what is left over, what one encounters in excess of principles, types, categories etc. in poetry – that is to say the individual, the contingent – is how poetry functions as a work of art, as a form of life, as an encounter with an aspect of reality that is evasive and uncounted (uncountable) in terms of principle and type; and in literature there will always be this something left if one proceeds by way of identifying universals – of counting only what is countable, otherwise poetry would just be history, or philosophy, or psychology.

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\textsuperscript{42} See Sam Goldberg, \textit{Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p120. Though I have not quoted him here, Goldberg’s text has influenced my perspective on these issues. The above point prefigures the perspective this whole thesis provides on the philosophical tendencies with respect to poetry.
As with Plato the distinction between poetry and philosophy is for Aristotle also constitutive for philosophy – is, following Plato, what helps to define the discourse of philosophy and to establish its supremacy over other discourses. It is the philosophical discourse at work in *Poetics*, doing what it in Aristotle’s hands does best – definition, classification; analysis of causes and effects, and relations between structure and function. Poetry, as Aristotle presents it, reveals itself to be amenable to such analysis. This amenability, in Aristotle’s system, is what constitutes good poetry – which is to say artistically and morally good.

The challenge to poetry to justify itself is made in philosophical terms, and a reply can, in principle, be made in philosophical terms also; Aristotle is the first of many, philosophers (and a few poets) to demonstrate that poetry can be justified philosophically. It seems to entail, or if not entail then permit, the possibility of rendering these ‘universal structures of action’ easily and correctly in general, abstract and even propositional terms outside of their embodiment in literature. It has become typical for philosophy to construe poetry in philosophical terms such that if poetry has anything to teach us, it can be found in some content which can be abstracted (extracted) from the poem itself – so that the poem itself is just ‘one way of putting it’ – a way that is perhaps nicer on the ear, more attractive, more palatable etc. – but on the other hand less rigorous and consistent. That is not to say that philosophy only does this but that it is an easily discernible feature of philosophy’s uptake of poetry, and an oft noted one, and its kernel is there in the *Poetics*. The oppositions we saw in Plato are muted in Aristotle: poetry is not opposed to reason but is a product of it, shares in it, and we feel that poetry is safe in Aristotle’s hands, safe in its place – respected rather than revered, but not derided. Yet something is missing. What seems to have been left out is the peculiar mystery and power of the poetic, the places from which poetry speaks as witness, the uncountable thing which Plato feared.
Chapter 3.

The Paradox of Philosophical Aesthetics: Kant’s 
*Critique of Judgement*

1.

The philosophical discipline of aesthetics (first so called by AG Baumgarten in the eighteenth century) is founded upon the assumption that ‘clear and distinct cognition’ mediated by the intellect, stands in contrast to the ‘inferior cognition’ mediated by the senses.¹ Poetry and literature have, in the context of aesthetics, almost universally and unquestioned, been taken to be modalities of fine art. Under the auspices of aesthetics the fine arts are connected to sensory cognition while philosophy, as the mode of clear and distinct cognition maintains its preference for the universal, the principle, the abstract, which it maintains as the high watermark of cognition and the standard by which anything, if it is to be called knowledge, must be measured. In this way, so I will argue, aesthetics is the modern descendant of the kind of philosophical annexation of poetry by which Aristotle neutralised it. Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* has introduced some extremely influential concepts into philosophy of art: familiar aesthetic concepts like disinterestedness and free-play of the faculties; concepts which have generated many fruitful ideas about art and its origins, effects, and relations to knowledge. However, I want to qualify that praise by suggesting that philosophical aesthetics (philosophical theories of art) is necessarily of limited value and scope both in helping to illuminate what is at issue in the long running dispute between philosophy and poetry and in providing a language for and range of concepts which adequately illuminate what poetry is for us. I am quite sure that this point would stand about aesthetics generally, but there is not the scope here for the kind of survey that would

demonstrate that. Instead I confine my discussion to certain aspects of *Kant’s Critique of (Aesthetic) Judgement* as the paradigm of modern philosophical aesthetics and the text in which that discipline comes into its own.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* was the first systematic treatment of poetry. Its longevity, its continuing authority testifies to its importance. Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (or *Third Critique*) is the first systematic treatment of aesthetics, and takes place within the larger architecture of Kant’s cognitive philosophy. Its influence on the field is monumental, though the text says very little about art, and much less about poetry. I treat it here as a philosophical defence of poetry not because I want to imply that Kant meant it as such, but because in the trajectory I am following of what is at issue for these two discourses (philosophy and poetry) the *Third Critique* has a vital role to play (in what I have already identified in Aristotle’s work) as a kind of paradoxical philosophical defence of poetry, where poetry (and for Kant art more broadly) is emancipated from a Platonic-like censure by being domesticated into the philosophical discourse. I will outline the possibility of a philosophical defence of poetry in the language of Kantian aesthetics on the basis of its potential to shift the philosophical discussion on poetry by a radical disconnection of reflection on and criticism of art from the moral and pedagogical sphere of concern by which Plato, that original proponent of the ancient quarrel, judged it. And I will show the kind of answer aesthetics is capable of generating to the questions we have been raising about poetry. Because of the difficulty of that task and the requirement of brevity this will have to remain inconclusive. Its importance for my purposes is to acknowledge that if we want to find out what has become of philosophy’s response to poetry in the long wake of Plato’s censure, we need to look, briefly at least, in the direction of aesthetics since its very subject-matter extends across questions begun by Plato and taken up by Aristotle, of what art is, what its relation to reality, and to knowledge of reality, can be. If a good deal of what philosophy has said and done about art is cast into shape in the texts of Plato and Aristotle that have been
examined, then its Kantian re-casting is equally important. Kant makes special use of the idea of disinterestedness, making it central to aesthetic reflection and giving rise to the idea of art as autonomous in the sense that it is characterised by a pleasure which by its nature vouches no interest in the sensuousness, goodness or existence of the object.

In Kant the trade-off forced on the discourse of poetry is in its being regarded as an aesthetic ‘object’. Poetry is granted its autonomy by being forced out of knowledge and in to the pure experience of reflective pleasure. Under this condition, poetry is not answerable to philosophical reflection, nor is philosophy answerable to poetic reflection. Yet poetry’s autonomy is circumscribed by philosophy, which regards itself as having the resources to encompass poetry. In the case of an aesthetic judgement, Kant says:

The representation is referred wholly to the subject, and what is more to its feeling of life- under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure- and this forms the basis of a quite separate faculty of discriminating and judging, that contributes nothing to knowledge.  

There can be no doubt about the importance, the persistence, of pleasure and displeasure, to human experience, and to the production and reception of literature (stories, drama, poems) and art. The question of pleasure, its functions and effects in the subject, has the capacity to unsettle, to disconcert philosophy. For Plato the pleasure elicited by poetry was a sign that it should not be trusted. For Aristotle the pleasure proper to poetry was attendant on its capacity to edify. For Kantian aesthetics pleasure is the central feature of our cognitive, and feeling, relations to beauty and to art, and the ‘Critique of Aesthetic Judgement’ is the analysis of what he takes to be the faculty of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Importantly, in an aesthetic judgement the representation (of an object of nature or of art) is referred to the subject’s “feeling of life” by the faculty proper to it which contributes nothing to knowledge. The element of aesthetic experience

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though Kant never refers to it as 'experience' in this way) arises out of our capacity to be spontaneously and vitally alive to the world; yet the subject's 'feeling of life' is held in place by his faculty-driven picture. In this formulation Kant's critique rests, in my view, on an irresolvable paradox: that it radically frees poetry from other cognitive activities and from other kinds of non-aesthetic judgement by the designation of this quite separate aesthetic space; and yet brings it radically into the protectorate of philosophy – as a faculty which 'contributes nothing to knowledge.' In this way Kantian aesthetics exhibits a paradox whereby art is recused from (moral, pedagogical and epistemological) censure by its domestication into the philosophical discourse that looks very like the one engendered by Aristotle's Poetics surfaces in Kant's Third Critique. But where Aristotle thinks of poetry as proto-philosophy, capable of a limited knowledge of universals, that is not what is going on in The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement in which aesthetic judgement operates indeterminately among the determining concepts of the understanding in a kind of play which carries on by resistance to subsumption under them and which therefore resists determination as knowledge. (The determinate concept for Kant is the concept that can be called knowledge and the indeterminate concept cannot – that is the basis of his distinction between determinate and aesthetic judgement, between what is knowable to the understanding and what is merely pleasurable to the imagination; but I can see no reason to go with Kantian thinking on this point; so that what he identifies as the indeterminate judgement of the free play of the understanding may itself be regarded as a species of knowledge.)

Seen from the perspective of the ancient quarrel the Third Critique simply dispels Plato's attack on poetry (without ever mentioning it) by suggesting that poetry is not judged objectively on moral or epistemological grounds, but 'merely' reflectively, in the subject's experience of the pleasure elicited by the aesthetic 'sense'. The expression and reception of aesthetic ideas is a different operation of thought from determinate judgements where the cognitive apprehension of the particular is subsumed under the
universal that can be found for it; the aesthetic judgement is a quasi-cognitive state, and in contrast to Plato’s formulations, it is not dangerous or illusory, it locates something of fundamental importance – which Kant identifies as the subject’s ‘feeling of life’. However aesthetics can block the question of what use poetry is for us and evade the possibility of its truthfulness to life, its reliability as witness, its capacity to move and comfort and disturb and persuade us. Ultimately, Kant’s analysis too readily leads to the position that in so far as poetry is art, it may be beautiful and therefore nourishing (or sublime and therefore disquieting), may elicit the pleasure of free reflection and the delight of originality, but all the while it will remain perfectly useless.

The category of mimesis, employed by Plato, and differently by Aristotle, has maintained a strong link with concepts of art as they have developed in aesthetics. But modern aesthetics has only a tenuous connection to the texts I have been speaking about (The Republic and The Poetics). Plato (and to a lesser extent Aristotle) connects poetry with painting mainly for the purpose of an analogy for poetic mimesis along epistemological and metaphysical lines. Kantian aesthetics, in so far as it is about art, shifts the concept of mimesis from an epistemological relation to a concept of the creative act. Notably Kant takes the objects of visual art as paradigm cases – even though he insists that poetry is the highest art. On this view, a poetic / literary text is effectively an art object, and there is no danger of its looking like, or purporting to be, philosophy. Seeing the poem as art object can in turn obscure from philosophy its own textual nature, and helps philosophy to avoid a literary critical reading of its own texts.

As has been often noted, Kant’s Third Critique – the completion of his system of critical philosophy – is not really about art. The discussion on art comes very late in the first half (the half I will be concerned with – The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement) following the establishment of a theory (in four ‘moments’) of aesthetic judgement / judgement of the beautiful which takes its grounding from the forms of nature, and then of the sublime (in four moments) which is grounded in the formlessness of nature. If Kant says
little about art, he says less about poetry which he classifies as one of the divisions of the fine arts, even though he considers it to hold “the first rank among all the arts.” This is not faint praise, yet comes as something of a surprise considering that the analytics of the beautiful (form) and of the sublime (formlessness) appear to lend themselves more to visual experience. In fact it is difficult to see how poetry could be fully responded to in the terms of aesthetic judgement – so much so that it is worth raising the question of whether it is quite right (or quite enough) to treat poetry as a ‘form’ for (eliciting) aesthetic contemplation, or as a species of art amenable to the same critical concepts as painting, sculpture and music without obscuring the possibility that poetry, as a discourse in language, is in that sense at least a lot more like philosophy.

That Kant’s aesthetics says so little about art is not a criticism; insofar as, in an effort to complete the enterprise of his critical philosophy, its function is to analyse (critique) the faculty of judgement, which is the faculty of the subject’s feelings of pleasure and displeasure, there is a sense in the text in which art is only incidental to this goal. Nevertheless, Kantian aesthetics gets going by a mighty effort to “restore unity to philosophy in the wake of the severe “division” inflicted upon it by the first two Critiques.”

This places a heavy philosophical burden on the explanation of art that unfolds within it.

2.

There is, to my knowledge, scant critical engagement specifically with Kant’s comments on poetry. This is hardly surprising since those comments seem a mere addendum, but since I am concentrating my discussion on the way this text animates the quarrel with poetry, I will start with Kant’s comments on poetry, (which come in the section on art at the conclusion of *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*) and work back through the notion of

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3 §53, 326, p155.
the ‘aesthetic idea’ introduced in that section, to the elements of aesthetic
reflective judgement: disinterestedness, free-play of the faculties,
 purposiveness and universality. Kant’s is a complex system, and since there
is no shortage of scholarly disagreement and controversy concerning the
meanings and mechanics of its elements, I shall not be rehearsing questions
and replies in the critical literature of just how these elements fit together,
nor reconstructing the component concepts of reflective judgement for
explanatory purposes. Rather I shall be focused on what these concepts are
capable of illuminating about poetry, and also what they reveal about
philosophy’s tendencies in respect of it.

The aesthetic judgement (judgement of beauty) is free rather than
dependent, reflective rather than determinate. In such a judgement,
aesthetic pleasure is encountered by the subject in its (the subject’s) pure
 relation (apprehension without interest) to the form, and is characterised by
a state of harmonious accord or free-play between the faculties of
imagination and understanding. The faculty of aesthetic judgement is the
faculty of pleasure and displeasure, relating to the subject’s feeling of life. It
is characterised by Kant in four aspects (moments): the judgement’s ‘quality’
is disinterestedness, its ‘quantity’ is its singularity and universality, its
‘relation’ is purposiveness without purpose and its ‘modality’ is its necessity
expressed as exemplarity and the expected agreement of ‘common sense.’
The paradigms of ‘the beautiful’ and ‘the sublime’ are the forms, and
formlessness, of nature, respectively.

Art is that production of genius which issues from aesthetic reflection
(not being fixed by a determinate concept of the understanding or of reason)
and which presents forms that lend themselves to the subjective condition of
aesthetic reflection. Art (like nature) is an occasion for aesthetic reflection –
it occasions the free play of the cognitive faculties and the pleasure that
attends it. Art, then, is what is beyond the constitutive powers of the
understanding and reason – our determined and determining way of
constituting the world. It is a way of encountering the world, not dependent
on interest, nor conceptually determined, but playful, free and pleasurable.
Fine art is aesthetic art, which is to say that it is made to set in motion the free play of the faculties and has the character of disinterested pleasure. Art occasions the creation and reception of what Kant calls ‘aesthetic ideas.’ Yet to elicit pure aesthetic reflection it must appear to us as nature while we remain conscious of its being art. What poetry is as it emerges from the Third Critique is partly a matter of what Kant says is ‘in addition’ to the pure aesthetic reflection in a judgement of the beautiful. As an object of aesthetic judgement it involves the free harmony of the imagination, as it lights upon concepts of the understanding without falling under or being determined by them. But poetry presents us with a more complex ‘object’ partly because poetry is, by virtue of being expressed in the modality of language, already more closely connected with concepts.

For Kant, the free play of the faculties in poetry clearly tends (strains) towards the understanding, engages and nourishes it:

...he [the poet] accomplishes something worthy of being made a serious business, namely, the using of play to provide food for the understanding, and the giving of life to its concepts by means of the imagination. Hence the orator in reality performs less than he promises, the poet more.\(^5\)

But “a mere play with ideas is all he [the poet] holds out to us.”\(^6\) This is why, according to Kant, poetry yields more than it promises, in contrast with rhetoric which promises more than it yields. I read him as saying that where the other fine arts are pure play of forms (visual forms in sculpture and painting, sonorous forms in music) poetry is a pure play of ideas. It promises nothing more than play, but yields something ‘extra’ because the elements with which it plays are ideas – so that in poetry the harmonious movement of the faculties of imagination and understanding is not a play of concepts set off by a sensual (visual or auditory) presentation, but set off by the presentation of concepts themselves.

The free play of the faculties is what characterises any judgement as aesthetic, it is the ‘cognitive activity’ particular to the subject’s feeling of pleasure when that pleasure is not attached to the object’s gratifying some

\(^5\) §51, 321, p150.
\(^6\) §51, 321, p150.
interest other than interest for its own sake in the form or presentation. This stimulates a ‘state of mind’:

...the state of the mind that presents itself in the mutual relation of the powers of representation so far as they refer to a given relation to cognition in general. The cognitive powers brought into play by this representation are here engaged in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition.⁷

Jean-Francois Lyotard emphasises the dwelling, or lingering nature of the play of the faculties – “a lingering that the play of the faculties imposes on thinking that judges aesthetically.”⁸ Because “the faculties play with each other but are not guided by the concept of an end... it is essential for it to dwell.”⁹ The power of judgement relates to what the intellect can do, rather than to a specific object. It is a kind of thinking, an intellectual activity of the imagination. In an aesthetic judgement (an aesthetic idea) the mind does not settle on or for any particular concept, it resists the static, it remains dynamic and active – dwelling in the free spaces between determinate concepts of the understanding. But it is, and remains, cut off from knowledge (contributes nothing to knowledge) and from the human, broadly moral, concerns of (say) literature and poetry by the characteristic of disinterestedness which is what keeps it dwelling in free play; the judgement does not, cannot, reach any final conclusion. One of Kant’s basic assumptions becomes visible here: that moral thinking must be of a determinate character – so that moral judgement cannot also be reflective judgement. Kant’s idea is, I think, that aesthetic judgement contributes nothing to knowledge because of its never-determined character, because of its inconclusiveness – so that moral judgement (moral knowledge) is, by nature, determinate judgement. However I see no reason to settle, with Kant, on this, and no reason not to interpret or utilise the notion and dynamics of aesthetic judgement to understand certain kinds of moral judgement, or moral thought. This suggestion opens up the possibility for

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⁷ §9, 217, p48.
⁸ Lyotard, 1991, p64.
⁹ Lyotard, 1991, p64.
aesthetic judgement being understood as a kind of knowledge, and similarly opens the possibility of certain works of art – specifically (for my purposes here) of literature as having the status of moral knowledge.

The faculty of judgement is the faculty of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure; elicited by the harmonious interaction of the faculties as they run across, but never settle, on a determinate aspect (concept) of the object. The harmonious interaction of the faculties is a free-play between the imagination and the understanding; a kind of accord, but one which is roving, undecided and undetermined, but not indeterminate. Thus a judgement of beauty, in virtue of its being aesthetic, always stays with the pure form of the object – whether it is an object of nature or of art. But, Kant says:

Poetry, (which owes its origin almost entirely to genius and is least willing to be led by precepts or example) holds first rank among all the arts. It expands the mind by giving freedom to the imagination and by offering, from among the boundless multiplicity of possible forms accordant with a given concept, to whose bounds it is restricted, that one which couples with the presentation of the concept of a wealth of thought to which no verbal expression is completely adequate, and by thus rising aesthetically to ideas. It invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty – free, spontaneous, and independent of determination by nature...10

It may be odd to praise poetry, the art whose medium is language, in terms which suggest that it invokes what ‘no verbal expression is completely adequate to’ – but given that aesthetic pleasure is conditioned by no concept’s being adequate to subsume the representation, and thereby to determine it for the understanding; the free-play of poetry, a free-play whose materials are in the first place concepts, will be similarly undetermined. Perhaps this preserves the always open-endedness of the verbal expressions of literature from the fixity of determining exegesis, but at the same time it seems to suggest that poetry plays with, and delights, the understanding but does not in any way augment or deepen our concepts. Kant is not, I think, saying that the play of the faculties is frivolous: “The

10 §53, 326, p155.
poet promises merely an entertaining play with ideas, and yet for the understanding there ensues as much as if the promotion of its business had been his one intention." His words here contain a mini-defence of poetry:

It plays with semblance which it produces at will, but not as an instrument of deception; for its avowed pursuit is merely one of play, which, however, understanding may turn to good account and employ for its own purpose. And:

In poetry everything is straight and above board. It shows its hand: it desires to carry on a mere entertaining play with the imagination, and one consonant, in respect of form, with the laws of the understanding; and it does not seek to steal upon and ensnare the understanding with sensuous presentation.

That final remark that ‘poetry does not set out to ensnare the understanding with sensuous perception’ could easily enough be construed as a reply to Plato. Poetry, in other words, is not duplicitous or deceptive, and this, because it does not even purport to determine anything or convey anything to the understanding. To the extent that it does stimulate the understanding, it does so ‘by accident’ and in a titillative spirit. We would be mistaken to derive knowledge-claims or moral concepts from literature, because those things belong to the faculties of the understanding and of reason – but this does not render poetry dangerous. Quite the opposite, since it is only if we do not commit that error that we will be able to enter, with the poem, the reflective space of aesthetic judgement. So there is a benefit for the understanding in poetry. Poetry for Kant is just a little bit instrumental, and not directly so; we cannot appeal to its use directly without exceeding the bounds of what the aesthetic judgement properly confers, but a sideways glance will reveal that the understanding can make use of it, but only in so far as poetry’s aim is merely to carry on an entertaining play. ‘Play’ here is not meant to be taken as something

11 §51, 321, p149-150.
12 §53, 327, p155.
13 §53, 327, p156.
frivolous. Kant’s notion of the ‘aesthetic idea’ will shed more light upon how the play of the faculties relates to art – and to poetry.

Kant introduces the ‘aesthetic ideas’ in his discussion of the activity of the artist in producing forms which stimulate aesthetic reflection.

*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art. Since talent, as an innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may put it this way: *Genius* is the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art.\(^{14}\)

Kant reserves the term ‘genius’ to designate the creative act of the artist and to mark out the distinctive nature of aesthetic creation. Central to Kant’s account of the production of works of art is the concept of *mimesis*, but of a significantly different kind to the concept of *mimesis* as Plato and as Aristotle used it; so that Kant’s artist mimics not the natural world by representing it, but is mimetic of the creative capacity of nature itself. That ‘nature gives the rule to art’ does not mean that the artist copies the forms of nature: “…nature in the individual (and by virtue of the harmony of his faculties) must give the rule to art, i.e. fine art is only possible as a product of genius.”\(^{15}\)

This process is not lawless, yet its laws cannot be discovered in the understanding nor in reason. Its law is the law of aesthetic judgement – the principle of purposiveness without purpose. So for an object or aesthetic creation to be art – to present itself, that is, for aesthetic judgement, it (like nature’s forms) too must appear to be purposive while yet betraying no immediate or determining purpose. This sets up a very complex relation between art and nature in Kantian aesthetics. Art must appear (we must, to have the proper reflective attitude take it to appear) as unmade as a natural form – thus art must resemble nature in its purposiveness being without purpose, for it to stimulate and keep the proper reflective distance that characterises aesthetic pleasure. In the person of the genius it is the rational agent in her freedom who recreates the creative purposiveness without purpose of nature - creative *mimesis* of the natural beauty of

\(^{14}\) §46, 307, p136.  
\(^{15}\) §46, 307, p137.
natural forms. And it is the privilege, perhaps even obligation, of the rational agent in her freedom to experience in aesthetic judgement what the artist has put into motion, and to judge the beauty of art as if it were the beauty of natural forms.

As Derrida has said: “art is what it does not suffice to know, in order to know how to do it, in order to be able to do it.”16 This is why Kant says that “…we cannot learn to write in a true poetic vein, no matter how complete all the precepts of the poetic art may be, or however excellent its models.”17 The work of the genius is distinguished from that of the scientist by the fact that that the discovery of aesthetic ideas does not, like those of science, go by ‘the natural path of investigation and reflection according to rules’18 and is therefore not, as science is, teachable: “…such skill cannot be communicated, but requires to be bestowed directly from the hand of nature upon each individual…”19 The distinction between art and science made by Kant is vital, since the genius is a maker who is making according to freedom and who is yet not entirely in possession, or conscious possession, of her power of making. Science can be learned, art cannot. This contrasts with Aristotle’s Poetics in which the critical analysis of the genres together with explicit formal criteria (especially for tragedy) suggest that poetry is entirely explicable and can be created by adhering to the formula. Something of the notion of poetic inspiration survives in this idea; it sits tantalisingly and playfully in his queer etymological conjecture: “Hence, presumably, our word Genie is derived from genius, as the peculiar guardian and guiding spirit bestowed upon a human being at birth, by the inspiration of which those original ideas were obtained.”20

What is it that the artist produces? What is uniquely manifested in a work of art? Those original ideas are what Kant calls ‘aesthetic ideas’ and they indicate the particular cognitive activity of aesthetic reflection:

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17 §47, 309, p138.
18 (Kant’s phrase) §47, 308, p138.
19 §47, 309, p138.
20 §46, 308, p137.
By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite fully capture and render completely intelligible.\(^{21}\)

The aesthetic idea is the ‘embodiment’ of, and the communication or expression of, the state of harmonious free play between the faculties. Poetry is the highest of the arts and the freest because it relies on the imagination alone – presentations of the imagination rather than of the senses give rise to aesthetic ideas in poetry. Lyotard writes that the aesthetic idea “is the indefinable not of the object itself (the form) but of the state that the object provides for thinking.”\(^{22}\) The aesthetic idea is the idea which cannot be determined in thought, it is the thought which cannot quite be thought, which exceeds experience and conceptual determination. As part of a faculty driven theory of cognition and cognitive activities, this ‘faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas’ describes those experiences where our thinking and our language ‘can’t quite get on level terms’\(^ {23}\) with a concept to resolve our experience in a way that is finally fixed and conceptually determined.

The aesthetic idea is a product of aesthetic reflection, conditioned in the subject by disinterested pleasure. For this reason art cannot, according to Kant, have any direct or causal benefit for us morally, as any interest in the good mars its purity. However entertaining aesthetic ideas may, albeit indirectly, promote the moral good, as Casey Haskins writes: “…aesthetic ideas perform the function of indirectly presenting, or symbolising, a rational or “moral” idea, a type of concept whose instantiation is literally unimaginable.”\(^{24}\) Kant appears to be gesturing towards a connection between art (literature) and our moral life, but he cannot make that connection explicit. This makes it sound as if the aesthetic idea is a kind of

\(^{21}\) §49, 314, p142.
\(^{22}\) Lyotard, 1991, p65.
consolation prize for the mind’s failure to find the determining ground for what lies before it – what we must do with concepts which we can’t make proper use of as concepts. (If it is not at all obvious that this is exactly what Kant is inferring, neither is it obvious that he is not.)

This leaves something of a grey area between the obvious kinds of interest (including moral interest) we do take in works of art, especially in literature, and the pure disinterested contemplation that is the locus of aesthetic reflection proper. Without meaning to suggest that we do (or should) read literature for its ‘moral content,’ literature is (and has always been) part of a general effort to ‘make the best sense of our life’ – and to make the best moral sense of it, and this is one way that we take an active interest in it; one of the ways it is alive for us, and, as a discourse, nourishes us. In reading, for example, Crime and Punishment we encounter an exploration of motivations and justifications for action, and of Raskolnikov’s awakening to the terribleness of his deeds; we encounter the harrowing depths of evil and also of remorse and we encounter the cruelty of the human world – the moral bankruptcy of some of its characters as well as the moral goodness of others. All this explores very complex moral territory and Dostoyevsky’s capacity to bring us to imaginatively bear witness to that is one of the things that make his novels such great works of art. So the moral interest of certain works of literature is part of their aesthetic interest.

Kant, like Aristotle, noticed that art can represent before the imagination something which would horrify us if we encountered it in “real life.” But this gives us little help in making sense of the moral force of literature. Iris Murdoch writes that “Our direct apprehension of which works of art are good has just as much authority, engages our moral and intellectual being just as deeply, as our philosophical reflections upon art in general...” She suggests that we have it the wrong way about if we start with aesthetic theory and once we have that worked out we will be in a position to judge works of art accordingly. I think this intuition is correct. If

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we look at matters from that point of view, we might indeed be worried that the Kantian account of aesthetics deflects much which we already know about what poetry is and why it is of value.

What Kant wants to confine to just the proper reception of art, can be thought of as ranging much further — so that what he thinks of as only a kind of aesthetic cognition might describe what happens in other kinds of thinking as well. For instance on the rough ground of a lot of moral thinking our operative concepts are better characterised as a dynamic movement which exceeds experience or concept, which does not settle or determine but actively and animatedly dwells. In our efforts to attain a deeper understanding of the significance and meaning of moral concepts (of concepts that we bring to bear on our moral reflection), we can be open to the ways that our thinking, in trying, yet being finally unable, to get on level terms with them, reflects what our life with concepts is really like, in much of our thinking. Seeing things clearly is not necessarily seeing them in terms of principles or sovereign concepts, especially when boiling the process of reflection down to such universals forces out something important to the character of experience which got thought going in the first place. There is always a question of how the particular might generalise. But it is not as if we already have a full and clear understanding of the meaning of a morally charged concept and then we just apply it to an action, or to a judgement.

Rather, it is a question of what, in a given situation or confronted by a work of literature or art, we can make of ourselves, of the lives of others, of the literature we engage. Of what, to return to my earlier example, we can make of the moral terribleness of Raskolnikov’s murder of the old woman and her sister and what we can make of his coming to see the terribleness of

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26 The phrase 'rough ground of thinking' comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein commented on the contrast between ordinary forms of discourse (which I take to include literature as part of the contrast) and pure philosophical forms of thought such as logic. His metaphor is that philosophy tries to smooth over the rough ground of thinking in which we engage in the, somewhat messy, living and reflecting on our lives. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans., Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1953, p40.

27 In Chapters Five and Six I pick up these points in discussing contemporary iterations of the quarrel by considering the role of literature in moral thought.
his deeds, to be in full possession of what it is he has done, is made available in reflecting on concepts like remorse whose sense remains to be given through what we can make of them in a particular context. This requires: “an attentiveness to the particular occasion which summons the thinking – to get on level terms with something that can never be finally grasped, which can never be wholly laid bare in concepts.”$^{28}$ In this way we need not, as Kant did, think of aesthetic ideas as something which only gestures in a kind of distant analogy to moral thinking. If morality and literature are much more closely related than Kant’s theory (of either) allows for, and I think they are, then we will have a better grasp of the value of literature than pure aesthetic judgement will allow if we acknowledge that: “The need to make sense of ourselves through the presentation of... aesthetic ideas marks out a distinctive character that our understanding of ourselves as human beings actually has. That is what real understanding is like.”$^{29}$

In characterising a mode of thinking in which the imagination moves freely between concepts, or between possible applications of a concept, as a form of ‘attentiveness to the particular occasion’ of the thinking, Kant suggests it is with the imagination in its apprehension of the particular that different possibilities for thinking may dwell. Again, if it is possible to take the model of aesthetic cognition as broadly descriptive of certain strains of or kinds of moral thinking as well, then we have a sketch of a model of how moral reflection can carry on in a similarly indeterminate but similarly sharable reflective space. But that inference cannot be made on Kant’s account of the reflective space that characterises aesthetic judgement, because the characteristic feature of the pleasure of aesthetic reflection is that it does not arise from or arouse any interest in the object so contemplated. This limits the desires and interests we can have with respect to a work of art.


$^{29}$ Cordner, 2008, p74.
3.

The Third Critique is an ambiguous text, and it has encouraged and sustained very different interpretative responses both on the precise connections between the four moments and on the implications of Kant’s account of aesthetic judgement for appreciation and criticism of art. One of the most controversial, and also fruitful, elements of Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgements is the famous condition of disinterestedness.

Aesthetic disinterestedness, wherein the apprehension (of an object) is not attended by any practical, appetitive or existential interest in the object, diffuses Plato’s censure of poetry by deflecting the sort of criticism which raises questions concerning the epistemological or moral value of poetry; in fact it may do so by deflecting criticism which singles out anything but the pure forms presented to the apprehension – that is debatable. But certainly the idea of the autonomy of art (whatever the extent to which it is explicitly supported in Kant’s text, which is also debatable) owes the impetus for its creation to disinterestedness as the cardinal condition for aesthetic experience.

Arthur Danto, in a now famous essay entitled The Disenfranchisement of Art argues that aesthetics, indeed philosophy itself, is a kind of penitentiary architecture designed to segregate and contain art. He describes:

two disenfranchising movements, aggressions, really, made against art by philosophy. The first is the effort to ephemeralise art by treating it as fit only for pleasure, and the second is the view that art is just philosophy in alienated form.\(^{30}\)

This first move he associates with Kant. Danto finds that: “…from the perspective of art, aesthetics is a danger since from the perspective of philosophy art is a danger and aesthetics the agency for dealing with it.”\(^{31}\) It is not easy to finally decide whether the effect of Kant’s aesthetics is

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ephemeralisation as Danto claims or whether, as an indeterminate and quasi-cognitive reflective space, there is something essentially illuminating in Kant’s account of the nature of aesthetic experience. The reason it is not easy to decide is, partly at least, because of the complex implications of the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness which has been differently interpreted as the ultimate saviour and as the condemner of art. That is, disinterestedness frees art from moral, pedagogical and didactic aims. It points to the for-its-own-sake-ness and in thus disconnecting art from its value in moral or social contexts, replacing the context with the ideal of art as self-sustaining. This raises the possibility of thinking of the value of art as separable from the question of what it does so that art derives its value from being radically non-instrumental. Similarly this opens the way to think of art as an autonomous and distinctive capacity, as an object of value which is able to do something not done, or not done in the same way, by other kinds of objects.32

One of the legacies of the Third Critique is the notion of ‘art for art’s sake.’ This is an interpretative legacy, as Kant never uses this phrase or anything that indicates that he took such an idea to follow from his analysis of aesthetic pleasure, or of art. Some commentators have denied that a notion of the radical autonomy of art does follow from Kant’s arguments. Haskins, for example, argues that Kant’s position implies that “a work of fine art is produced…with a view to engendering a certain kind of reflective activity in spectators”33 and that the sensus communis – our ability to share and universalise the pleasure of aesthetic experience and to articulate its value – is what art is instrumental in promoting.34 Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that Kant’s account of aesthetic judgement makes the separation of art complete, in that he “first distinguished aesthetic qualities from the categories of the useful, the pleasant and the good.”35 Kant leaves us with “the necessity to distinguish between judgements about

32 Haskins, 1989, p43.
33 Haskins, 1989, p44.
35 Saw and Osborne, 1960, p20.
the excellence of a work of art qua work of art and judgements about its importance as a vehicle for cultural and other values”\(^{36}\) It is deeply ambiguous whether Kant’s view of art is ultimately affirming. The source of much of the trouble is the ‘condition’ of disinterestedness which prompted the poet John Crowe Ransom to say of Kant: “I have come to think of him as the most radical and ultimate spokesman for poetry that we have had.”\(^{37}\) This is contrasted with Nietzsche’s view that “The aesthetics of disinterested contemplation – through which the emasculation of art today tries, seductively enough, to give itself a good conscience.”\(^{38}\)

Disinterestedness (the moment of quality in the analytic of the beautiful) as the qualitative characteristic of an aesthetic judgement is disinterestedness is, Kant says, the characteristic which sets the aesthetic apart from other kinds of judgements; which designates the judgement of taste as aesthetic, and so presents the aesthetic as a cognitive relation, loosened from the strictly conceptual, but not a-conceptual. Delight in the beautiful is distinguished from delight in the agreeable and then from delight in the good as ‘useful,’ as ‘good for something’ or ‘good in itself’ – because in ‘the good’ an end is implied. So an aesthetic judgement is radically free in that it can have no end in pure sensation, nor in reason. This does not however imply that one merely disengages from the object of such a judgement. Disinterestedness is on the contrary a very particular mode of attention or experience which engages actively with the object (or mode of representation) by the free play of the imagination and the understanding which grants to the aesthetic a distinctive place from which it is not judged by other standards or interests. The poem therefore will not be the object of aesthetic judgement – the locus for aesthetic experience – based on any instrumental value’ moral or pedagogical, it will not therefore be judged (as Plato judged it) on how faithfully it renders the actions of divinities, nor how exactly it represents nature; nor will its role, as Aristotle

\(^{36}\) Saw and Osborne, 1960, p20.


supposed, be to represent universals in the way that renders it more philosophical it is than history.

On some views – contrary to Danto’s – this is good news for art, and for poetry, as it allows it to function in a self-determinate space free of criticism that instrumentalises it or that holds it to the dictates of moral, social or pedagogical standards; yet, and here the paradox of philosophical aesthetics really emerges, disinterestedness essentially seems like a limited way to understand the whole power, the whole experience of art and what it is for us, and it seems too hollow, too content-less to handle poetry. One reason for suspicion concerning the idea of disinterestedness is ‘its apparent denial that the experience of beauty can have any direct effect on our desires, or generate any interest in the existence of beautiful objects.’

Disinterestedness, aesthetic distance, the dis-relationship between form and function, or between beauty (art) and gratification of any kind other than the pure self-interested pleasure of aesthetic contemplation is the complex and paradoxical heart of Kantian aesthetics. It appears to free art from philosophy but it may also free art from the very thing that art seems so powerfully to elicit – passionate interest. Indeed, it seems to deny, or ignore, many of the forms of our engagement with works of art, and many forms of our impetus towards them. Especially, though Kant lauds poetry as the highest of the arts, it is difficult to see how the condition of disinterestedness could hold for reflective judgements of literature without obscuring something essential to literature: its deep involvement in the exploration and elucidation of concepts as modes of moral attention, like remorse in *Crime and Punishment*.

There is one further difficulty in Kantian aesthetics that I want to briefly mention, that is an essential element of his account of aesthetic reflection: his preference for nature over art. Kant argues that the intellectual and moral interest in beautiful objects (in addition to a purely aesthetic response to them), can only be engendered by natural, and not

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artistic, beauty.\textsuperscript{40} Kant insists that the judgement of taste with respect to an art object occurs where the object is apprehended ‘as if’ it were nature. In other words, its existence as art must first become partially obscured – we must be conscious of its being art while it has the appearance of nature.\textsuperscript{41}

A product of the fine art must be recognised to be art and not nature. Nevertheless the purposiveness in its form must appear just as free from the constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of pure nature.\textsuperscript{42}

This odd relation between art and nature is partly to do with the condition of ‘purposiveness without purpose’ (forming the second moment, that of quantity). To look at a natural form, and to apprehend just what the form offers for the attention of aesthetic pleasure is to assume purposiveness where you at the same time cannot assume there to be any actual purpose. The difficulty arises because, though objects of nature might easily present themselves as purposive while not actually being purposeful the case is more complicated in art, since purpose is so clearly implicated in the coming to be of the object, or creation of the poem. This is particularly puzzling when we try to grasp in what sense a poem, novel, epic or tragedy, can appear as if it were nature.

And this concerns what I take to be one of the cardinal, but largely undiscussed, problems with Kantian aesthetics, one which perhaps only surfaces if you prosecute the Critique specifically on the question of its capacity to illuminate what poetry is for us. It is not clear that an analysis of the fine arts can be, \textit{ipso facto}, applied to poetry. Considered as an object of fine art in the Kantian sense, poetry is precluded from critical attention to its human content, to what most often moves us in a work of literature. The intricate architecture of the \textit{Third Critique} carefully preserves art, and therefore poetry, from the interests we tend to take in it. Kant’s approach – largely because of what is at issue, epistemically, in his aesthetics –


\textsuperscript{41} §45, 306, p135.

\textsuperscript{42} §45, 306, p135.
assumes that poetry (and literature) is explicable in terms of form. But it is far from obvious that poetry is closer to the products of the plastic arts, or to the kinds of examples Kant himself finds compelling, such as the repetitive patterns of wallpaper, than it is to the texts and discourses of philosophy. It is worth considering then, to what extent the virtually unquestioned assumption of aesthetics that poetry is fine art (like painting with words) may be tendentious. Indeed, the tendency to think of poetry primarily as an art object distances it from its textual nature, and from its obvious connection, as a discourse with reflective and persuasive capacities, to philosophy. In this way, aesthetics tends to keep in place, and refine, the conceptual structures philosophy employs in blocking the poetic mode of attention.

4.

In Aristotle’s hands poetry is recused of wholesale moral censure by an explanation of how the relationship between poetry and knowledge/morality can be restored following Plato’s strong insistence that poetry leads away from understanding. I have discussed the nature and limitations of that explanation. Here I want to reiterate how it differs from Kant. The aesthetic judgement, the character of which is disinterested pleasure, just doesn’t take into account moral or epistemological questions. The aesthetic ‘realm’ is precisely the realm where these things are absent, where they cannot take hold. In this way the aesthetic is essentially cut off from moral reflection. To make sense of a notion like ‘the moral force of literature’ seems under these conditions impossible. For Kant, as we have seen, no matter how much an aesthetic idea tickles the understanding and stimulates the life of the mind, it remains mere play, which is after all what it promised. What it delivers that exceeds that promise, only approximates in its play the serious business of the understanding, apparently causing the understanding much surprise and delight. In this sense, the modes of identification we have with art, or we think art has with life, are closed off,
and concern with the human content of the work is at worst incompatible with aesthetic reflection or at least in excess of it.

So, while it is “a mark of good moral character to take an interest in the beautiful generally” Kant writes that “interest in the beautiful of art... gives no evidence at all of a habit of mind attached to the morally good, or even inclined that way.” In a judgement of taste the beautiful must not be conceptualised in a way that would bring it into the sphere of moral judgement. Kant does point to an analogous connection between pleasure in the beautiful (and the judgement of taste) and moral feeling. In Guyer’s analysis this works “by means of practical reason’s interest in the existence of objects conforming to the conditions of our wholly disinterested delight...” Yet as he points out, Kant draws the conclusion that this justifies interest in the beauty of nature but not of art. It is not clear why this should be the case, and Kant does not sufficiently justify the distinction. It seems puzzling enough in respect of the forms produced in mediums such as painting or sculpture, but it generates confusion about what we might, critically, want to say about a poem or novel. It seems that if we want to say much at all about literature we will not be able to remain within the domain of aesthetic reflection, so understood.

Kant’s is a faculty driven picture, and his account of the ‘origin’ and nature of aesthetic pleasure, while leaving plenty of room for more felicitous interpretations of the harmony of the faculties and the possible applications of the notion of the aesthetic idea, essentially cuts that pleasure (the locus of the subject’s ‘feeling of life’) off from ways in which the subject’s reflection does and must range over more than pure reflective pleasure to be answerable to critical concepts that locate our responsiveness to poetry and literature in modes of attention that are morally responsive and morally interested. As Sam Goldberg writes:

It is... quite common for philosophers theorising about art to suppose that there are certain evaluative predicates which are applicable only to art and

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43 §42, 298, p128.
44 §42, 298, p128.
45 Guyer, (Summer) 1978, p450.
which comprise something called ‘aesthetic value’... Whatever may be the case with painting or music or pottery, it is hard to think of any quality of a poem that a traditional critic would regard as ‘aesthetically’ valuable which could not equally said to be ‘morally’ valuable.\footnote{Sam Goldberg, \textit{Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p225.}

Philosophy and poetry represent different casts of mind, and a way of honouring that emerges from Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgement, in particular in the following two senses: that in reflective judgement only the particular is given for which the universal is sought (as differentiated from determinate judgement characterised by the universal’s being given under which the particular is subsumed) so that reflective judgement is anchored in the concrete, and in what reveals itself to the individual, what must be made sense of by being before our very eyes, what must be borne witness to. That, together with the indeterminate nature of this kind of thinking captured in the free play of the faculties and the aesthetic idea, which honours the open-endedness, not just in respect of the meanings of poems but in respect of the character of that kind of understanding (and self-understanding) which is attendant on our efforts to make sense of things.

And yet, Kant’s faculty driven picture does seem to require that, strictly speaking, much of what we do naturally reflect upon when confronted by a work of literature – indeed much of what is clearly presented for our reflection – is not strictly aesthetic, but is in addition to, because it introduces some interest to, the purely aesthetic play of the faculties. In view of the austerity of aesthetic pleasure, it is not easy to see what pure aesthetic pleasure in reading a poem might amount to. Kant seems to be suggesting that the form (which in a poem may be the imagery, metaphor, structure, cadence etc.) will set off the free play of the faculties and the pleasure of aesthetic experience, but once we start to feel a connection with the ideas a poem contains, once we want to observe our response in terms (concepts) of, say, pity, justice, melancholy, or grief, and articulate our response in ways sensitive to and shaped, informed or deepened by how those concepts might resonate with us as individuals, we
are outside the domain of the aesthetic, and engaged in a different kind of activity. I have argued that the aesthetic idea need not be confined to the aesthetic, but that Kant thought it was, and that he worked hard to preserve its purity, shows again that tendency to want to confine poetry to a realm where one has a critical language with which to analyse the cognitive uniqueness of aesthetic pleasure.

Like Aristotle’s, Kant’s defence of poetry is really meant to correct philosophy, to set things right inside of what philosophy knows. Yet unlike Aristotle, Kant does not subordinate poetry to philosophy as something which nudges towards it, but cuts it off radically. It is not easy to locate the source of the trouble. But, it is unlikely on this picture of things that literature can augment or deepen moral thinking, or that we can make sense of the very deep resonance literature can have for us. Iris Murdoch writes that “The short-comings of Kant’s aesthetics are the same as the short-comings of his ethics. Kant is afraid of the particular, he is afraid of history. He shares this with Plato.”47 Our moral interest in literature is a form of our striving towards self-understanding; it is an effort to make sense of things, to see things clearly, as they are. This effort is often thwarted, or complicated, by the opacity of things. The efforts we make to make moral sense of things – of ourselves, of works of literature – must often dwell in a cognitive space which is indeterminate, because meanings are not fixed. ‘What we truly are’ (the kind of transforming perception needed to be alive to that) is revealed to us by thinking which is sensitive to, and by attention to, the concretely human form of life we live, and the indeterminacy, the ‘rough ground’ of that form of thinking. And it is not ‘finally’ revealed to us, but open-endedly, in ways that are continually at issue and continually in resolution. It is a kind of exploratory thinking which dwells not just in the pure pleasure of beauty, but in what the forms (poems) which touch that touch also, the thinking that they set in motion which is personal and interested, but not final and fixed, so which is a kind of free reflection. Thus, the critical concepts given by the Third Critique, as they stand in Kant’s

text, can work against our critical attempts to get hold of the moral value of literature. As one would expect, with Kant the situation is complicated; he has more than most philosophers to teach us about art – especially if the implications of some of his ideas could be allowed to escape their architecture. We do, I think, ultimately need aesthetics (by which I mean philosophical aesthetics) because there are genuine philosophical, conceptual questions about art – though we must remember what Kant forgot – that art itself is not a philosophical question.
Chapter 4.

Witness, Redress and Invocation: Poetic Modes of Reflection

1.

As we have seen, philosophy has, as a way of defining the parameters of the philosophical discourse, tended to subordinate poetry, even, in some cases, where it appears to defend poetry from the original Platonic censure and subsequent exile. It is clear, then, that common to a range of views philosophy holds about poetry is the confident assumption that philosophy is in a position to judge poetry by the standards and norms of its own discourse. Yet if anything is to be gained by raising the question in and for philosophy of what its prevailing modes of practice exclude, of what philosophical costs there might be to exiling poetry, then an adequate response had better enable the poetic to surface on its own terms, which means remaining vigilant to the ways that philosophical thinking habitually wants to close it off. I have said that philosophical aesthetics animates the quarrel by making art a province of philosophical enquiry, whereby poetry’s emancipation is contingent upon its domestication. From this I take it that, so far as we want to reflect on poetry we cannot, under these conditions, do so fully or deeply enough. In this chapter, my aim is to clear an extra-philosophical space in which to speak about poetry; a space that is responsive to philosophy but not bounded by the terms it dictates to poetry. I want, then, to suggest that certain concepts (and types of concepts) can open up a way to talk about poetry’s vital responsiveness to the world. This is necessarily an open-ended discussion. The terms I use are not meant to be definitive, formulaic or final, but suggestive of the kind of approach we might take.

The concepts, or reflective terms, I have chosen for this task are witness, redress and invocation. ‘Witness’ I borrow from Czeslaw Milosz;
‘redress’ from Seamus Heaney; ‘invocation’ from Robert Graves. In the way I use them, I take witness to have a kind of pre-eminence; to be a guide for how redress, and invocation, may be understood. Witness, as I want to employ it, after Milosz, means that which pertains to and carries a vital responsiveness to the world; that dimension of our own realisation of ourselves in the world that allows us to see things truly, clearly and unflinchingly. Redress here means bringing back to right relationship – that is, redressing what has fallen out of kilter to bring ourselves back to right relationship with the world and with what we deeply know, by throwing our weight – as Heaney describes it – on the lighter side of the scale. Invocation calls upon an idea, explored in depth by Graves throughout his work, which is difficult to name but captures the sense in which poetry is not entirely at the dispensation of the poet’s conscious will. This idea, as we have already noted, does peculiarly haunt philosophy’s relation to poetry.

All three of these poets broach the question of ‘the uses of poetry’ – which I take to be a kind of gesture of resistance to the common view, closely associated with Kantian aesthetic disinterestedness, that that the proper reflective attitude of and to poetry is one where the question of its use cannot take hold. But, against the risk of sheer instrumentality, the discussion must also cleave to the notion of poetry as art; as Heaney puts the question: ‘…how is poetry’s existence at the level of art related to our existence as citizens of a society?’ Since Plato set out the philosophical case against poetry, the philosophical answers that I have considered have treated poetry as if it were already outside the republic of philosophy – outside, that is, of the discourse which takes upon itself the pre-eminence to be able to order, to categorise, (be it metaphysically, cognitively or ontologically) all other forms of discourse. In other words poetry has to be banished from the discourse itself for the discourse to act on it – for philosophy to be able to philosophise about poetry it cannot straightforwardly treat the resources of poetry as internal to its own methods. Thus the conceptual categories familiar from these responses with

1 Paraphrase; for full quotation and reference see below.
which philosophy habitually speaks about poetry, those which place poetry in a certain epistemological (Aristotle) or cognitive (Kant) relations that tend to be dictated in the first place by philosophical needs are limited by the philosophical freight borne by them.²

In this chapter I begin to explore the way our life with concepts is shaped by literature and the forms of attention to life, world and self – forms of attention we may want to call moral or (may once have wanted to call) spiritual – that poetry exemplifies; with which we may, in Heaney's phrase 'credit poetry.'³ In the next chapter I follow Cora Diamond in discussing certain instances of what she calls “philosophical blindness to modes of moral thought,”⁴ to show how those blindesses are rooted in philosophy’s exile of poetry, and I argue that the cost, for philosophy, of its exile of poetry is its closing off of certain forms of attention, like those suggested by the concepts of witness, redress and invocation. Seamus Heaney credits poetry "...because credit is due to it, in our time and in all time, for its truth to life, in every sense of that phrase."⁵ But to borrow a turn of phrase from Diamond the truth ‘isn’t just lying about on the surface of things.’⁶ It takes a kind of, what she calls, “transforming perception”⁷ to see the possibilities in things. Transforming perception here explored in terms like 'witness,' understood as a dimension of our realisation of ourselves in the world – a dimension which philosophy has neither been able to master, nor even, in many of its prevailing modes of practice, see as important to experience and to knowledge.

2.

Before I turn to my account of the concepts of witness, redress and invocation, I want to place that discussion in the context briefly mentioned above that surfaces in the works I discuss of all three of the aforementioned poets: that of ‘the uses of poetry’. It may seem odd to enter into a discussion of poetry with the question of what use it is, but I do so in view of philosophical aesthetics, poetics and literary criticism having lately, by and large, gone out of their ways to exclude the possibility of considering its value in terms of its use. This impulse is not difficult to understand, if we see that it dispenses with certain pragmatic tendencies, and rescues poetry from straightforwardly instrumental and didactic criticism. The question of poetry’s ‘present use’ is a question (and, I want to show, an open question) of poetry’s value in terms of its, and our, relation to the world. It is not a question operating only in a purely functional grammar, but one which contextualises poetry, and properly situates it in the vital relation it bears to our sensuous, reflective and feeling nature. I am inclined to justify this as my entry point by saying that putting the question this way redresses the tendency in aesthetics to define art, and by extension, poetry, as that which is of no (specific) use. Seamus Heaney writes:

Professors of poetry, apologists for it, practitioners of it, from Sir Philip Sydney to Wallace Stevens, all sooner or later have to attempt to show how poetry’s existence at the level of art, relates to our existence as citizens of a society – how it is of ‘present use.’ Behind such defences and justifications, at any number of removes, stands Plato, calling into question whatever special prerogatives or even useful influences poetry would claim for itself within the polis.⁸

Heaney is drawing attention here to just how pervasive philosophy’s quarrel with poetry has been and to the point that, central to the quarrel, poetry’s ‘use’ has always been at issue from one or another viewpoint. It is true that poetry has had to continually deflect other discourses’ charges against it of

frivolity, obscurity and irrelevance. True, that is, that poetry as a discourse
has, since the time of Plato, been engaged in a long struggle for its place in
what is philosophically sanctioned as legitimate forms of knowledge or
modes of thinking. In this situation, poets are on the back foot. Because of
idiosyncratic facts about our culture this has been partly obscured from
view. Those distortions in the culture, which suggest that the poet’s struggle
is merely reactive against the tides of philosophy – or science – are thus part
of the quarrel, siding with philosophy, in that they accept the
epistemological priorities of philosophy against or above those of poetry.

Yet, all these professors, poets and sundry apologists (including many
philosophers) do, in various ways, extol and argue for poetry: for the
strength of its thinking, for its bearing on matters that matter to
philosophy, for the contribution poetic modes of attention can make to
wisdom in the face of philosophy’s historically and foundationally
insufficient attention to what poetry reveals about what we value. Perhaps
the question of how and why we value poetry is too habitually tied to that of
how it can be justified, or how it justifies itself. We may regret this state of
affairs but, as Heaney suggests, we can hardly ignore it. And, as he points
out, the impetus for justification arises out of the tension between poetry’s
existence as a form of art and our existence as citizens of a society. This
tension is partly, and in the first place, set up in Plato’s Republic where the
state, as such, is analogous for philosophy. To paraphrase the kernel of
Heaney’s remark: ‘how does poetry’s existence as art relate to our existence
in the polis?’ The ‘polis’ can stand for philosophy, as the image of the poets
in exile outside the city walls suggests; but it stands also for life in its many
outward dimensions of the political and social. The relation between poetry
at the level of art and our existence as citizens of a society may not, or not
always, be recognisably public as Heaney’s remark suggests; indeed there
may at times be something fundamentally at odds between poetry as art
and our life in the polis, as citizens. What that might be is suggested by
Harold Bloom when he says that:
Aesthetic criticism returns us to the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul, the reader not as a person in society but as the deep self, our ultimate inwardness.9 This is important, and I shall come back to it later in the chapter. The question of use, then, is only partly implicated by the moral, ethical, social value of literature and its value in the moral, ethical and social sphere; it should also be able to indicate and accommodate that turning-inward which is the private domain of our self-reflection – which Bloom calls "The reception of aesthetic power."10 And which he says “enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves.”11

Heaney’s remark suggested that we must try to show ‘how poetry as art relates to our lives as citizens.’ What, then, can we understand by ‘poetry at the level of art’? Poetry ‘at the level of art’ designates the particular forms or modes of attention which characterise poetry, which make something recognisable as poetry. It points to the unique pleasure which attends poetry, and its unique capacity to move the heart and nourish the feeling of life, however these features are identified. What might we understand by ‘poetry as part of our existence as citizens of a society?’ We might see that this is not just a question of how poetry functions in our lives – its ritual roles, its cultural mantle and its personal resonance; therefore to see this also as a question of how our lives function in poetry and how our being depends upon it; that in our reflective life with concepts we can be fully realised in our vitality only by poetry.

The question of use may seem to point us in the opposite direction, towards a purely utilitarian justification of poetry, and this risks obscuring poetry’s existence at the level of art by privileging its relation to our existence as citizens of a society. There remains, too, in the question of poetry’s use, an ironic lament ‘what is the use?’ Robert Graves capitalises on and derides, this irony:

What is the use or function of poetry nowadays? is a question not the less poignant for being defiantly asked by so many stupid people or apologetically answered by so many silly people. I wish to keep this naively asked (as I shall euphemistically paraphrase Graves) question in view. Perhaps the most pressing questions are naive ones. My account of what the question of poetry’s use can mean for us and why it matters to ask it will shed light on the examples I presently turn to, in illustrating how certain kinds of philosophical blindness, as they surface in (particularly moral) philosophy, are symptomatic of philosophy’s exile of poetry. Graves’ insistence that the question of poetry’s function and use isn’t the less poignant for being stupidly asked and answered, seems true in that the question both is and is not a trivial one. He cautions us that the question of use, which if taken in an overly restricted utilitarian sense is completely the wrong question to ask about poetry, however if we think of the question of poetry’s ‘present use’ as a question of value and function, then it is a very good question indeed: why do we value poetry; how does it function in our lives and how does it function in the world? When too many justifications of art converge on the narrow question of epistemology, or seek an answer in the category of the aesthetic, Heaney’s question (and Graves’) may create a space for examining what poetry is for us, and for the possibility of the genuine poetic encounter.

Critics are accustomed to being suspicious of this kind of question in relation to poetry. Usefulness (utility) has something of a bad name in criticism; in relation to art or literature it suggests a demand of instrumentality. At the juncture between literature and a (critical/philosophical) interest in moral concepts, the question of poetry’s use exposes it to the dangers of moralising of all kinds, yet I think it is an important question. My readings of *The Republic*, *The Poetics* and *The Critique of Judgement* have shown that the question of the use of poetry (even where a negative answer is given – that poetry is precisely of no use) entails the relation of poetry both to knowledge and morality. The goal of

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this thesis emerges from that – which is to problematize the standard philosophical ways of supposing those categories can be employed with the authority of the philosophical judge.

3.

Poetry witnesses us.

—Czeslaw Milosz

The concept of ‘witness’ needs to be understood reciprocally – not only is poetry a conduit for witnessing the world, for disclosing, that is, the world in a certain attitude, aspect or moment, but also poetry witnesses us, and helps us toward a kind of self-disclosure. This conception works against the evasive tendencies of a philosophy that conceives of poetry as something less than a full-blooded, vital responsiveness to the world. It is not as if the world comes before us, fully given, fully disclosed, and then we can test a poem’s truth against how we know things to be. Poetry can help us to establish ourselves in relation to things; can deepen, through the role of witness, our reflection on – our sense of – concepts, feelings, and experiences. To witness is to be called to rise to the truth of a situation, to use the effort of one’s perspective to see things clearly.

That poetry ‘in our time’ has been marginalised, that poetry very often has to struggle for survival, and that its cadences fall on increasingly deaf ears may be due in part, as Cleneth Brooks suggests, to the peculiar difficulties of modern poetry. Czeslaw Milosz introduces the term witness partly in defiance of the difficulties of modern poetry, as a way of coming back from some of its more abstruse permutations. My own use of the term witness, though I take many cues from Milosz, does not depend on such distinctions of genre, though it may be that what I say about the concept of

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witness as a critical concept does not suit all poems or all styles of poetry, nor probably could any single critical concept. I suspect that the sorts of literary creations that might not fare well under the concept of witness will require an adjustment to the resources of our critical language. Milosz’s gesture away from the abstruse tendencies of modern poetry is meant to remind us of one of the chief functions of poetry (one he doesn’t think all poetry lives up to) which is to tell the plain truth. And that, Milosz says, is why poetry flourishes in times and places of great social upheaval or great suffering, where: “when an entire community is struck by misfortune... poetry becomes as essential as bread.”14 Why is poetry so essential in times of conflict, suffering and change? That poetry, in such times, becomes more essential than bread is an expression of the way in which poetry can sustain us and nourish us. And one of the ways it nourishes is through witness which does not resile from what we must try, truthfully (faithfully) and without distortion, to understand.

On the face of it there is a point of tension between philosophy and poetry where questions of explicable, of how certain experiences can be fathomed, are at issue. In trying to give expression to experiences that are difficult to speak about, and that go particularly deep for us, explicability requires more than just crystallisation; it sometimes requires recognition of those contexts which thwart the kinds of concepts we might intuitively or ordinarily apply; a recognition of those situations which we, conceptually, cannot quite ‘get on level terms’ with. This is true (but not exclusively) of certain extremes of human experience and suffering. At such times poetry is more necessary than philosophy because the power of argumentation and rational consistency has its limits at certain extremes of human experience.15 This sort of answer reflects a view that poetry takes over at the limits of what we can otherwise say clearly. Poetry in its capacity as witness must do more than that: the particular modes of attention that

poetry invites, the kind and character of witness that it calls for are crucial parts in the first place of the process of reflecting on the meanings of our concepts. In the words of Peter Coghlan: “...at some crucial points in moral philosophy, or in any philosophy that deals with questions of meaning and value in human life, witness or testimony plays a crucial role.” The sense of truth to life that demands we not obfuscate and evade the difficult realities of existence is shaped by how poetry witnesses us.

Milosz’s own poetry is forged in the fires of major political and social upheaval and mass human suffering, and his notion of witness puts faith in the appearance, at the most terrible moments of human history, of poets who can, and are willing to, suffer for us, who can witness our suffering in a way that brings us through; poets such as Anna Akhmatova, through whose, as she says, ‘exhausted mouth, a hundred-million scream.’ The poem this image comes from is the second Epilogue of Akhmatova’s sequence Requiem; poems that seem to me unflinching in their role of witness, and in the authenticity that it demands. Here is ‘Instead of a Preface’ which opens the sequence:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines in Leningrad. Once, someone “recognised” me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me called by my name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I answered: “Yes, I can.”

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.

This woman is asking the poet if she can truly be a witness to the horror of these events. A great deal depends on the question: “Can you describe this?”

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The witness that the questioner seeks isn’t one who merely records and reports what is there – what all the women waiting outside the prison for news of their husbands and sons, could see. She wants to know if the poet can really say what this is like, if she can really describe, unflinchingly, the truth of this horror; if she can truly bear witness. And a great deal depends on the poet’s answer: “Yes, I can.” The ilk of witness being called upon here is not documentary or didactic, and this is where poetry becomes ‘more necessary than bread.’ The poems which follow do in turn bear witness to the poet’s ‘yes, I can.’ *Requiem* is a sequence of ten poems framed by a Dedication and two Epilogues. Here are the concluding stanzas of *Epilogue II*, in which the poet refuses even beyond the deliverance of ‘blissful death’ to resile from the station of witness:

> And if ever in this country  
> They decide to erect a monument to me,

> I consent to that honour  
> Under these conditions – that it stand

> Neither by the sea, where I was born:  
> My last tie with the sea is broken,

> Nor in the tsar’s garden near the cherished pine stump,  
> Where an inconsolable shade looks for me,

> But here, where I stood for three hundred hours,  
> And where they never unbolted the doors for me.

> This, lest in blissful death  
> I forget the rumbling of the Black Marias,

> Forget how that detested door slammed shut  
> And an old woman howled like a wounded animal.

> And may the melting snow stream like tears  
> From my motionless lids of bronze,

> And the prison doves coo in the distance,  
> And the ships of the Neva sail calmly on.\(^\text{18}\)

Haunting Milosz’s characterisation of poetry as witness we find Plato, whose criticisms of poetry in The Republic can be summed up in these terms also: that poetry cannot be a credible witness because poets lie and because their art is by nature mimetic, at the furthest possible ontological remove from reality. Conversely, implicit in Milosz’s question: ‘what sort of testimony about our century is being established by poetry?’¹⁹ is the assumption that poetry will be some kind of a testimony, that it will witness us, and that it is at least capable of witnessing us with some truth. We could ask this as a critical question: ‘what kind of witness does this poem establish?’

The notion of witness is, for Milosz, connected to poetry’s capacity to bring us through our experiences, both individual and collective, and in so doing to speak our time. This is how poetry witnesses us. Poetry as witness springs from what is most real for us – from a particular encounter with the real, an encounter which is precisely and only poetic. There is nothing occult or abstract here: the witness of poetry entails, in Milosz’s words “That we apprehend the human condition with pity and terror, not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time, in one particular province, in one particular country.”²⁰ I don’t take this as a condition or stipulation on poetic theme, content, language or anything else, and he himself says it is not a call to ‘socially committed poetry.’ I take Milosz to be expressing the need for a poetry conceived of as both mystical, and as touching, as it were, ‘the great soul of the people.’²¹ In contrast to this he identifies certain developments in twentieth century poetry, epitomised, he thinks, in the work of the French Symbolists and various capricious experiments in modernism that ensued, as failing in the role of witness by attempting to cut poetry off from its public and creating a poetry of isolation. Milosz sees this as a degradation in the role of witness, but it is not inconceivable that these developments in poetry are themselves a kind of witness; a testament to the dislocation of a whole culture, perhaps a whole world, from whatever way in

which the sense of a human family had hitherto pervaded it. Perhaps if poetry ceases to identify with anything, it is because it prefigures and responds to a greater cultural aporia of identity. Milosz is pushing against what he sees as a tendency in modern poetry for its “interests to become limited to an aesthetic and nearly always individualistic order” expressed in the idea that “true art can’t be understood by ordinary people.” His sense of witness, then, champions poetic motives and styles not confined to a narrowly aesthetic ideal. Milosz is advocating a poetry that, in the sense I invoked earlier, is of some use to us; and a poetry that does, at the level of art, relate to our existence as citizens of a society – be it a nationality, culture, or the human family.

‘Being an observer of an event,’ ‘giving evidence in relation to a matter of fact,’ and ‘testifying to a transaction’ are the usual default meanings of ‘witness,’ as the concept functions in civil society. The word, as Milosz uses it, invokes the now obsolete sense of witness as knowledge, understanding and wisdom; in its application to the inward testimony of the conscience. In invoking the term ‘witness’ I take that all of these senses to be crucial. Poetry asserts itself as a different kind of witness, and while it is not at all unusual for philosophers to value literature as source material for philosophy, there is an important difference between a conception of literature as open to the pressures of philosophical thinking and one of literature as being – by virtue of its being literature – capable of augmenting philosophy with ‘the inward testimony of the conscience.’

Witness (wit-ness) is what pertains to and carries a vital responsiveness to the world, of expressions of everything constituting who we are as beings. Witness is a vital dimension of our realisation of who we are in the world.

When Milosz asks for poetry that apprehends the human condition with pity and terror, always in relation to a given place or time, one thinks of Anna Akhmatova who has been able to “describe this;” and the many poets who have borne witness to the great and terrible moments of human

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history. Poets like Paul Celan, César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Agha Shahid Ali, Czeslaw Milosz himself. But one should also think of the poets that witness our quieter, inward, solitudinous joys and sufferings: like John Berryman in his *Dream Songs*, the mystical poetry of Francis Web, Elizabeth Bishop’s understated masterpiece *One Art*, the poems of Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manly Hopkins' *Sonnets of Desolation*. Here is the first half of one of Hopkins’ sonnets:

> I WAKE and feel the fell of dark, not day.  
> What hours, O what black hours we have spent  
> This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!  
> And more must, in yet longer lights delay.  
> With witness I speak this. But where I say  
> Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament  
> Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent  
> To dearest him that lives alas! away.  

These sonnets were written at a time of grave desolation and spiritual crisis. Though the identity of ‘dearest him’ remains obscure, whoever he is, he is not there to witness the poet’s darkest hour, and yet the poet can still speak of the difficult reality of his experience ‘with witness.’ He is utterly alone, but he is witnessed by poetry, and if his poem happens to find a reader, and if it happens to find a reader who has ever felt utterly alone, and if we are that reader, then it witnesses us, and we in turn witness the poet in his utter aloneness. Here are the concluding lines of the poem: “I see / The lost are like this, and their scourge to be / As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.”

Here Hopkins extends this sense of witness to all ‘the lost’ which gives rise to the surprising image of a ‘community’ of the lost who, because they experience an isolation akin to the poet’s own, are witness to him, as he is to them. Witnessing of poetry here is an augmenting of self—an enactment of who we are; essentially it is an affirmation, one which needs no argument but the vital testimony of experience and of a poetic

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26 This phrase ‘augmenting of the self’ comes from Harold Bloom, 1994, p30.
creation that renders that private experience communicable. To bring this forth in philosophy requires different principles than argument – reflected in the differences between certain demands of philosophical thought and modes of literary attention. Witness can be a point of relation between the particular and the universal – the particular that commands our attention and the universal that allows us to reflect on it. It is in this sense that, as Edward Hirsch writes: “Reading poetry is an act of reciprocity, and one of the great tasks of the lyric is to bring us into right relationship to each other.”

This notion of ‘bringing to right relationship’ points to the concept of ‘redress’.

Poetry can, of course, fail in its role of witness, it can serve the state by proffering ideologies and inventing nationalistic myths, it can fall into a documentary role, or become didactic, apologist or self-absorbed. The true witness of poetry requires a poetry that is “not indifferent to the past-future axis and to the last things [that is] to everything that connects the time assigned to one human life, with the time of all humanity.” The kind of witness poetry is calls on our need for a reality that counters the one which is already given. The witness that poetry provides, the redress it seeks, is one which bears up when reality, the one which is already given, fails us; when it is not enough; poetry can also be what shows us that the ‘given’ reality fails or is limiting.

4.

Poetry’s redress is its instrumentality in adjusting and correcting the world’s imbalances.

—Seamus Heaney

In the title piece from his Oxford Lectures, The Redress of Poetry Seamus Heaney introduces the term ‘redress’ as the guiding concept of his own

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29 The opening paragraph of which I quoted and discussed above, see section two.
temptation to show how poetry as art relates to our life as citizens; how it is, as he says, ‘of present use.’ The redress of poetry, in which the “poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions” is “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.” For Heaney, poetry’s redress lies in “the received wisdom that poetry is a symbolic resolution of conflicts insoluble in experience.”

To redress is to set right, to rectify or repair; the amendment of a grievance; less commonly a remedy for or relief from trouble; assistance, aid or help. To correct, restore, rebuild are other senses. A further (obsolete) meaning of ‘redress’ to which Heaney appeals is “[From Hunting.] To bring back (the hounds or deer) to their proper course.” And in this sense redress indicates poetry’s ability to bring us into right relationship – with each other, with ourselves, and with ‘reality.’ To understand this one must understand poetry as a kind of encounter. Poems, observed Rilke, “are not simply emotions, they are experiences.” Poetry is a point of contact between poet and reader, between language, thought and experience, between one reality and another. Recall the sense of community, the community of the lost invoked in Hopkins’ sonnet discussed above. Poems aren’t simply emotions; they counter unbridled emotion with form, poetry can en-form experience, can hold it even as it seems at odds with reality; it can stand in for us. Hopkins' poem, by the stout and hearty structure of the sonnet, holds together what is otherwise in danger of disintegration – a self in the mental and bodily experience of its own abject desolation.

For Heaney, poetry’s “imagined response to the conditions of the world” is its instrumentality in our lives. This works as a quasi-metaphysical force in which the poet imagines for us a reality that resembles, maps on to, the labyrinth of experience of ‘actual’ reality’. The poem shows us a way through the labyrinth of experience. This does not

30 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p1.
31 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p2.
32 Oxford English Dictionary
33 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p15.
35 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p2
give poetry any special ability to affect outcomes in a social or political sense, which is the role that the activist who believes in using poetry’s redressal to ‘affirm that which is denied voice’ wants it to play. Heaney is cautious of a poetry that conceives itself in the first place from a political motive: the activist, he says,

...will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of their point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales.\textsuperscript{36}

But

...poetry is understandably pressed to give voice to much that has hitherto been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual and political life. Which is to say that its power as a mode of redress in the first sense – as an agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices – is being appealed to constantly. But in discharging this function, poets are in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry as poetry...\textsuperscript{37}

Heaney denies that this process of imagining another world, the world so imagined, need intervene on ‘the actual.’ But, he says,

...by offering consciousness a chance to recognize its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways, it does constitute a beneficent event, for poet and audience alike. It offers a response to reality that has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit.\textsuperscript{38}

The symbolic resolution is achieved in an act of balancing the imaginary against the actual, the interior against the exterior, and the symbolic against the real and in doing so poetry ‘throws its weight on the lighter side of the scale.’ Imagined or imaginary here is not necessarily the imaginary of what is fictitious, though it can be and often is, but first and foremost it is the imagination as active constituent in the mediation of experience, as an active part of our discovery of ourselves in the world, and of everything we are vitally alive to and that is revealed in the reflective postures and spaces of the mind. Any experience or response to an experience, whether wholly

\textsuperscript{36} Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p2.
\textsuperscript{37} Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p6.
\textsuperscript{38} Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p2.
imaginary or merely responded to by the imagination, is mediated imaginatively. Imagination is active in the calling and recalling of memory as it is in poetic acts of making.

Kant thought of the poet as the creator of a new nature, which resembles ‘actual’ nature. Rilke’s Orpheus, from his poem *Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes*, creates upon his lyre a world of mourning for the dead Eurydice that looks almost exactly like the familiar world full of details of wood and vale, populated by beasts; a world that sits exactly alongside our own:

She, so belov’d, that from a single lyre
more mourning rose than from all women-mourners, —
that a whole world of mourning rose, wherein
all things were once more present: wood and vale
and road and hamlet, field and stream and beast, —
and that around this world of mourning turned,
even as around the other earth, a sun
and a whole silent heaven full of stars,
a heaven of mourning with disfigured stars: —
she, so beloved.39

Yet it is a world created out of sorrow, a world seen through the gaze of impenetrable sorrow. A world which has to be re-imagined in sympathy with the heart’s vision, and in being so imagined, is refashioned from it. A world thus reimagined, coloured by sorrow, so populated by objects whose substance is the very stuff of mourning, is the world that the mourner inhabits. It is the same world, but from which the beloved is forever gone; the same world in which things are irrevocably changed and so the poet imagines it as a parallel reality that moves outwards to encompass everything, culminating in a ‘heaven of mourning with disfigured stars’. It is a parallel reality capable of fathoming the true depths, the true meaning of a world thus altered.

Heaney writes:

As long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighing function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way. (8)

Heaney connects redress with images of balance, gravity and weight. The strength of poetry is in its capacity for counterbalance, for not siding, as it were, with gravity, and in the mind’s finding its capacity for counterbalance in poetry, realised by poetry:

In the activity of poetry (an) impulse persists, to place a counter-reality in the scales, a reality which is admittedly only imagined, but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual.40

Poetry weighs in by imagining a reality capable of counterbalancing the one that is given. The poem’s reality doesn’t negate or supersede the world as it is given; it does not or may not resolve the difficulties of reality. Its redress can be the act of holding out against the will to resolution of our difficulties in the terms of the realities they contradict; to hold us in our unresolvedness, to witness it, and us. There is a resemblance here to Kant’s notion of the aesthetic idea – that concept which we can’t quite get on level terms with, and which dwells in uncertainty. Poetry simply weighs in, and in so doing it shifts the weight to a different way of making sense of things, a different kind of truth. For instance this fragment from Pablo Neruda demonstrates how a poem or a poetic encounter can intervene on the usual categories with which we might formulate our understanding of and response to the world that surrounds us and what happens in it:

Throughout the long winter
mysterious tears roll from her glass eyes
and lie on her cheeks, not falling.
It’s just the damp, say sceptics.

40 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p4.
A miracle, say I, respectfully...
But why does she weep?  

“But why does she weep” represents the redress of poetry, it asks the uniquely poetic question, the question that intervenes in the tussle between the factual and the miraculous which engages the protagonists; calls us back to the right course, to see what is really at stake. This question emerges from a reality outside of the paradigms that vie for truth. The sceptics fight for what they must, and the ‘I’ (the poetic persona of the lyric) tries to see through the scepticism for a supernatural alternative, but they are on the same side of the scale, it is the poem itself that asks the question, and asks it from outside the dialectic of sceptic and believer, the poem itself that throws its weight on the other side of the scale, that asks the ‘real’ poetic question: “But why does she weep?” It is a question which directs our attention to something deeper, beyond the ordinary course of thinking, from cause and explanation to meaning.  

In Anna Akhmatova’s poem Lot’s Wife the desire to truly witness is powerfully illustrated in the counterweight of a single glance against the weight of threat and prophecy. Its final stanza reads:

Who will weep for this woman?<br>Isn’t her death the least significant?<br>But my heart will never forget the one<br>Who gave her life for a single glance.  

Poetry’s redress is in its reimagining, reordering of the way we take things to be. This poem redresses the consistent failure of biblical narratives to imagine things through the eyes of women; it counterweighs the furious justice in Yahweh’s reprisal on Sodom, with the enduring attachment of Lot’s wife to her home. The poem describes the ‘red towers’ the square where she sang, the tall house where she bore her children. This poem throws its weight behind the past and all that is precious in it against future salvation; it balances choosing for oneself, and choosing death,

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against being chosen and exempted from perdition. The redress of this poem is its capacity to balance the weight of a whole lifetime with a single glance, and although all the rest adds up to tonnage, and the thing Lot’s wife puts on the scale is a glance as light as a feather, somehow it holds, it bears up.

Heaney appeals to Simone Weil, to her imagery of gravity, and the prevailing notion of counter-balance in her writings published under the title *Gravity and Grace*, and to her belief that we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter side of the scale. For Weil, gravity is a metaphorical image for the force which draws us away from God and is connected with the exercising of power.43 “How” asks Weil “can we gain deliverance from a force which is like gravity?”44 Her answer is that the only way we can escape ‘that which corresponds to gravity in ourselves’ is grace.45 Heaney’s answer is that the redress of poetry can act as a counterbalance, (in this sense we can think of it as a kind of grace, and connect it to the notion of invocation – something which comes to us from somewhere else, but which we have to seek and be open to receiving); that it can correct or restore what is unbalanced, or what is too finely balanced. “This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.”46 Such a countervailing gesture, Heaney notes, can “frustrate the common expectation of solidarity”47 when that expectation is leveraged on behalf of a governing ideology or agenda, or on behalf of ‘self-exculpation or self-pity.’48 We have to, as Heaney quotes Weil “be ever ready to change sides like justice, ‘that fugitive from the camp of conquerors.”49

Martin Heidegger, in his essay *What are Poets For?* (that question again) follows an imaginative etymological-metaphorical trail from the notion of ‘weight’ and ‘balance’ to ‘wager’: “to weigh or throw in the balance,

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44 Weil, 2004, p5
46 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p4.
47 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p3.
49 Heaney, Faber and Faber, 1995, p3.
as in the sense of wager, means... to throw into the scales, to release into risk.”

Something, then, is ventured; something risked. Gravity is of course a necessary force, keeping things in balance, keeping them steady. One may risk a great deal in redressing things by refusing to obey the force of gravity but there are times we must ask 'at what cost does the balance hold good?'

Heaney recounts one such time, and puts the themes of balance and redress to work in his own poem *Weighing In*, published around the time of *The Redress of Poetry*.

Here gravity is described as “a socket-ripping, / Life-belittling force” in culmination of the poem’s opening image: “The 56 lb. weight.” which is “Gravity’s black box”. Yet placed on a weighbridge it balances: “everything flowed with give and take.” The imagery of balance, cashed out next in human terms, is: “This principle of bearing, bearing up / And bearing out, just having to // Balance the intolerable in others / Against our own...” and this in light of “all that // Holds good only as long as the balance holds, / The scales ride steady and the angles' strain / Prolongs itself at an unearthly pitch.” Next it is weighed in spiritual terms, and we must examine the implications of holding the balance. The poem toys with the idea of letting it go, of unbalancing things by ‘refusing the other cheek’; ‘casting the stone’. What would be ventured, what risked if for once we are not obedient to what holds things in the balance? The spiritual balance is measured by the poem through these scriptural references, and the image of Jesus refusal to strike his mockers in which “Something was made manifest – the power / of power not exercised”. But the soldiers “were neither shamed nor edified” and the power of power not exercised is that “of hope inferred // By the powerless forever.” What if, when true equilibrium required silence, we spoke out; ‘gave scandal’; ‘cast the stone’? What is at stake is cashed out in the recalling of a moment, and a friendship, where something was held back that should not have been, where an opportunity to speak the truth, to challenge a hurt, to show or speak from the depths of the heart’s response,

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was lost for the sake of equilibrium: “I held back when I should have drawn blood / And that way (mea culpa) lost an edge. / A deep mistaken chivalry, old friend.” In spite of the balance, there is something else something that runs deeper, that the balance has to be tipped before it can be accessed. ‘Old friend’ – what can a friendship take? What forces is it incapable of surviving? What happens to ‘all that holds good only as long as the balance holds’ once the balance ceases to hold? Perhaps the ‘deep mistaken chivalry’ is the failure to find out, failure to risk what redress always risks by seeing that “every now and then, just weighing in / Is what it must come down to”.

5.

The Function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse, and its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites.

—Robert Graves

Robert Graves writes these words in the preface to *The White Goddess*, a book notorious for its erudition and its fanciful yet persuasive mix of fact and conjecture. Scholars of all stripes from linguists to anthropologists and palaeographers have quarrelled with its conclusions. “There is a great deal of nonsense in this book” says one reviewer echoing the comments of many others “but it is nonsense of an entertaining sort.” In *The White Goddess* Graves claims that the matriarchal rites widespread in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, which he calls cult of the White Goddess, and which are generally presumed to have been wiped out by northern invaders into Bronze Age Greece to be replaced with the patriarchal pantheon of Greek mythology, nevertheless survived in England and Wales where a great battle, The Battle of the Trees, took place, recorded in a riddling,

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fragmentary poem that Graves has painstakingly restored.\textsuperscript{54} Graves, calling the study “a historical grammar of the language of poetic myth”\textsuperscript{55} claims to have discovered that a secret grammar of goddess worship, concealed in the alphabets of this and several other ancient poems of Welsh origin and secretly preserved by travelling minstrels, which he claims is the true, and only true, language of poetry:

My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry...\textsuperscript{56}

There is no doubt that the methods and conclusions of the book are outlandish and idiosyncratic. I certainly do not wish to raise the issues of its provenance or of its historical plausibility here. What I want to pick up on, to borrow from Graves, is the seriousness of his quest, throughout his work, as poet, historical novelist and creative anthropologist, of his deep and abiding engagement with the mystery of poetic inspiration.

When Graves says that ‘this remains the true language of poetry’ he means that the true function of poetry is the invocation of the Muse. And for Graves, invocation of the Muse is tied (in \textit{The White Goddess} and elsewhere in his writings) to an ancient feminine fertility cult which was superseded, so he claims, by rational values, as the Dionysian is superseded by the Apollonian.

The theme of poetic inspiration is further explored by Graves, in his Oxford Lectures, in his of discussions on ‘Muse poetry:’

Muse poetry is composed at the back of the mind: an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes. The effect on readers of Muse poetry, with its opposite poles of ecstasy and melancholia, is what the French call \textit{frisson} and the Scots call a

\textsuperscript{54} Steiner, 1960, p355-356.  
\textsuperscript{55} Graves, 1961, p9.  
\textsuperscript{56} Graves, 1961, p9-10.
'grue' – meaning the shudder provoked by fearful or supernatural experiences.\textsuperscript{57}

For Graves, the Muse, another name for the White Goddess (which signifies the source of vitality in poetry) is connected to the language of myth which was, at one time in our history, vital to us, but which has now fallen away, and been replaced. His ire is often, understandably, directed at philosophy:

Then came the early Greek philosophers, who were strongly opposed to magical poetry as threatening their new religion of logic, and under their influence a rational poetic language (now called Classical) was elaborated in honour of their patron Apollo and imposed on the world as the last word in spiritual illumination: a view that has prevailed practically ever since in European schools and universities, where myths are now studied only as quaint relics of the nursery age of mankind.\textsuperscript{58}

Here there is a strong link to Nietzsche’s view, expounded in The Birth of Tragedy, of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of culture and of artistic and poetic creation. In The White Goddess, Robert Graves warns his readers that they should take utterly seriously his claim that: “The function of poetry is religious invocation of the muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites.”\textsuperscript{59} And, in the Oxford Lectures he writes: “I can think of no true poet, from Homer onwards, who has not recorded his personal experience of her.”\textsuperscript{60} But, as one interviewer reports:

Does he, then, believe in the White Goddess as an actual presence or being? His answer is equivocal: “Whether God is a metaphor or a fact cannot be reasonably argued: let us likewise be discreet on the subject of the Goddess.”\textsuperscript{61}

I draw on Graves here not for his specific thesis about the nature, origin and contemporary fortunes of the Muse, but for his unwavering commitment to this aspect of the poetic art. What I’m interested in exploring from Graves’

\textsuperscript{58} Graves, 1961, p10.
\textsuperscript{59} Graves, 1961, p14.
\textsuperscript{60} Graves, 1995, p338.
\textsuperscript{61} Steiner, 1960, p356.
work is twofold: the importance of poetic inspiration, as an absolutely necessary critical concept, and the ‘feeling’ for poetry, the ‘shudder’ that poetry, that a certain poem, can cause, which Graves describes as ‘the mixed exultation and horror that her presence excites.’ I think it is crucial that these related aspects of poetry be reflected in our critical vocabulary; that that vocabulary be equal to acknowledging and utilising them.

That the Muse is an active, living part of the poet’s creation, that poetry involves elements of inspiration, is never denied by poets, and often not by philosophers either. Plato, despite his careful avoidance of the possibility that her presence might absolve the poet, is bound to acknowledge her. His omission of poetry’s connection with divine inspiration in The Republic is telling, but he touches on it in other dialogues where, in Phaedrus for example, Socrates characterises the possession of poets – that is, possession by the Muse, as a kind of madness. That Plato never dealt with this theme in conjunction with his mimetic theory of art, which condemns poetry as falsehood, means that it is left to us to guess that his acknowledgement of the inspired nature of poetry would not disrupt this ontological indictment of it: in so far as the poet cannot wholly account for himself owing to the mysterious and apparently extrinsic nature of inspiration, his discourse cannot have been rational and accordingly fails in the requirements philosophy has placed upon what can legitimately lay claim to truth.

Indeed, poets as disparate as Sappho and John Berryman have ‘recorded the presence of the Muse.’ Here is an excerpt from W. S. Merwin’s poem Berryman:

he suggested I pray to the Muse  
get down on my knees and pray  
right there in the corner and he  
said he meant it literally62

The matter-of-factness, with which Merwin, Berryman’s pupil, relates this tantalising glimpse at a modern poet of great genius, is instructive; as is the

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phrase ‘meant it literally.’ which stands against the tendency to insert a psychological explanation of the ilk of Jacoby’s that the muse is “the image of the poet’s “unconscious creative potentiality” which is “not in his own power;””63 Berryman is asserting the reality of the Muse, is reminding us what Plato knew and Graves insists upon: that poetry is not entirely at the dispensation of the poet’s conscious will or intellect. It marks the poet’s dependence on a force beyond the intellect, a kind of divine possession. Berryman is telling his pupil, and (through him) any aspiring poet who is listening, that poetry is a grant earned in supplication to the Muse upon whose reality the poet depends and to whom she must appeal. This sense of poetry’s coming from somewhere else is echoed by Milosz, though he does not call it by the name of Muse: “Frankly, all my life I have been in the power of a daimonion, and how the poems dictated by him have come into being I do not quite understand.”64 (It is interesting to notice in passing that he refers to his own poetic guide by the same name as that entity that Socrates is reported to have claimed being visited by.) I also want to quote from Pablo Neruda in this regard, from his poem entitled Poetry:

And it was at that age... Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don’t know, I don’t know where
it came from, from, from winter or a river.
I don’t know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not words,
nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires
or returning alone
there I was without a face
and it touched me.65

64 Milosz, 1983, p3.
Invocation is a two way movement; poetry comes in search of us, comes from somewhere, we do not know where, but we are summoned, from the street, the night, the company of others.

Just what is the strength of this notion of invocation, and what force can it have in the critical language? The importance of the Muse, of the concept of invocation, is that it captures the non-rational aspect of poetic creation, and what is invoked is something that surpasses (that is not explicable purely in terms of) discursive reasoning. Poetic truth arises from the encounter between one reality and another, as with Heaney’s concept of redress, and it is an encounter which will always be rooted in mystery. The notion of invocation is present, though in truncated and philosophised form, in Aristotle’s remark that the ability to make metaphor cannot be learned, and in Kant’s insistence that artistic production requires a talent which cannot be taught, but is given by nature; as Derrida said, for Kant art is ‘that which it does not suffice to know in order to know how to do it, in order to be able to do it.’ The poet’s experience of invocation is instrumental in poetic creation, but invocation is also instrumental in the reception of poetry. ‘Invocation’ indicates the work that literature does on us which is also not fully in the grip of our conscious attention. It acknowledges that there is something beyond the borders of what we say, or perhaps can say, about all sorts of literary texts and about ourselves in terms of what they evoke for us.

Invocation means “The action or an act of invoking or calling upon (God, a deity, etc.) in prayer or attestation; supplication, or an act or form of supplication, for aid or protection.” Oxford English Dictionary.

We might think of invocation as a certain attitude of mind, or better still, attitude of soul, captured in the ideas of prayer and attestation. Though it may seem overly loaded, difficult to take in a non-religious sense, it captures an attitude which is hard to find in more secular but related notions like contemplation or meditation. For example we cannot really read Hopkins’ Sonnets of Desolation without appreciating that they are a kind of prayer (a literary relation of the Davidic
Psalms of Lament), and that the speaker’s anguish is of a religious kind and is inextricable from the sense in which the words that the poet utters on its behalf are uttered in supplication. But more than that is invoked by Hopkins. It is not only a heuristic for these poems: by being open to such an understanding we can perhaps come to see a certain attitude or affliction of the soul that is recognisable in all suffering, not just religious suffering, witnessed in a particular light, given a particular form, as an entreaty in the face of abandonment. We can come to see the sense in which that is what suffering of this depth is like. We can attest to it. Attestation here forms a link with testimony, with witness. As it relates to invocation the testimony is that of poetry itself.

But I also want to connect invocation with evocation. Evocation as “The action of evoking; a calling forth or out...”67 or, obsolete, “The calling (of a person) from a specified place or association; (of the spirit) from present surroundings...”68 is a related concept, one which captures that dimension of poetry that involves its bodying forth of sense and image in language capable of transporting. Evocation may relate to memory, to the calling forth of a particular mood, or scene. It is the point of communication between what the writer calls forth in themselves and what their vision is capable of calling forth in the reader. Though we can point to certain aspects of the form, imagery, cadence of a poem as active in this process, the process itself cannot be prescribed. One feels it in one’s bones, in one’s heart. It will necessarily be in some sense ‘private’ – in some sense it will depend upon what resources the individual brings, what ways a poem, image, character, description of landscape etc. can resonate with her, uniquely. But of course a critical language aims to be a conduit for shared experience of affective response. The Muse, that mysterious presence that quickens the heart in the poetic encounter, is invoked, arrives as an encounter with another, imagined, reality and witnesses us by evoking a truly authentic encounter.

68 Oxford English Dictionary.
Seamus Heaney, in his Nobel Lecture, says:

I credit poetry... both for being itself and for being a help, for making a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind’s centre and its circumference. ... I credit it because credit is due to it, in our time and in all time, for its truth to life in every sense of that phrase. \(^{69}\) (My italics.)

Heaney’s characterisation of poetry as true to life invites an open-ended account of what truth, for and in poetry, might be. I shall avoid the traditional responses that take the truth of poetry to be connected to its special aesthetic nature (as in Keats’ “truth is beauty and beauty truth”) and I shall avoid those that centralise its relation with the emotions (Wordsworth’s ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’); not because I deem those categories to be mistaken, but because they are too well worn and imply too much of what I want to question: that poetry is a form of expression indigenous to the faculties of mind which, for better or worse (better for Romantics, worse for Positivists), lies outside the ordering principles of rationality; that it slips past reason, and in slipping past it, fails to pay its toll. What precedes this view is a particularly ‘rationalistic’ conception of rationality, and what very often follows from it is the denial that other, aesthetic, literary or poetic forms of thought are capable of getting hold of anything that might be legitimately true according to that view of rationality and its commitment to accuracy.

The concepts of witness, redress, and invocation are meant to cut across notions of value derived from epistemology and aesthetics (metaphysics), and capture how literature bodies forth the world for us. We need concepts that allow philosophy to speak to, rather than speak over, poetry, allowing us to see how our life with concepts is vivified by our life with literature and what it means to be critically reflective about what moves us. Sir Phillip Sydney’s famous answer to the question of poetry’s use was that poetry is to ‘delight and teach’. Quaint as this may seem, we could...

do worse than to press it a little – teach need not be didactic and delight need not be frivolous. And they go together. Delight is the feeling, the pleasure, the affectual responses, and is related to poetry’s capacity to deepen and augment our reflections, our experiences, our inner beings. Iris Murdoch, in *Against Dryness*, speaks of the failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing the world. That failure is often a philosophical failure. It can misdirect philosophy’s efforts at getting it right. “We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place.”70 “Through literature we can rediscover a sense of the density of our lives.” We need, she suggests, to turn our attention away from the “false whole” and towards “the real impenetrable person”71

Cora Diamond writes: “A novel or poem, [Henry] James says, does not give out its finest and most numerous secrets except under the closest pressure, except when it is most demanded from it, looked for in it.”72 The pressure we exert must be of an imaginative, creative kind – that is the nature of transformative perception. It must be responsive to our life in all its complexity, as with “the truth that had, with so much handling, began to glow” (*James, The Golden Bowl*); or in the way that “sheer plod makes plough-down sillion shine” (*Hopkins, The Windhover*). Truth, in James’s image, is not conceived as a solid thing, like a hard fact, but as a luminous thing, a thing that becomes luminous as one examines it, turns it over in one’s hands.


Chapter 5:

Cora Diamond and Onora O'Neill: A Contemporary Quarrel

Literature shows us forms of thinking about life, about what is good and bad in it, which philosophical requirements on the character of thought, mind and world may lead us to ignore.

—Cora Diamond

I take philosophy to be... part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves.

—Bernard Williams

1.

I have argued that, though Plato claimed the quarrel between poetry and philosophy was already ancient, his exile of poets in *The Republic* marks an important, foundational gesture for philosophy. I have shown the ongoing philosophical tendency to make demands upon poetry in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and in Kant’s *Third Critique* and I said that, under these conditions, we cannot simply turn to philosophical aesthetics for an adequate sense of what poetry is for us, nor for an adequate critical vocabulary to reflect upon the cost, for philosophy, of its exile of poetry. In the previous chapter I suggested that in its role as witness, in its capacities of redress and invocation, and in its living presence in the world, poetry can (in Seamus Heaney’s phrase) ‘be a help’ – it can help us establish ourselves in relation to things; to the world, and to each other. That is, it helps us to reflect on the way we live our human lives. But how important is it to recognise poetry’s capacity to help us look at, think about and experience ourselves in our relations within this
human life? How important is it to making the best sense of our life in the situation in which we find ourselves?

The question of what philosophy is, is a perpetual question; a question which is always central to the practice of philosophy, and which finds an implicit answer in what it tends to centralise, and what it tends to marginalise. Throughout its history philosophy has reflected upon its own discourse in relation to poetry and imaginative literature: a relation that has been, both directly and indirectly, an important reference point for philosophy's self-image. Setting the parameters of thought in such a way that certain, philosophical, methods will be sanctioned and that other ways of thinking will be excluded is an old habit of philosophy as we have already seen in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Kant. In this chapter I want to find a way into pondering how that tendency has played out in the contemporary philosophical landscape. While the way I shall follow is admittedly only one such way in, I think it will enable us to see how the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry remains foundational in at least some of philosophy's prevailing modes of practice.

In her paper *Anything but Argument?* Cora Diamond interrogates a view expressed by Onora O'Neill about what methods – of argument – confer legitimacy on moral conviction; and she takes issue with O'Neill's general characterisation of moral thinking as argument. In that characterisation, says Diamond, the moral force of literature is obscured. In this chapter I consider how Diamond broaches the problems she identifies within contemporary moral philosophy and how she reflects on literature to illuminate part of what is missing from its practices. I think Diamond touches on a very important set of issues about the type of philosophical practice represented by O'Neill. Let me give a brief overview of this dispute, before coming back to focus on some of its details. Diamond takes up something O'Neill says in a review on a book by Stephen Clark. Diamond takes it up in such a way as to centralise what O'Neill never mentions: literature. To begin with Diamond takes issue with the stipulations O'Neill placed upon how philosophical discussion in ethics ought to proceed – that
only argument is a legitimate form of persuasion. In stipulating that conviction is justifiably secured only by argument, she is deaf to the moral force of other reflective activities, such as (for the examples Diamond uses), literature – poetry and fiction.\footnote{In this chapter I focus, as Diamond in her paper does, on works of imaginative literature – in particular on poetry and fiction. The point is that these can instantiate forms of moral thought and reflection not, will fall outside the narrow conception of moral thought that O'Neill has in mind. (In the next chapter I look at another, different kind of example, in which Raimond Gaita reflects upon the moral touchstones of past experiences in a literary style closer to memoir.)}

Diamond takes O'Neill’s claim to be representative of a common view of moral philosophy. A central methodological presumption of much of analytic moral philosophy is that argument is the only correct method of working through questions of a moral nature. Her discussion points up two common philosophical assumptions: that morality exhaustively concerns a set of problems in the form of ethical dilemmas, and that these conundrums can (at least in theory) be resolved given (roughly) the best possible application of the right principles. O’Neill makes an indirect reply, in her paper *The Power of Example*, which reinforces an attitude to imaginative literature that resembles the exile of poetry in its Platonic / Aristotelian form.\footnote{See Chapters One and Two for a detailed analysis of Platonic and Aristotelian attitudes to poetry. Plato dismisses poetry because it purports to contain a truth while bypassing the intellectual labour by which knowledge is gained. For Aristotle poetry is created under specific philosophical conditions. O’Neill’s attitude does not resemble Plato’s attack on poetry on one important front: Plato thought poetry was dangerous, for O’Neill no such fear is possible.} Importantly, Diamond has set out her critical agenda not by laying down her own precepts, but in response to those that she encounters in the attitudes of O’Neill. She extrapolates from O’Neill’s comments a general tendency to define the very *conditions of moral thought* such that argument, and only argument – to the exclusion of other methods of reflection, counts at all as able to establish moral conviction. Diamond singles out the following remark as her point of engagement:
Yet if the appeal on behalf of animals is to convince those whose hearts do not already so incline them, it must, like appeals on behalf of dependent human beings, reach beyond assertion to argument.³

Diamond claims this remark exemplifies a view of how philosophical discussion in ethics can and should be carried on; the view it exemplifies is common; the view it exemplifies is confused (in that) it rests on a conception of moral thought which is false; and the view it exemplifies renders unaccountable and incomprehensible the moral force of many kinds of literature.⁴ Indeed, according to Diamond, its inability to account for the moral force of literature is central to the way this view is confused and is part of what shows its conception of moral thought to be false.

It might be said that philosophers are perfectly justified in simply drawing the boundaries of their own discipline, and that everyone else is welcome to do as they like with poetry. But for reasons we saw in Plato’s Republic, the issue is not as simple as that – as the disagreement between Diamond and O’Neill shows. Plato exiled the poets because their craft purported to show a kind of truth – to be capable of deep and honest reflection on life. That is, philosophers have always tended to try and dictate what counts in general for legitimate ways of thinking, knowing and deciding. Diamond’s critique challenges the tendency to lay down tendentiously philosophical conditions (in this case on ‘moral thought’) and then to judge the veracity of other kinds of discourses according to those conditions. (We have seen how this tendency operated in Plato, Aristotle and Kant.) There are, says Diamond, many ways of approaching moral questions. O’Neill is advocating a philosophical approach which involves deploying arguments capable of establishing the grounds of moral standing. But she is doing rather more than that, because she is also operating on the assumption that only this method can produce a legitimate moral conviction. Diamond’s beef is that O’Neill’s view lays down conditions on moral thought

such that other possibilities for methods of moral reflection simply disappear.

Diamond invites the reader to agree that works of literature can, by engaging the imaginative capacities, have the power to move, affect or change one's moral dispositions. She implies that there is nothing inherent in the philosophical method to give it the primacy that O'Neill insists upon. Clearly this dispute shows that the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry is also a modern quarrel; the Platonic gesture of exclusion is present in some form in the modern philosophical landscape because philosophy continues to define its aims and methods in contrast to those of poetry; and continues to harbour suspicions that "poetry is essentially a non-rational activity, lacking any secure, transmissible and impersonal body of knowledge or expertise that might ground a claim to any depth of understanding." It is hard not to see O'Neill's way of limiting what counts as legitimate moral thought as an iteration of the same move Plato made in *The Republic*: defining the aims and methods of philosophy so as to exclude poetry – not just by distinguishing it from philosophy, but by excluding it from having a bearing on the moral dimensions of our lives. In her response to Diamond, O'Neill outlines specific philosophical limits on how literature is 'used' by moral philosophy: she thinks the extent of literature's stake in morality is that it can provide useful illustrations within certain strictly philosophical parameters. It is hard not to see that as a distinctly Aristotelian move: where literature's moral dimensions are given by philosophical sanction.

Coming back to the quotation with which Diamond begins, O'Neill appears to say that only argument is capable of bringing someone who does not already hold a certain moral view, over to a new perspective; a corollary of which is that anything but argument is merely assertion. But the spurious nature of this claim is demonstrable by the existence of countless other sorts of appeals that encourage new moral perspectives – as a

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response to different presentations (such as a film, a piece of music, a religious perspective, a reflection on lived experience or a poem). Diamond comments on the highly implausible empirical claim that people are convinced only by argument, pointing out the obvious truism that for various reasons people are not always convinced by good arguments, and that people are often convinced by other things. But the dispute goes much deeper than this. O'Neill's comments represent a fairly common general philosophical condition: to make progress, i.e. to be rightly persuaded (in this case on moral questions) it is necessary to deploy arguments. Argument can of course take a variety of forms, but in general it aims to provide an impersonal, logically consistent structure in which to establish premises and reach a conclusive answer to a particular problem. The key point for O'Neill is that only argument can be justifiably convincing. On this view, it is argument that can establish whether a conviction is warranted – and only argument that can do that.

Argument is an important part of philosophical practice and Diamond is not disputing that it is one way of approaching moral questions. In certain contexts it will be appropriate. But argument is not exclusively apt in all the ways we conceive of, and reflect upon, the moral life. Reflection on the moral life also does happen in and in response to literature in poetry, fiction, drama and other genres of imaginative writing. In our attempts to make sense of things, these forms of reflective engagement have (or, can have) important moral dimensions – connected with poetry's interest in the concretely human forms of life as we live it. Those dimensions can be lost beneath the gaze of more abstract philosophical conceptions of what ethical thought is and ought to be. Moral thought may involve many different faculties and capacities – reason, abstract thought, argument, imaginative vision, compassion, and love. It may sometimes involve simple principles of action; it may at other times involve complex inward acts of attention – of the sort frequently explored in literature through concepts such as witness, redress and invocation.
O'Neill's remarks reveal that insofar as she thinks to reach 'beyond assertion' as she put it Clark would have to have used argument, she implies that no other kind of appeal can hope to produce a justifiable conviction. And that in turn implies that not just philosophers, but everyone, should aim to employ this method of reflection. She appears to think that moral thought (itself) ought to proceed by argument, and specifically by argument of a certain (narrowly analytic) kind. And, she implies, that if it does not, it cannot produce legitimate moral conviction but can only be a kind of assertion, or be persuasive in some spurious way. Diamond rejects the conception of moral thought that identifies it with, and pins it to, procedures of analytic moral philosophy; just as she rejects the philosophical conditions that conception lays down on moral thought – of what genuinely justifies moral thinking – where certain possibilities for reflection disappear: namely (but not only) the possibility of accepting an invitation to enter into an imaginative vision rather than to follow an argument. There are many ways of presenting a moral perspective, including ways of inviting others to exercise their moral imagination in certain directions such as (for example) those employed by poets and novelists. In numerous ways poetry shows us forms of thinking about life and shows us ideas that can help us think about our human lives – in which we may be moved to see things in a different light. O'Neill might concede poetry can do that but on the view she holds it cannot be what authoritatively compels us. Her view implies that if we are to be genuinely justified in our moral thinking we must employ argument, including legitimising any other kind of source, like literature, from which we may draw.

2.

Diamond said, I noted at the beginning, that O'Neill’s remarks exemplify a view of how philosophical discussion in ethics is and ought to be carried on which is confused. The suggestion that nothing else besides argument could justifiably convince 'those whose hearts do not already so incline them' to
adjust or change their moral stance rests on a conception of moral thought. Diamond says, that is false. She implied that one of the things which shows that conception of moral thought to be false is that it renders unaccountable and incomprehensible the moral force of many kinds of literature.

Imaginative literature sometimes has clearly identifiable moral aims. Diamond invokes examples in which works of literature invite the reader to see if they are moved to alter their moral orientations. The examples she uses, from the fiction of Charles Dickens and the poetry of William Wordsworth, are not meant to be paradigmatic forms of what literature does as such; nor to demonstrate general principles from which something called 'the moral force of literature' is supposed to emerge. Rather, Diamond is trying to show how instances of poems and works of fiction have (sometimes quite obvious) moral aims; and to show how those aims are met in literature's capacity to imaginatively bring out the individuality and detail of a life, and of a mode of life. Philosophical reflection is limited when it comes to such individuality and detail, which gets lost in the universals of moral philosophy. The moral force of literature is not a case of literature giving correct moral insight – but is alive in its capacity to bring us back to the rough ground of living and of reflecting on life, in its irreducible complexity.

In response to O'Neill's complaint that “...asking for reasons to accept Clark's view we find no arguments.” Diamond's examples show occasions of moral reflection that invite an audience to entertain different moral possibilities, by offering reasons (of a kind admittedly different to those which generally support arguments) to take moral thought in a particular direction. Diamond aims, through the following examples, to show the possibility of modes of moral thought and reflection that appeal to and engage the intelligence and to the moral imagination – offering 'reasons' in a

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6 In this discussion my ideas and formulations of them are influenced by Sam Goldberg's study of the relations between morality and literature in Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993.


much broader sense than O'Neill has in mind: as invitations to see things in a certain light – to facilitate genuinely moving insights in moral thought and reflection.

William Wordsworth, in *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, clearly seeks to engage the reader’s sense of fellow-feeling through descriptions, wrought in warm compassionate tones, of the response of the villagers in whose community the beggar shares a place. His aim is to touch upon the reader’s own sense of compassion and to draw on the reader’s capacity for a sense of fellowship. He appeals to the heart’s affections and invites them to come to life in the poetic, narrative mode. In his work, moral feelings are placed in a context; are embedded in the concretely human forms of life as we live it. Wordsworth’s moral vision for human fellowship depends upon the reader exercising her capacities of imagination to take up the invitation. Here is a passage from *The Old Cumberland Beggar* in which can be heard the tones of Wordsworth’s appeal:

Wherewith to satisfy the human soul?
No--man is dear to man; the poorest poor
Long for some moments in a weary life
When they can know and feel that they have been,
Themselves, the fathers and the dealers-out
Of some small blessings; have been kind to such
As needed kindness, for this single cause,
That we have all of us one human heart.9

The poem invites the reader to witness by feeling the fabric of life in the village, the various ways that its people respond to the beggar. One particular expression of Wordsworth’s vision of morality as human fellowship in the poem is the line ‘we all of us have one human heart.’ In that expression the moral vision the poem presents, through descriptions of the villagers’ responses to the old beggar, is crystallised. That vision is our human capacity to be moved by and to respond with sympathy to each other’s very humanness.

That 'we all have one human heart' is, in a way, (in the poem) a kind of principle; to feel the force of that idea in our moral reflections and in our worldly actions may issue from its resonating for us in ways that lead to rethinking our attitudes or changing our habits of action. But to be convinced on the strength of the context in which Wordsworth utters it is not to be convinced by an argument but to enter into an imaginative vision. As a 'kind of principle' it resonates with our imaginative engagement with the relations between individual lives of the beggar and the villagers; as a 'principle' it is not antecedent, rather it is a gathering together of the individual moral beings and relations in the poem. Wordsworth's presentation draws on capacities of the creative imagination, which are different in kind from those drawn upon to establish a principle through argument. The idea that we all have one human heart is arrived at in Wordsworth's poem by the imaginative detail, and in such a way that the reader, as witness, is taken into, rather than distanced from, that moral sentiment as it is expressed in the villager's actions towards the old beggar. It is by observing and feeling the responses of the villagers to the beggar as the kinds of responses of which we might be capable, that we can be moved by such a vision. We might, if we take up the poem's invitation be brought to an understanding of what it would mean to accept that we all have one human heart. The capacity for a sense of compassion, and of fellow-feeling, is, Wordsworth's effort suggests, the capacity to truly see another human being. The work is done by the poetry; if you are receptive to that way of speaking, then the line "we all have one human heart" will resonate with you. One can therefore find that a certain kind of response is possible in oneself – to this beggar; to people whose lives we may habitually see in idioms like 'those less fortunate than ourselves.' The vision Wordsworth presents redresses the brashness of such idioms.

The moral force of this poem is in its capacity to reveal what it means for us to all have one human heart, to animate the idea in us, not just to enunciate a principle; and not by bringing us to rationally accept it as an argument, but by bringing a sense of it to life in us, in our reflective
capacity, as witness. And that depends on a deeper root of moral response than is possible in the philosophical paradigm O’Neill equates with moral thought. In this sense “the moral force of the poem is created by the way objects are described, and feelings given in connection with one another.”

Wordsworth is not, by showing us the plight of the beggar, giving an example of how to apply the principle that 'we all have one human heart' but demonstrating that a certain form of attention – to others, to their reality, or the ways they are much like ourselves can bring us to see and to feel, with imaginative force, a sense of ‘fellow feeling.’ What that amounts to for any particular reader cannot be antecedently laid down; Wordsworth’s appeal can only issue an invitation, it cannot dictate the response. It is by the power of observing and of feeling the responses in oneself that one can be moved by such a vision of the fabric of life, to feel the force of the idea that 'we all have one human heart.'

As well as Wordsworth's poem, with its 'moral aim' of showing what the living principle that 'we all have one human heart' would be like at the centre of a community's attitude to a person on the margins of life, Diamond points out that in many of Charles Dickens' novels one encounters the fairly clear moral aim of attempting to “lead people to a sympathetic way of looking at children.” The Dickensian world is one in which children have a particularly terrible time; his novels are full of plots and episodes in which children are abused, neglected, taunted, disregarded and used for the nefarious aims of grownups. Showing up the tough, unjust behaviour in the adult world through fictional narrative can of itself hope to draw attention to the moral world in which children exist. And in many of Dickens' novels there are passages in which the treatment of children is specifically at issue in a way that has clear moral significance. But Diamond draws attention to other features of his novels that are relevant to the aim of leading people to a sympathetic way of regarding children.

Consider the following sentence:

I remember Mr Hubble as a tough high-shouldered old man, of a sawdusty fragrance, with his legs extraordinarily wide apart: so that in my short days I always saw some miles of open country between them when I met him coming up the lane.13

Descriptions like this one, writes Diamond, are “part of the way Dickens attempts to realize [the] moral aim... of getting the reader to attend to a child as a centre of a view of the world.”14 He ‘enters into the child's point of view’ to convey a sense of how the world appears to them; the moral significance in passages like this is in their capacity to show what it is like to ‘attend to a child as an object in its own right.’15

The moral significance of attending to something in its own right pushes back from the philosophical requirements of universalisable moral judgement by putting the concrete reality of a particular something, or someone, at the centre; revealing what is obscured in the universals of philosophical abstraction. That does not necessarily commit one to a particularistic or perspectival morality, but it changes the orientation of the moral starting point. Attending to something ‘as an object in its own right’ has a different orientation from attending to someone ‘as a centre of a view of the world.’ Some things may be attended to in their own right, but perhaps not as the centre of a worldview. It may be possible for example to care for certain features of the natural environment as objects in their own right, without them having a view of the world in any way that we could understand that.16 The moral significance of attending to someone as the centre of a view of the world acknowledges the other as the centre of a perspective, as the possessor of particular needs, desires, loves and fears; as placed in a unique personal history; part of a nexus of stories, events, and emotions. The world appears to each person uniquely through his or her

16 This point relates to a discussion in the next chapter on the philosophical work of Raimond Gaita on caring for insects and the difference between that and, say, forming a friendship with an animal.
own points of view and experiences. Literature illuminates those human forms of experience for us.

In this passage from Dickens, bearing witness to the world from the perspective of a child is an effort to see not just what the child is experiencing, but that his experience amounts to something that matters if we want to reflect on where he morally stands with us. It is not a case of his perspective as a moral precept either, but of the effort to invoke a fuller, more intense vision, and sense, of modes of experience and of life that have the capacity to inform our sense of our life, and the lives of others, in the situation in which we find ourselves. So it is not the fact about children that they have a perspective on the world (just in case anyone has forgotten even that) at issue here. We are faced most immediately with people as individuals. This is where our moral lives happen. Dickens' writing issues an invitation to look again at how the world can be and seem to a child. It invites the reader to see what that attentiveness can reveal to them, to consider how such a perspective might affect their responses to things and their reflections 'on life and what is good and bad in it.' It is the novelist's attention to detail that brings these possibilities to life in descriptions which include (for example) quirky details such as the different proportions in which objects and people appear to a child. Where we see, through Pip's eyes, miles of countryside between Mr Hubble's legs as he comes up the road towards the boy, we are invited to enter, imaginatively, his world in which things look and feel different and in which different things are significant. The imaginative force of the description gives room for ways of responding to children that are informed by our being able to see Pip's point of view. It can engage the reader, but not by putting her in the child's shoes — the unique perspective depends on us being a witness to the child seeing the world (— not witnessing the child's point of view, but witnessing the child seeing from their own point of view). The onus is on the reader to take up the invitation to engage with and respond to it.

Diamond's use of Dickens is not an example of some particular moral view, but of one way of presenting a view of the world that may be morally
significant, and may contribute significantly to the development of one’s moral outlook. As such it has exemplary power. What it presents is inseparable from the form of its presentation partly because what is being expressed cannot be best expressed in the abstract conceptual terms countenanced in analytic moral philosophy – and so the language, with its detail, evocative description, cadence and metaphor is not just the vessel for the thoughts and ideas, but is the very possibility of their expression.

Dickens is inviting his reader to engage their imaginative capacities to witness how the child sees the world; to witness the world, its objects and its people, from the child’s point of view. If the reader has no capacity to engage imaginatively with the vision being presented, then the invitation has been lost on her. In view of both the above examples – Wordsworth and Dickens, what is at stake is not just whether and how we can be moved by them; whether we can be brought to assess, to perhaps reassess, our moral standing in a particular context or with a particular group of people (children or beggars) but also what is involved in the moral life, and what capacities of thought and of reflection are significant. At issue are questions of what things are important for us, what we value and what contributes to our lasting sense of who we are in the world and in our lives.

Being moved by a vision like Wordsworth's or Dickens' is possible by virtue of certain capacities of response in oneself, like the capacity to respond with sympathy to a fellow human being or the capacity to respond imaginatively to a humorous descriptive detail. We need to be critically reflective about what moves us. But in ‘our general attempt to make the best sense of our life’ many of our capacities will be engaged. The human capacities characteristically exercised in the development of someone’s moral life will quite obviously include other forms of reflection as well as argument; like forms of reflection found in poetry, fiction, drama and other kinds of imaginative literature. Dickens’ descriptions (what he describes and the language in which he describes it) show an attention that engages us – ‘which contributes to our lasting sense of human life – of what is interesting and important.’
3.

Diamond writes: “Our – philosophers – paradigm of moral thinking is just what Professor O’Neill suggests: that of an interweaving of fact and general principle.”17 On the view in question morality is taken as largely limited to matters of deliberative judgement about right or wrong action. The crucial human capacity for moral reflection is thought to be the rational capacity to recognise principles and apply them by systematic argument to solve specific moral dilemmas. O’Neill complained that Clark ‘appeals only to the heart’ and she saw no effort in his book to ‘probe the grounds of moral obligation’:

In debates on abortion and euthanasia... we have seen a growing preoccupation with the moral entitlements of those who are not quite like us – whose sentience or rationality or self-sufficiency is in doubt. These debates scarcely stir the surface of Clark’s book.18

In standard models of moral philosophy, the grounds of moral obligation must be secured by a principle. In the case of philosophical discussions on our moral relations, and obligations to animals, the ‘general principle’ holds that certain capacities – of, say, sentience or intelligence – grant their bearer some particular moral status. So the principle is what establishes the relation between capacities and moral obligation: which sorts of capacities establish what force of moral obligation. The facts guiding its application are obtained by identifying what capacities a creature does, in fact, have. So providing one has the right empirical data to correctly apply the principle, the outcome will be a clear-cut moral precept which dictates that such and such a creature is granted a particular moral status based on the facts about its capacities together with the principle that designates what, according to that, it is entitled to.

In her remarks, O’Neill clearly takes the philosophical paradigm to be not an ideal, but the ideal form of moral thinking. Further, she takes what

she thinks of as its exclusive legitimacy to be a consequence of the nature of morality and the nature of reason. The relation between morality and human nature that inheres in any conception of moral practice reveals what that practice takes moral thought to be, and also what it takes as the deepest root of morality in us. Diamond said the view represented by O'Neill is common. Let me briefly address the question of whether that is still the case. How readily does Diamond's diagnosis fit with more current philosophical approaches to ethics? The commonality of a view that establishing the grounds of moral obligation is fundamental to the practice of moral philosophy, and only that can justify moral conviction, can be verified by looking around and seeing how much of contemporary moral philosophy still proceeds on such assumptions. This paradigm remains the foundation of practice for much philosophical work in the analytic tradition. The fundamental force of Diamond's criticisms remains relevant in current practice of philosophical ethics in relation to, for example, the thought of Peter Singer and of Jeff McMahon, two prominent figures.

Peter Singer's utilitarian theory is currently very influential in the practice of philosophical ethics and in those areas mentioned by O'Neill. He has been particularly vocal in debates on animal ethics, and on the permissibility of abortion, and infanticide. It would be unintelligible to Singer that our moral responses could be rooted in something like fellow feeling or kinship. An important feature of Singer's brand of utilitarian moral theory is that he maintains no particular differences between moral obligations to human beings and to animals except insofar as certain morally relevant characteristics confer different interests that ground different levels of moral obligation. The idea that we have greater moral obligations to humans than to other species, Singer dismisses as (what he calls) speciesism; which he regards as an unacceptable bias leading to a morally (and philosophically) inconsistent position. Commenting on arguments he has made against certain forms of animal experimentation, he writes:

19 Anything but Argument? was originally published in 1983.
If the experimenters would not be prepared to use a human infant then their readiness to use nonhuman animals reveals an unjustifiable form of discrimination on the basis of species.20

Singer’s conception of the practice of ethics reveals a conception of human nature in which love for our infant children is a complication of emotion, rather than an expression of our moral relations. It seems to me there is a question here of whether we should treat all competing arguments equally, at the evaluative outset. In an illustrative point Singer is making about collapsing the differences we would usually recognise between an infant and an animal, he suggests rendering the example such that the infant (it is being considered whether or not it would be moral to experiment on or to kill) is as an orphan, to ‘avoid the complications of the feelings of the parents.’21 I want to say that rather than seriously consider an argument like this it we should dismiss it as patently absurd. Looking at the issue from a certain point of view, can we seriously think that morality actually requires us to simply set aside love as a moral response? It seems that this sort of application of the philosophical paradigm becomes, as Diamond noted, a way of hiding our moral insights from ourselves.22 This is perhaps a controversial example, but of the sort that is relatively commonplace in moral philosophical discussion. Once the principle is secured, the moral outcome is always its product. Singer’s approach reveals that his conception of the relation of morality to human nature is removed from all the messy, feeling, human aspects of our lives. From that point of view the roots of morality do not go very deep into the heart; moral reflection is only cerebral, and everything else is a mere distraction.

Singer is not alone in holding this notion of what argument should accomplish, nor in insisting that the tough-minded philosopher is committed, by the demands of philosophical consistency, to such distasteful

moral positions. Very similar sorts of arguments are espoused by James Rachels and following him Jeff McMahan. McMahan in his paper *Our Fellow Creatures* takes up the question of moral obligations to animals by advocating a position (held by Rachels) known as 'moral individualism' in which moral obligation is grounded in the capacities any individual has, irrespective of that creature’s species membership. In this paper he argues forcefully against certain philosophers whom he regards as disciples of Wittgenstein, like Cora Diamond and Raimond Gaita.23 McMahan writes:

> According to moral individualism, if it is permissible to kill the animal, it should also be permissible... to kill, for the same purpose, a human being who lacks any relevant status-conferring intrinsic properties.24

McMahan's language here (especially the sterile and scientific sounding phrase 'status-conferring property') seems to operate at a level of abstraction that is not only distant from, but also sounds hostile to, the human forms of our experience. Under these conditions, ordinary insights about life and what is good and bad in it can easily be overwhelmed. Yet philosophers like Singer and McMahan have a substantial influence on contemporary moral debates. Diamond makes a similar point about what goes wrong with certain kinds of moral arguments such that they are 'capable of hiding our genuine ethical insights' and which sometimes give rise to 'stupid, insensitive or crazy moral arguments.' 25 In relation to a quotation by Singer she writes:

> What I mean... may be brought out by a single word, the word "even" in this quotation:

> We have seen that the experimenter reveals a bias in favor of his own species whenever he carries out an experiment on a non-human for a purpose that he would not think justified him in using a human being, even a retarded human being.26

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23 In the following, final chapter I discuss Gaita’s work, particularly in The Philosopher’s Dog, and I return to McMahan’s specific criticisms of Gaita there.
It usual for moral philosophers to draw upon poetry, fiction and drama for instances of exemplary conduct or for illustrations of moral dilemmas within discussions of ethics. Yet such discussions habitually treat literature as having a kind of proto-philosophical function. (We have already seen this thinking in previous chapters on Aristotle and Kant.) But I want to emphasise an important distinction between on the one hand using literary examples as source material for philosophy and on the other hand literature as having moral force in the sense in which Diamond invokes that idea. Works of poetry and fiction can have moral force not for what they can show us about already given moral categories (given, say, by philosophy, or by custom), but in the sense that they can show us ‘ideas we can think with,’ so that the moral force comes from their having imaginative force – in ways we have already seen through discussions on Wordsworth and Dickens. The former is a fairly common view of the role of literature in moral philosophy that treats literature as a repository for examples furnishing conventional styles of moral argument. It assumes that literature has a ‘philosophical use.’ Diamond’s concept of the moral force of literature involves the reading of certain works of literature as themselves exemplifying forms of attention that can augment moral thought, reflection and judgement – as issuers of an invitation to be moved by a certain vision of things. But the conventional moral philosopher might agree that literature can make a point forcefully, yet still claim that its content can be extracted from its literary presentation. This is the essence of a view expounded by O’Neill in a later paper which I will look at in some detail below in order to make the contrast between Diamond’s conception of literature’s moral force and the conventional moral philosophical view explicit.

In her paper, The Power of Example, O’Neill makes an oblique reply to Diamond, of the sort that might be expected. In a general discussion on

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27 The phrase ‘Ideas it is good to think with’ comes from a paper given by Cora Diamond, entitled Diamond, Murdoch Off the Map, at Marquette University in Milwaukee Wisconsin on April 26th, 2013. It is at this time an unpublished manuscript.

28 Diamond does expect it: “...the arguments I have given are in a sense quite useless. For if someone takes a view of the relation between human nature and morality from which it follows that only argument can convince, you cannot convince him by examples that
examples in moral philosophy, O'Neill does if not quite advocate at least approve of the use of literary examples – but not without specific qualifications and certain reservations that are telling. O'Neill’s view of what ‘doing moral philosophy’ must require assumes that the only thing one could do with literature in the context of moral reflection is mine it for examples which may serve the needs of argument, or illustrate some already determined (and determining) moral principle: “The primary use of ostensive examples is... educational. By considering examples we become better able to judge cases requiring decision and action.” So O'Neill takes examples as helping by illustration to secure the grounds for correct moral judgements. Literature can be one source for such examples, but their primary function is training for the application of principles to specific cases. There is no room in the philosophical paradigm in which generality and systematicity are the highest expressions of moral thinking for the idea that a poem like Wordsworth's might itself constitute moral reflection.

The forms of attention and possibilities for thought Diamond has drawn attention to in her examples are contrasted to O'Neill’s view that “Good illustrations need to be clear and simplified, even caricatures, if they are to get their point across.” It is not that clear or simplified illustrations are necessarily problematic, but that a predilection for only this will not do justice to the fullest possible expression of morality and the moral life. Thus we might ask what the point would have to be like, for this to be the best way to get it across. Under such conditions as O'Neill wants to impose on moral thought, literature's nuance and complexity, its particularity and imaginative reach (in other words, its most important, and 'literary' features) will not do the job – on the contrary those things will only serve to confuse moral thinking. For Diamond the examples from literature are not meant to be illustrations but something like occasions for reflective thinking (or occasions which constitute a special kind of moral thinking).


O’Neill recognises no distinction between ‘philosophical discussion in ethics’ and ‘moral thought.’ And so, for her, the possibility of poetry’s vital responsiveness to the world, in which we may be witnessed by poetry – in the way that, as Milosz said: ‘poetry witnesses us’ – is not something that could even be made sense of. What therefore worries her about the kind of association Diamond has in mind between literature and ethics (in which literature is an occasion for reflective thinking) is that reflection on literature is not there treated as merely illustrative: “[examples] are not theory-led but themselves the pivot of moral thought.”31 That is, of course, the point. Despite its pejorative connotations for O’Neill, ‘pivot’ is just the right word since works of imaginative literature have moral force by inviting us into a form (or forms) of reflection in which our capacities of imagination, of witness, are engaged – and for which that engagement is itself substantial moral work. Such forms of reflection engage something at the root of our morality that the style of reflection advocated by O’Neill necessarily obscures.

Diamond’s appeal to Dickens and Wordsworth doesn’t function as an example of the kind O’Neill has in mind. Those works don’t illustrate principles that are philosophically given, nor do they purport to present facts that are, or are taken to be, morally significant. Rather, they are examples of ways in which literature can show us something about what ethical thinking is really like when it takes forms other than making moral judgements or application of principles: forms of reflection for which the world is bodied forth through imaginative engagement, in language that is attentive, and sensitive. Iris Murdoch writes: “The 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.”32 The forms of thinking that poetry shows us have to do with this picturing of human situations. Moral achievement is not limited to the application of principles and dedicated arguments.

It is likely that certain styles of philosophical practice in ethics which are distinguished by their own different theoretical commitments will be more susceptible to rigid views about what moral philosophy can be, and what its relationship to literature can be. Deontology and utilitarianism, for instance, might be more likely to think of literature, if at all, as having a moral purpose or function only in case it can in reveal or illustrate formulable moral insights. Yet even for a philosopher of the virtue tradition like Martha Nussbaum, whose ethical writing frequently takes works of literature to have important moral dimensions, there is a strong tendency to formulate those dimensions in a fundamentally philosophical way. Nussbaum's Aristotelian virtue theory already defines the territory of moral philosophy differently from the more problem-oriented ethical theories represented by philosophers like O'Neill, McMahan and Singer. She includes in her purview of the sphere of the moral, things that Singer and McMahan would not dream of considering. In a paper on Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum writes: "I wish to make, on behalf of this novel, the claim that it is philosophical or makes important contributions to moral philosophy." Yet putting her point that way reveals a different kind of bias towards philosophy where literature is concerned. It resembles Aristotle's paradoxical defence of poetry which, rather than denying the terms of Plato's quarrel, reinscribes poetry so as to render it amenable to the demands of philosophy – or to the philosophical demands of morality.

Nussbaum sees the moral value of James's novel as contained in its demonstration (through the main character Maggie coming to realise it) that choice among competing values can be tragic. She remarks that Aristotle thought tragedy could bring illumination and clarification, and she thinks this is what happens, painfully, for Maggie in the novel's resolution.

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"Inspired by tragic events, we learn what matters to us, and we are clarified."\textsuperscript{36} But I am not convinced that clarification is the best descriptor for how this novel resolves itself. Perhaps the expectation of this kind of an outcome, of resolution, is still too philosophical. Even in Nussbaum’s much deeper probing of literature’s moral dimensions, this rather tendentious formulation fails to take literature on its own terms. The Golden Bowl is a complex, often elliptical, novel. Nussbaum is right about its having moral insights which are impenetrable by systems of moral rules. Yet she too easily collapses it into a genre of philosophy when she says that "We need... – either side by side with a philosophical "outline" or inside it – texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer difficulty of moral choice."\textsuperscript{37} Surely we do need texts with which to think about the difficulty and indeterminacy of life, but the idea that we need to have a philosophical outline for them misses the point that what such texts offer is outside the scope of philosophy. Nussbaum’s point here still makes it sound as if such texts can illuminate a philosophical claim: that morality is difficult and complex. That is not to say anything about what the interest of such texts might be to philosophy.

Nussbaum thinks of The Golden Bowl as doing philosophical work that conventional modes of philosophy do not do, but the point is that she thinks it is \textit{philosophical work}, as though she is deaf to the possibility of moral reflection being something other than philosophical reflection.\textsuperscript{38} Sam Goldberg’s formulation – that "literature is a distinctive and irreplaceable

\textsuperscript{36} Nussbaum in New Literary History, 1983, p38.  
\textsuperscript{37} Nussbaum in New Literary History, 1983, p41.  
\textsuperscript{38} I must acknowledge here the brevity of my treatment of Nussbaum. I mention her to show that the issue is not just a problem for strictly analytic moral philosophy – i.e. that it doesn’t simply dissipate in a different philosophical tradition like Virtue Ethics. However Nussbaum has been very influential in contemporary moral philosophy, and has taken an interest in literature that many philosophers would not countenance. I do not mean to suggest that her work is of no value, but in my view, this example of Nussbaum’s tendentious reading of a literary text is characteristic of her mode of engagement with literature, in general, in the philosophical work she thinks literature does – even given that what philosophical work is, is highly contested. However I recognise that a fuller discussion would be needed to establish these points – a discussion which, due to the restrictions of space, I do not here embark upon.
kind of moral thinking,"³⁹ is better. Philosophy tends to subscribe to instrumental views on the relation of morality and literature. But on a formulation like Goldberg's, the moral thinking in literature is there by virtue of its being attentive to what philosophy can not attend to – because literature "does its thinking in the particulars it imagines."⁴⁰ Attention, of the kind sought (in the above examples) by Dickens and by Wordsworth, concerns how, with sensitivity and subtlety, with justice and love, we picture our humanity.

Poetry is one way of attending (giving attention to) things, which makes something available in its own right – not contingent on what it can philosophically show or be made to show. In its capacity as witness, poetry and the kind of attention it exemplifies (to some extent even makes possible) are constituent in the formation and life of our concepts; which are modes of access to reality. In this sense witness (wit-ness) helps us to establish ourselves in relation to things. Obscured by the view of moral thought O'Neill exemplifies is the possibility of genuine reflective thinking – and actual transformed receptiveness and responsiveness, emerging from a presentation, or representation of a form of life where bearing witness, inter alia, rather than marshalling arguments offers the deepest possibility for moral engagement with the world, each other and with ourselves. Reflection may take a variety of forms, the possibilities for which are not antecedently laid down, and I see no reason to acquiesce to O'Neill’s assumption that philosophy has a monopoly on exemplification or approval of what might count as legitimate moral reflection. The salient point here is that the exemplification and practice of such habits of awareness are moral acts, ones that engage a broader range of human capacities than argument alone can:

...Ethical thought goes on in argument and also not in argument but (e.g.) in stories and images. The idea that we have not got Thought unless we can

⁴⁰ Diamond Goldberg, 1993, pxv.
rewrite the insight as argument in some approved form is a result of a mythology about what is accomplished by argument. 41

4.

Diamond admits that her criticisms are likely to miss their mark because the view O'Neill exemplifies will deflect the possibility of their getting any purchase. If someone finds evidence of a certain sort unthinkable (evidence of ways that some works of literature can instantiate forms of moral thought), then they are already outside the pale of whatever genuinely persuasive power that sort of evidence has. Something is lost on them; they have refused the invitation. This non-acknowledgement of other modes of reflection is a problem many philosophers are likely not to recognise as a problem at all. This fact indicates that it is not a simple disagreement about the best way of doing moral philosophy in which different approaches can just exist side by side, perhaps in mutual suspicion but not necessarily in mutual exclusivity. That non-recognition is so central to constituting the problem itself that we can’t just agree to disagree: one way or another the outcome has implications for our fundamental understanding of the nature of morality, its relation to human nature, and what that means for the nature of moral reflection.

Crucial to the question of what possibilities there are for constituting and reflecting upon our moral lives is what one takes the relation of morality and human nature to be, and how one takes it to be expressed. What any given view of morality reveals about an accompanying view of human nature is instructive. Diamond writes:

...What is characteristic of some of these views... [those of Stephen Clark, Wordsworth Dickens and Henry James]... is that they take as the root of morality in human nature a capacity for attention to things imagined or perceived: what I think it would be fair to call a loving and respectful attention... 42

The metaphor of the 'root of morality' in human nature here is significant. The root is the deepest part, the part that is not visible, but that sustains growth. If your conception of moral thought is such that it is intelligible that it can involve 'attention to things imagined or perceived' or that it is vitally responsive to the contours of life lived, and the ways that poetry witnesses that; if your conception of moral thought is responsive to the way the world is bodied forth to us in imaginative literature, then your concept of the roots of morality in human nature will be very different from that of someone for whom a conception of moral thought rests on rationally grounded, universal principles:

Such a view of the relation between morality and human nature is – not least because what one takes morality to be is not something given in advance and independently – highly disputable; and it is perfectly alright for philosophers to dispute it. But what is not all right is for philosophers to lay down exclusive ground rules for the discussion of moral issues in blithe unconsciousness that they are simply taking for granted and building into those rules a totally different view of morality and its relation to human nature.\(^{43}\)

In the context of this disagreement between O'Neill and Diamond the quarrel is a tussle between competing views of what can be involved in an account of the moral life. On the one hand an account of the moral life is exhausted by a system of enquiry in which argument is paramount. On the other hand moral reflection is more textured, of the sort we saw in the examples offered by Diamond. So far as that goes, the conclusion for Diamond need only be that the second account is at least worth considering, and that advocates of the first account are wrong to proceed as if the other were simply beyond the pale. But there are stronger implications to this dispute too, since it is, in essence, a disagreement about what morality is like – about what the subject of moral philosophy encompasses. This does not just reflect a local (philosophical) issue about the nature of ethical discourse; it raises questions about what we understand about our nature as moral beings to include and about the very nature of moral thought.

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So, what is really at stake in this dispute between Diamond and O’Neill is what possibilities there are for constituting and reflecting upon our moral lives: possibilities for what we take to be morally significant, and for the forms moral reflection might take. Poetry and imaginative literature are part of a ‘humanistic tradition’ – a tradition of writing and of reflection that stretches across the many disciplines that comprise the humanities, which also traditionally includes philosophy. Across the various strands of the humanistic tradition, reflection on human life and human values take various forms. Literature, as I earlier quoted Murdoch saying, is a lesson in how to picture human situations. Philosophers like O’Neill, Singer and McMahan and even Nussbaum hold a conception of what thinking is that overlooks the ways we learn from, and the forms that understanding may take in, literature. The kind of understanding at stake is not an understanding that involves more facts. Rather, it involves:

...a learning how to think, a learning how to think about ourselves, about human life, about experience and desire and death, about relations with others and love and hatred, a learning what concepts, what ideas, what images, what stories, are good to think about such things with.

Literature offers possibilities for forms of reflection on the moral life that philosophy cannot. Such touchstones are crucial to our making sense of our life – not of human life as an object, but as a lived experience. Diamond said of Wordsworth and Dickens, "they take as the root of morality in human nature a capacity for attention..."

Previously I discussed the uses of poetry in terms of Seamus Heaney’s phrase ‘truth to life’. The moral attention of literature is a function of the 'truth to life' that Heaney credits poetry with. It is not per se a matter of having more, or clearer, facts. Diamond called it ‘a loving and respectful attention.’ It is ‘true to life’ by being just in its vision. Attention, then, is not simply looking but being ‘present to’ in a way that implies an activity in

45 Diamond, Murdoch Off the Map, Unpublished.
oneself. The activities of, among other things, love and respect – including attention to the spirit in which one apprehends and reflects upon others and upon the objects of the world. It concerns the quality and character of one's orientation to a person, or a situation: one's 'presence to' that object upon which they attend. It is not simply a matter of what might be illuminated by finding out more accurate information. Rather it is about the spirit in which one sees. Attention as a moral concept is an effort to attend to something as an object of admiration, or compassion, pity, love or humour. Some of these aspects we saw in what Diamond drew attention to through the examples of Dickens and Wordsworth. Attending to these things is in the way we morally position ourselves, or find ourselves so positioned, in relation to them. And attention of this kind, exemplified in imaginative literature, and in our responses to (capacities of response to) imaginative literature, is a possible form (of indefinitely many possible forms) that moral reflection might take.

In the quote at the top of this chapter, Diamond said that 'literature shows us forms of thinking about life.' But, importantly, literature is not the exclusive domain of forms of thinking about life. Many other things may add to our reflective life. What Diamond said was that literature shows us forms of thinking – and it is literature's exemplarity here that is important. One of its uses, the way it is true to life in Heaney's sense, is this exemplarity. The moral force of literature is found in what philosophy has been insufficiently attentive to: expressions of life that, precisely because of their modes of existence, cannot be reinscribed into its universals.

Onora O'Neill's exclusion from ethical discussion of anything that is not argument is emblematic of philosophy's non-recognition of other forms of thought, including those frequently found in literature – and I have read it as a contemporary iteration of the Platonic banishment of poetry from the republic of philosophy. In as far as her views represent the contemporary situation, the prevailing mode of moral philosophy can be seen to be operating on a set of assumptions that exclude the possibility of poetry's having moral force for poetic, rather than philosophical, reasons. There is
nothing wrong with argument as far as that goes; but there is a very strong, almost ubiquitous habit, especially in the analytic temperament, to think that argument requires as much extrapolation as possible from reflection in situ to propositions, theoretical in character and universal in application. It is *that* assumption Diamond rejects. The point is, rather, that argument always takes place in a context.

The assumption that other forms of thinking are not really thinking, that they are deceptive, mistaken, or inadequate does not mean they can’t be condescended to in a kind of backhanded approval: Plato professed his love for the poets, Aristotle lauded poetry for its capacity to express universals, Kant envied them for their innate capacity to produce metaphor; O’Neill concedes that literature can provide nuanced examples for moral philosophy. But in each case, literature and the modes of thought and reflection to which it gives expression are dictated to, curbed and treated with suspicion by philosophy. Cora Diamond does not stipulate what a philosophical study of morality should be like. She says that the subject is notoriously difficult to define; she does not say what morality and moral philosophy ought to be; she says that any conception of the relation between morality and human nature is disputable, but the crux of her argument is that philosophy has no business laying down ground rules for what moral thinking is like such that possibilities for moral reflection in other ways simply disappear.
Chapter 6.

Possibilities for Philosophy: Ethical Reflection in the Narrative Philosophy of Raimond Gaita

1.

In the previous chapter I said that the conception of moral thought operative in some of moral philosophy’s prevailing modes, that assumes it must take place at a level of philosophical abstraction to be capable of supporting legitimate moral justifications, is an inadequate characterisation of the moral life because it obscures some aspects of what moral thinking, and the moral life, is like. In this chapter I discuss a philosopher whose work occupies a different reflective space. Raimond Gaita’s approach to philosophy implicitly and explicitly challenges the standard analytic model of what thought, and moral thought, involves. In *The Philosopher’s Dog* Gaita writes:

> Since at least the time of Socrates, the West has been preoccupied with the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate persuasion. One version of the distinction... says that legitimate persuasion appeals to the head rather than the heart, to logic and reason rather than emotion. Suspicion of storytelling and of poetry, as forms of powerful but illegitimate persuasion, often goes with that way of drawing the distinction. Art may delight us, but if it is to teach us, if it is to show us how the world is, then we must extract plain cognitive content from form that often beguiles, dazzles and seduces us.¹

Gaita draws attention here to the sense in which the distinction between head and heart is underpinned by other persistent distinctions such as the one frequently drawn between reason and emotion. The thought that, as Gaita puts it ‘legitimate persuasion belongs to the head not the heart’ has important implications not just for philosophy’s ongoing relation to literature but also for what it is possible for philosophy to be. Central to the

thought that ‘legitimate persuasion belongs to the head’ is the stipulation that it can be gained *only* via a rational discursive process. The rational discursive process is not one which is *necessarily* thought of as excluding the imagination, but it is one to which imagination is finally subordinated so that ‘ways of knowing’ which do not fall under the auspices of argument are not properly ‘ways of knowing’ but something else: ways of feeling, ways of experiencing, ways of thinking one knows or even ways of being deceived. Since philosophy in the analytic tradition tends not to recognise forms of thought not in conformity with analytic standards of argument as *legitimate* ways of reflecting on the moral life, perhaps we need, as Gaita says, “...a better account than is on offer of what it means to be compelled by argument, and of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate persuasion.”

He attempts to give us one. The form of philosophical blindness discussed in the previous chapter is blindness to what philosophy itself may be like – due to blindness about what thinking is really like, and in particular in the examples considered, about what moral reflection is like.

Where in the previous chapter I considered ways in which poetry and fiction can have moral force that were contrasted to the usual philosophical methods of moral reflection, in the present discussion I consider other possibilities for philosophical discourse; that is, possibilities for moral reflection with a philosophical disposition that comes out of forms of attention to the world, to its objects and beings, which is closer to the concretely human forms of life as we live it that literature explores. In his philosophical writing Raimond Gaita reflects on aspects of the moral life through narrative reflection. He tells stories, the telling of which is fundamental to his philosophical engagement – however it is not just in telling stories but also in the process of reflecting on them, of engagement with what they bring to light, that the moral work is done. Operative in Gaita’s work is a conception of philosophical practice that recognises processes of reasoning argument as well as (not necessarily to the exclusion

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of, but informed by or open to) other forms of attention and reflection – including those we more usually find in poetry and imaginative literature. In Gaita's writing, human forms of experience are reflected upon in narrative story telling. For him it is not a case of finding ways of thinking, that philosophy can sanction; nor is it a matter of writing into a set of practices already given by philosophical paradigms.

We need, and Gaita gives us one possibility for, a conception of philosophical practice that redresses the inadequacies of the hard analytic frame of mind: redresses its reductive tendency (in moral philosophy) to conceive the relation of morality and human nature exclusively in the context of questions like 'what should I do?' and 'is this action morally right or wrong?' In Gaita's work, moral reflection emerges through an effort to restore the relationship between concepts, reflective practice, language and expression and a rich engagement with life lived. For Gaita moral concepts are sustained by our experiences and our capacity to reflect upon them; reflection that is morally constitutive plays a creative roll in our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we find ourselves. Gaita is not a writer of fiction, nor a composer of verse. The 'literary style' of some of his philosophical work (which is just one way of putting it) has as its touchstone lived, embodied experience.

In his work Gaita probes the depths of meaning in, and of, our lives. Our relationships, our loves and our personal experiences give life meaning, and the critical concepts we use in relation to meaning – concepts like authenticity – have an ethical dimension. Thinking about 'meaning in life' in the way Gaita does is not exactly a form of 'thinking about life' – it is more a kind of 'life-thinking'. That is, 'life' is not the object to be thought about; rather, the moral dimensions are in the mode of thinking. Here real ethical transformation does not come about with the application of moral rules, nor is it a matter of getting empirical facts right and, together with principles, of making universal ethical determinations. Ethical transformation happens on a more concrete level of human experience. As a result it will be more individual, and closer to the rough ground of thinking than to the smooth
surface of philosophical abstraction. The outcome of Gaita’s style of ethical reflection will be different from more formulaic approaches to moral argument – it will be philosophy operating in a reflective space that is closer to the topography of life as we live it. Meanings cannot be systematised because meanings are not fixed. Gaita does not treat the issue as a tussle between reason and imagination – for him that dichotomy of traditional philosophy does not hold.

2.

One of the central ethical issues of our time is the nature and extent of our moral relations with, and responsibilities to, non-human animals. In *The Philosopher’s Dog*, Gaita takes up some of the issues that have come to be central to the debate – issues concerning, for example, animal consciousness – by way of narrative reflection on his own relationships with various domestic pets. There is striking difference between Gaita’s approach and the style of argumentation with which the subject is usually treated. The personal and experiential basis of Gaita’s arguments plot his route to philosophical insight through attention to the meaning of concepts that mark our moral relations, like friendship, in our lived experience. This approach suggests that the moral fabric of our lives is woven from our experiences, in a way that is not adequately expressed in the usual parameters of philosophical practice. It is not adequately expressed because philosophy wants, at the level of abstraction from particular and individual to a more universal, objective picture of humans and human values, to smooth over those very details that populate our lives; and it is and has always been a function of poetry to bring those details vividly to life. We can think of argument as that which reasonably justifies, or more specifically, as a process of giving reasons and connecting them by a process of justification to an outcome, while leaving the question of what is to count as a reason, and what as a legitimate process of justification, open. How objective and

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how abstract an idea is, may be tied to that. For Gaita philosophical reflection is anchored in disciplined, detailed reflection, through narrative, on lived experience. He tells stories and he reflects on those stories. He raises questions about what modes of reflection illuminate them. The resultant work may not fulfil the standards of universalizability that stricter analytic standards of argument expect.

*The Philosopher’s Dog* has gained very little notice in academic philosophy; indeed it has attracted almost no philosophical reception. I take this omission as evidence of the widespread assumption that the more descriptive a text is, the more it concentrates its attention on forms of expression that are poetic, filling out details rather than abstracting from them, the less philosophical weight it is thought to carry. In *Philosophy, Ethics and a Common Humanity: Essays on Rai Gaita*, few papers mention *The Philosopher’s Dog*, and in none of them is it taken up specifically. One exception to its almost complete omission from critical discussion is Christopher Cordner’s ‘Moral Philosophy in the Midst of Things’ in *A Sense for Humanity: The Ethical Thought of Raimond Gaita*, in which he ‘fastens on a specific moment of Gaita’s thinking’ from *The Philosopher’s Dog* to help illuminate ‘the reflective character needed to capture the reality of our moral thinking and responsiveness.’ I discuss that essay in detail below.

There is similarly scant attention in the current philosophical discourse, whose concerns it overlaps with, on Gaita’s particular handling of the problems it broaches: scepticism, other minds, animal consciousness and behaviour, issues of language and deep questions regarding philosophical method. Gaita has one or two critics on the issue of animal rights, Jeff McMahn for instance complains of his ‘speciesism’ in a paper entitled *Our Fellow Creatures*. – But beyond those, the book has rarely been taken up into academic discussion on these topics.

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*The Philosopher’s Dog* does not belong in the genre of philosophy dumbed down and popularised for a wide audience. I say this because its lack of philosophical reception leads me to wonder if this is where academic philosophers have placed it. It may look, but only at first glance, like philosophy made popular. Given that philosophy is very often so specialised and abstruse as to be of little interest to a non-academic readership, *The Philosopher’s Dog* does have the virtue of being highly enjoyable reading, and available in its insights to the non-academic, or non-philosopher. But it is not, on that account, philosophy blunted. It is often philosophy put plainly and clearly – which, as anyone who writes about philosophical ideas knows, is a difficult thing to achieve. How to categorise this text may be a difficult question, but more so if one is overly worried about precisely where to draw certain distinctions, especially between literature and philosophy. Roger Scruton called it “an experiment in narrative philosophy.”7 This is a fine way to characterise a text which speaks through narrative lucidly and with authority, and which is a challenge to traditional formulations of analytic philosophical method – by a series of reminders that some of what moral thought calls us to must be met in other ways.

Before I turn to looking more closely at what Gaita says about animals, and his stories of relations to and experiences with his pets, I want to begin with a different episode from the book – in which Gaita describes his father’s attitude to the bees that would turn up some mornings cold and seemingly dead outside their farmhouse in the central Victorian wintertime. It is an episode which illustrates the contrast between Gaita’s narrative approach and a more typical philosophical methodology – in particular it shows what other, reflective modes, such as narrative, can reveal to and about us which philosophical modes can obscure.

Sometimes on cold mornings he found bees lying on the grass outside the hive, to all appearances quite dead. He would collect them in the palm of his hand and take them into the kitchen where he placed them on the table.

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Then he would take an electric bulb and move it to and fro, fifteen or so centimetres above them, so they would not be harmed by a concentration of heat on any part of them. When I first saw him do this I was moved by his attentive tenderness and entranced by its results. Gradually signs of life appeared. Legs twitched so slightly that one wondered whether it had really happened, and then more surely so that I knew that the bees had been restored to life by this gentle miracle-worker. Soon they tried to turn right side up, and when they succeeded, often with a little help from us, my father brushed them from the table with the side of an open hand into the cupped palm of the other as one does breadcrumbs, but gently, and we took them outside where they flew away.

Tender though he was to his bees, my father hated flies. If one came into the kitchen, which happened frequently enough, he would not rest until he had killed it. ... He would sneak up on one and, with a sideways sweep of his open hand, palm upwards, catch it and instantly close his fist. ...for my father, flies were not just an irritant... but an enemy to be vanquished and he killed them with an appropriate satisfaction. Though he was a wise and thoughtful man, I’m sure that it never occurred to him to wonder whether there was some tension between his attitude to his bees and his attitude to flies.8

Indeed, it hardly seems surprising that Romulus Gaita did not wonder whether these attitudes were in tension. It is easy, even natural, to think of bees with certain affection – as Gaita says just before the passage quoted, “because they give honey, because they are symbols of industriousness, and because there has been for a long time acknowledgement of their extraordinary social life.”9 We also know just how vital bees are for a balanced ecosystem and for the production of food upon which we depend for our very survival; and that currently bee populations are in decline because pesticides and disease have severely impeded their survival. On the other hand, though flies certainly have an important ecological role to play in decomposition of dead organic matter, we tend to experience them as pests and we tend to associate them with dung and other things that engender disgust rather than affection. Perhaps we can think of bees with affection because we share the fruits of their labour like honey and wax whereas (in

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certain parts of Australia at least) we have to vigilantly protect our own food from marauding flies. Romulus Gaita’s different behaviours towards these insects issue from deep seated differences in responses to them: in the case of the bees to a gentle and loving sympathy for their plight, and in the case of the flies of an irritation bordering on obsessive and a sense of revulsion.

On another view though, one made popular in its contemporary form by Peter Singer, there is clearly a moral issue here, in the inconsistency between Romulus Gaita’s treatment of ‘his bees’ and the flies. That view is the ‘equal consideration of interests’: that living creatures that can suffer have interests – they have them by virtue of the fact that they can suffer:

“The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all.”

Weighing interests is, according to Singer, the method for determining all moral obligations and the basis for moral decision-making.

“No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with like suffering…”

According to Singer's theory it is an empirical question of what capacities of suffering certain creatures have which, at base, determines our moral relations with them. But this hardly seems relevant to the episode of Romulus and his bees. Romulus's regard for bees and disregard for flies is just an ordinary, natural reaction for him, not a moral judgement. It does not need to apply a principle consistently. As Christopher Cordner, writing about the episode comments: “There is simply no inconsistency or logical tension between helping one’s friends and fighting with, even killing one’s enemies.”

Cordner points out that it is the difference between these relations – friend and enemy – that informs Romulus Gaita’s compassionate resuscitation of his bees and his relish in killing flies as ‘an enemy to be vanquished.’ The difference can only make sense in the embedded narrative

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or “Gaita’s description of the background to his father’s care for bees.” A description which can resonate with the reader but which would be morally irrelevant on the level of abstraction that Singer’s principle demands. For Singer the principle of equal consideration of interests would imply that bees and flies, as creatures very similar in terms of sentient capacities, ought to be subject to the same kinds of considerations and, if it came to it, treatment. It is, on this view, a matter of logical consistency. A failure to recognise and act on that level of abstraction – on certain ‘facts’ about a species (rather than experiences with them) would show a failing of logic. Cordner writes, of the meaning of friend and enemy in this context, “So far as Romulus’s engagements with the bees and the flies exemplify (something like) those contrasting relations, he need recognise no tension or inconsistency between them.”

That is not to deny that we may want to examine our moral relations to other kinds of insects more closely, or perhaps to encourage a sympathetic attitude to them in others. It is of course possible to have pity for flies too – as in these first three stanzas of Blake’s poem *The Fly*:

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Little fly,
Thy summer’s play
My thoughtless hand
Has brushed away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance
And drink and sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.
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Blake identifies with the creature, so very different in its being, as another of God’s creatures, and as basically sharing the same fate as him, as mankind, as all living creatures share – which is vulnerability to fate and the inevitability of death. The sentiment comes from an imaginatively charged vision of the creature. The whole notion of moral vision when meaning is at issue in the way it is in the attentive exercise of our imaginative capacities, will be different, will be more open, less than final, compared to the application of principles which can be abstracted – be they Singer’s Utilitarian principle or other, Kantian or virtue based principles. If the imagination is under strain here, it is perhaps because thinking of insects under these aspects (friend/enemy) puts it under strain. Yet it need not be, and the long tradition of bucolic and nature poetry, in which relations of humans to the natural world are explored, contains countless instances of such relations, morally charged by concepts like friendship and enmity. If, for instance, one can be led to a dynamic receptivity to the beauty and colour of the world, as Wordsworth was, on encountering ‘a host of golden daffodils’ then Blake’s sympathy with the little fly does not seem out of place. Chris Cordner writes:

Gaita shows us into a distinctive way of thinking about our moral relation to (in this case) insects. Among other things, he enables us to see why we should resist supposing that Romulus’s attitudes must be described as’ inconsistent’ or in logical tension with one another.

The ‘narrative dimension of moral thinking’ enables us to find where we stand with other creatures, and where they stand with us; to get our bearings in the world, in our ‘living relatedness’ to the world – and in this way “fellowship is realised and enacted in the narratives into which we find ourselves woven” – with one another and with other creatures. But, again, it’s not a question of life, or even the living creature about whom the
fellowship is realised, as object; it's not narrative about fellowship, but fellowship realised in the mode of the narrative rendering of it.

While Singer's principle of the equal consideration of interests can yield a moral rule which is abstract and universally applicable, it does not yield insight into the meaning of suffering – the meaning of it in the sense of how it impacts us, and how its presence or absence moves or compels us to do or not do certain things. Singer's idea of suffering is that it is a piece of moral data. In any case, such empirical knowledge is epistemically out of reach. Does the fly suffer if its wings are pulled off? Does the spider suffer when it is washed down the plughole? These are questions we cannot really answer empirically. The possibilities for meaning that our concepts (like suffering, fellowship, pity etc.) might have for us are creatively constituted in the reflective activity of narrative and description. Gaita quotes mountaineer Walter Bonatti expressing his sense of common fate with a butterfly he finds dying in the ice up in the European Alps. Gaita is moved by the “tender pity” Bonatti feels for the butterfly. What gives such descriptions the power to move us is, surely not, says Gaita, beliefs about the butterfly of the sort that attribute conscious states, such as fear, to it. We cannot, he thinks, even imagine the conscious state of an insect. “One cannot feel tender pity for a creature on the assumption that it is probably appropriate to do so.” That Bonatti should feel a common fate with a butterfly “is made intelligible... because we can describe the butterfly as the actor in a drama that was to consume it.” That is because we inculcate them into our stories, share their world, as Blake’s fly and Romulus’s bees, through the conceptual terms of our experience, our narrative, our literature – this is how we realise, how we enact a fellowship with other creatures. “Were it not for our unhesitating readiness to say that the moth struggles, that the fly wriggles, that the spider tries to escape from the sink, then we could not feel about and respond to them as we do.”

3.

Gaita’s discussion on our relations, including moral relations, with animals takes place in the context of our relationship to domestic pets. He does not try to formulate rules of conduct that should define those relations, nor does he try to give empirical accounts of what capacities animals (certain kinds of animals at any rate) have, in order to decide their rights and our duties in respect of them. His style of narrative philosophy is, in a sense, empirical in that it is based upon experience, his experience of his own relationships to animals, and also his responsiveness to other writers’ attempts to recount or explore such topics. In the stories he tells, Gaita explores concepts such as dignity and friendship. These kinds of concepts tend to operate in a broader reflective space than those more familiar to moral-philosophy, like ‘duty’ or ‘obligation.’ The experiential basis of Gaita’s reflections is reinforced by his tendency to emphasise the physicality of these relations. Memories of how Jack the cockatoo would kiss Gaita’s father, Romulus and how Orloff the dog would bound towards Raimond as he returned home from school furnish the narrative. Rather than ground his philosophy in general principles, Gaita starts from the way in which our relations with our pets very often are of a physical and affectionate nature – and the anchor of the philosophical work here is in this aspect of our relations to those animals with whom we have shared a bond. It is possible, then, that someone who has never shared such a bond with any kind of animal may be unable, perhaps unwilling, to be moved or engaged by philosophical reflection anchored in such encounters and experiences.

Our readiness to think of other creatures in the kinds of terms described above, as fellow creatures, as sharing a common fate with us, in tender pity for them; our readiness to think of animals in such terms as friendship or in terms of concepts like dignity, does not depend on ascribing states of consciousness or particular conscious experience to them. Recognising the possibility of such descriptions, in and through our

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25 For instance he mentions Rush Rhees and JM Coetzee.
narratives, is a different way of reflecting on our moral relations with animals. Gaita does not deny that animals have conscious states, but suggests that we do not need to know or conjecture about their conscious states, or their capacities, in order to reflect on moral aspects of our relations to and our lives with them. It is important to Gaita that on the rough ground of thinking we naturally recognise concepts such as friendship, companionship and dignity in some of our relations to some animals. The possibility of extrapolation is a further question: We might be more likely to reject the practice of hunting, or to decry the destruction of wildlife habitats if we have known some animals 'up close' and so may be inclined to see non-domestic animals as creatures with individual lives to live. But thought does not have to go in this direction.

Consider the fact that many (or most) people befriend some animals and eat others. Different critical concepts will be at issue in differences between, for example, what someone who keeps dogs as pets sees in their behaviour and what someone who keeps them in a laboratory for experimentation sees. The way one describes things is not simply a matter of getting the facts right. It is also a matter of the context in which things are encountered – the context in which things are perceived and imaginatively rendered. It is a matter of the meanings one can constitute from such encounters. The moral import is not a matter of finding the salient details nor of getting the facts right, but in the whole orientation towards others, an orientation which itself constitutes friendship or loyalty. In this way Gaita shows a different possibility for philosophy, one which has been excluded by a view of philosophical (and moral) thinking as being at its best when it is more abstracted and less contextualised. Gaita demonstrates the ethical work that can be done when meanings are contested through narrative. Philosophy is, in Bernard Williams’ words, “part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves.”

Our moral lives are

not best expressed in the uncompromising terms, of analytic styles of argument and Gaita’s method of narrative philosophy is one way of reflecting on the moral life where the terms are fluid and open to the terms of our own experience.

An element of many of the stories Gaita tells in this book is the physical nature of people’s attachment to and relationship with their pets. The texture of our physical relation to the world, our physical presence in it, is the context for our relatedness to other creatures with whom ‘we share the substrate of life.’ Philosophy, including moral philosophy reflecting on our relations to animals, has often shunned or neglected this aspect of experience. The descriptive passages that open The Philosopher’s Dog speak, with great warmth and evocative power, of two pets from childhood – Jack the cockatoo and Orloff the dog. Here is a sample from early in the narrative:

When I went to school, six kilometres away, Orloff often accompanied me part of the way and he would be there, the same distance from the house, when I returned... As I walked from the junction of the road and the rough track to our house Orloff would bound up to greet me with such enthusiasm that he would knock me over. Lying there in the long grass with him standing over me, legs astride my chest, licking me and making affectionate noises and wagging his tail so furiously that his entire body swayed with it, I felt he was my truest friend and I loved him.

...The depth of my need and Orloff’s intelligent and faithful response to it generated an intensity in my relationship to him that could not be captured by the idea of mere companionship.

The familiar saying that dogs are man’s best friend is evoked with particular tenderness by this passage. Of course in Australia farmers and drovers have always worked side by side with their dogs, and that we are prolific dog-owners is humorously captured in the colloquial idiom ‘every man and his dog.’ A natural and physical sense of kinship expressed here. Orloff’s presence, accompanying the young Raimond to school, his being

there upon Raimond's return; Orloff's bounding enthusiasm that literally knocks the boy over, the licking and swaying of Orloff's big body, all give the friendship its grounding, and allows Raimond to experience it as 'an intelligent and faithful response’ to his need. “Intelligent” is an interesting choice of word here, as if the context gently unhooks ‘intelligent’ from ‘intellectual’ and suggests its place in the realm of the physical. Indeed one of the ways we recognise, and conceptualise, friendship is in terms of fulfilment of needs. Aristotle claimed that ‘true friendship’ was possible only non-instrumentally and could not in this sense be defined or guided by need, but as Gaita says:

The need we have – often unfathomable – of other human beings is partly what conditions and yields to us our sense of their preciousness. The same is true of our relations to animals.\(^{28}\)

In contrast Aristotle, for example, would have thought the idea of friendship between humans and animals to be nonsensical since he thought friendship could only truly occur between equals; he could not have conceptualised any sense in which humans and animals could be regarded as having that kind of relationship, or of a person experiencing his relationship to an animal in those terms. Gaita continues, a little further on:

When I said that, as a boy, I felt that Orloff was my truest friend, I did not mean to disparage my school friends. But they could not satisfy, as Orloff did, my deep need of physical comfort, protection and security. I do not recall attributing false powers to him, but I did trust that he would protect me if I were in danger.\(^{29}\)

The bodily nature of Raimond's need and his sense of the security Orloff provided grounds the trust he felt between them very deeply in their physical relationship. In this way, descriptions of what that relationship was like, what it meant for Raimond and how he experienced the sense of need and the way it was met in the companionship of Orloff provided give depth to an understanding of what friendship, love and companionship can mean, and how they can be present in different sorts of relationships,

\(^{28}\) Gaita, 2002, p17.
including the relationship between a boy and his dog. That is, the need Gaita describes, and its fulfilment in the physical relationship Orloff provided, is not best understood in terms of such overarching concepts as Aristotle’s ‘instrumentality’ and ‘equality.’ These concepts do not ground it deeply enough in life’s lived-ness.

Similarly evocative are the stories about a big white cockatoo who lived with the family. Jack was never caged. Though he was physical with all the members of and frequent visitors to the household – he was particularly attached to Romulus Gaita. Rai writes:

How does a cockatoo kiss? Like this. He puts the upper part of his beak onto your lips and, nibbling gently, runs it down to your lower lip, all the while saying ‘tsk, tsk, tsk’. That, at any rate, is how Jack did it to my father, with unmistakable tenderness. My father would stroke him, under his wings, under his beak and on his chest and stomach.30

The tenderness of this passage, augmented by sharp descriptions and sensory detail – the onomatopoeic ‘tsk, tsk, tsk”” – has the kind of imaginative detail that brings the writing to life. This detail, the vividness of the visual and sensory picture it creates, does its ‘ethical’ work by putting us directly in touch with life by that vital responsiveness to the world that poetic, literary and narrative forms of address foster and mediate. The reader is not instructed about what to make of it. She is invited to respond, to find out the depths of her capacity to respond. She is not passive, but involved in the process of uncovering what is there, in the contours of the world, to nourish (among other understandings) our ethical understanding of our relations with other creatures with whom we share ‘the substrate of life.’ Gaita, as Craig Taylor puts it “suggests that ethical understanding is often seeing something through what someone has made of it in their particular, individual life.”31 To convey this Gaita has needed forms of expression closer to poetry than to philosophical argument.

Conceptions of friendships of various kinds between humans and their pets explored by Gaita turn on the richness of the conception of

friendship that comes through the textured attention to particulars in the narrative. These details include the ways we interact with animals – us as part of their world and they as part of ours. Perhaps (as in the passages below) this is more surprising with a bird than with other sorts of animals; but birds (cockatoos especially) are highly intelligent. Intelligence is relevant not because levels of intelligence set strict parameters for moral status, but because capacities of intelligence make certain kinds of relations and interactions possible. So it would be a stretch to think of someone having a mutual bond of trust or companionship, of the sort that constitutes friendship with, say, an insect because there is not much, if any, sense in the idea of an insect sharing our world in a complex enough way.

Notwithstanding, as I have discussed above, the possibility of sharing a fellow-creaturliness with an insect as Blake with the fly, Bonati with the butterfly or Romulus Gaita with the bees.

Sometimes [Jack] would keep [my father] company in the workshop, digging his beak into small heaps of screws and scraps of iron, placing some to one side as if he were sorting them.\(^{32}\)

Occasionally we would catch [Jack] trying to whistle a tune he had heard on the wireless. He would whistle a little of it, forget how to go on, and would then screech, raise his crest and dance around on the chicken-wire fence in frustration. When he calmed down, he would usually get a little further until he would again forget how to go on. He did this often, but would stop if he noticed us observing him. Only when he believed no one could see him did he practice whistling tunes he had heard.\(^{33}\)

Again the descriptions here are just right. They let us in imaginatively to these small but profoundly funny and interesting moments and, if we choose or are able to take up the invitation, what we get is not a philosophically determined set of characteristics, empirical and factual, on which to base a universal moral theory, but rather a rich sense of moral possibility. The humour of the above passages is important. Humour is not something ordinarily thought of as having anything to do with moral

reflection, at least in any standard view of ethics; yet appreciating and reflecting upon things which make us laugh, which titillate the spirit, can relax us into a sense of something shared, or into a kind of sympathy. All these things can foster a sense of kinship that does not need to be – perhaps cannot be – grounded in the first place by principles of moral standing which support traditional philosophical practice. It might even be that the nature of kinship is misunderstood if you think it can be grounded in this way. Humour brings out something that many theoretical approaches to ethics do not take into account: something like Iris Murdoch's notion of the ‘texture of (a person's) being’ – of which Cora Diamond says that “…it is surely characteristic of many novelists that that is what they give us – and out of an interest we may properly call moral.”34

The animals in Gaita's story have shared his world in many small ways, and also in profound ways, to do with the large, significant aspects of life – of ageing of death and of loss:

Gypsy is old now. ...The truth... is that she feels her age in her spirit as well as in her body. ... This first became apparent to me when we were walking past a house guarded by a young and hopelessly neurotic border collie who barked at everyone and everything. Only a year before, Gypsy gave the irritating creature his just deserts by biting his nose as he thrust it under the front gate. But now she increases her pace as she approaches the gate so that she can get past as soon as possible.35

It is precisely this kind of detail and reflection which gives shape to an and imaginative critical engagement with the concepts like friendship; concepts which are fundamentally ethical in a different sense. Philosophical modes make available modes of reflection, through argument, that are sustained ‘above the rough ground’ of life lived, elevated in a sense which provides for more abstract engagement. Narrative modes give us something else; they make available a level of moral reflection that is more deeply rooted in the particularities of our experience. As Chris Cordner writes:

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It is an immensely difficult question how one can achieve an illuminating ‘philosophical’ perspective on human life without cutting oneself off from the sources of energy that animate and nourish that life in the first place.\footnote{Christopher Cordner, ‘Life and Death Matters: Losing a Sense of the Value of Human Beings,’ in \textit{Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics} (2005) 26: pp207-226, p222-223.}

Gaita’s conceptual exploration here does not work by simply attempting to stretch the definition or concept of friendship to include animals. Our conception of the possibility of friendship with animals, and more broadly, our moral relation to them, is explored by exploring ways friendship is given meaning by all our relationships. Not, that is, by deciding what friendship between people means and then deciding whether that concept applies to our relations to others, or asking whether it can apply to our relations to animals. It is the reflective-ness of that ‘lived engagement with the world and its creatures’, brought to life in language that is truly alive to us.

4.

The young Rai Gaita’s friendship with Orloff comes to a very sad end at the hands of a neighbouring sheep farmer whose flock they had not been able to prevent Orloff from molesting.

A few weeks later we found Orloff dead one morning some twenty meters from the house. He had been bleeding from the mouth because he had been fed meat spiked with glass. He lay on the far side of a fence that separated the house and its yard from the paddocks beyond. ...so tenderly did my father lift Orloff over the fence that I needed no words from him to know that he did it so that Orloff would be buried where his home had been.

As my father dug the grave, placed Orloff in it and buried him, I remembered our friendship. I thought of how painful it must have been for him to get home, his insides ravaged with glass... We cried for him. It was the first time I had seen my father cry and the only time we cried together. For weeks I felt as though the pain in my chest would make it explode.\footnote{Gaita, 2002, p14-15.}

A very moving passage, yet the lack of melodrama or sentimentality with which Gaita recounts his love for Orloff, and the grief of his loss; the clarity of those moments, is vital for the way in which the voice of the narrative can
be authoritative – can, that is, carry the gravitas of its authorship. It is in these narrative contexts that concepts such as sentimentality have application as critical concepts. The power such writing has to move us, and to create a space for reflective engagement with life; to make, in Williams’ phrase the ‘best sense of it’ is subject to critical appraisal, and judgement, of a kind that is appropriate to that way of talking; the description will fail if it is overly sentimentalised. Sentimentality, insincerity or absurdity will diffuse narrative power by cutting into the clarity and precision of narrative’s truth.

In a later chapter Gaita returns to reflecting on Orloff’s death in the context of what it meant for he and his father to bury Orloff:

Why did my father lift Orloff over the fence that separated the paddocks from the house and bury him ‘at home’? Why did he and I stand weeping at the graveside for some minutes? Why did my father not dump Orloff in a paddock far from the house so that we would not smell his decomposing body?...

What we did for Orloff human beings do for each other more elaborately. We did not just put him in a hole and cover him for the many practical reasons there are to do such a thing. We gave him ‘a burial’, and by standing at the graveside we observed a simple ritual of mourning. But no words were said over his grave, no marker was placed on it and no remembrance candles were lit on the anniversary of his death. That we did as much as we did was an expression of the degree to which Orloff had become ‘one of us’, part of the family. That we limited it to what we did marked his distance from us.\(^{38}\)

Here Gaita opens a space to explore concepts surrounding experiences of death and mourning in the context of our lives with animals and the expressions of friendship and companionship it is possible to share with them. We mourn our pets to the extent that we share our lives with them. The grief of their loss can go very deep and can be very painful. Gaita mentions Rush Rhees’ experience of losing his dog Danny and the protracted period of mourning Rhees experienced. It is true that some people will not have experienced relationships with their dogs that could result in a very

\(^{38}\) Gaita, 2002, p85.
deep grief. It is also likely that few people would grieve in the way Rhees did. As Gaita notes “Rhees grieved for his dog as though for a person.” Yet perhaps Rhees’ story of what Danny was like (who he was) and Rhees’ description of the development of their relationship with one another makes it intelligible that Rhees could experience the depths of grief that he does.

Gaita asks why his father buried Orloff on the right side of the fence and concludes that it was for Orloff. Burial is a way of honouring the dead; we do so with our pets to mark them as special to us in ways that are true to the concepts of friendship and companionship. The differences between those simple rituals and more elaborate burial rituals for people – our loved ones and family, marks out the differences between how concepts of companionship, honour or friendship exist in human relations compared with human – animal relations. Gaita suggests that mourning an animal in an attenuated way marks both how much they can be one of us, and also how much they are not; by which he indicates that to honour Orloff, and to mark the place Orloff had as one of them, it made sense, was necessary, to bring his body home and bury it. It makes sense to treat the act and occasion of doing so with solemnity, but it also makes sense not to have given Orloff a funeral of the sort we would hold for a person. Again, these differences do not represent absolute moral categories so much as forms of attentiveness. The narrative attention creatively shapes a space where the meaning of such acts can be explored and contested.

Consider the contrast between Gaita’s description of the death and burial of Orloff and this passage from Peter Singer. Singer is responding in a literary voice to J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*, which itself is a literary reading. His response takes the form of a narrative in which he is the protagonist, discussing the nature of human – animal relations and moral obligations with his daughter Naomi, in terms of Max, the family pet dog. Peter is the first interlocutor:

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41 This is taken from the text of Peter Singer’s response to the tanner lectures given by JM Coetzee under the title of *The Lives of Animals*. Coetzee’s lectures took the form of two
“...You tell me: in what way is painless, unanticipated killing wrong in itself?”

“It means the loss of everything. If Max were to be killed, there would be no more doggy-joy of welcoming me home, being taken for a walk, chewing his bone...”

“No more for Max, that is true. But there are plenty of dog breeders out there who breed dogs to meet the demand. So if we got another puppy from them, thus causing one more dog to come into existence, then there would be just as much of all those good aspects of dog-existence.”

‘What are you saying – that we could painlessly kill Max, get another puppy to replace him, and everything would be fine? Really, Dad, sometimes you let philosophy carry you away. Too much reasoning, not enough feeling.”

A little further on, Peter says:

“...We can’t take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism... I don't mean that everything would be fine if Max were killed and replaced by a puppy. We love Max, and for us no puppy would replace him. But I asked you why painlessly killing is wrong in itself. Our distress is a side effect of the killing, not something that makes it wrong in itself. 42

The suggestion that it would make no difference if Max were simply replaced with another dog, as though there were nothing unique about Max in Naomi’s attachment to him is rather perverse. Peter insists that killing Max and replacing him with another dog would make no difference – no moral difference – quite as if the things Naomi likes about, and the ways she benefits from, Max were detachable from Max himself, and were, rather, just ‘good aspects of dog-existence.’ The idiom 'too much reasoning, not enough feeling” is as close as Singer can come to understanding what might be objectionable about that. But that misses the point. His representation of what is at issue is distorted. It's not just that we need more 'feeling' but that

we need a way of making sense of the world, which involves feeling, but which is a realisation of our being in it.

What constitutes a true ethical viewpoint for Singer is a way of seeing Max in which descriptions that include concepts like friendship, companionship or dignity are obscured, and are in fact ruled out as the sorts of concepts which can have an ethical dimension. But why? Naomi accuses her father here of letting philosophy carry him away into too much reason and not enough feeling, to which he responds that: We can't take our feelings as moral data, immune from rational criticism. But it is not at all clear what 'moral data' here is, nor is it clear why feeling should not be a legitimate aspect of our moral descriptions and relations to the world. However even that way of putting it – that we are faced with a disagreement about the relation of "feeling" to moral thought, is an inadequate description of what is at issue, too narrowed by Singer's parameters.

As the passage continues, Peter continues to insist on being told why painlessly killing is wrong in itself. But what is 'in itself' supposed to mean here? Famously Singer thinks that the imperative of philosophical consistency should compel us to accept that there is no moral difference between, for example, human infants and certain animals of a particular 'mental level.' What follows from that, in Singer's view, is that because he thinks it is not wrong 'in itself' to kill an animal like Max, then it is also not wrong 'in itself' to kill a human being with similar levels of rationality – provided one does it painlessly. It might be wrong, on this view, to do it for 'extrinsic' reasons: because, for instance, someone who has an attachment to the animal will be distressed. But it is not intrinsically wrong.

The ease with which Singer can conclude that killing Max, or a human infant, is not 'wrong in itself' is connected to his insistence that moral data has to be separated from feelings, and his rejection of moral descriptions for which concepts such as dignity hold meaning. Dignity is the kind of concept that works in a different register to the paradigms of moral thought (and theory) which I have been contrasting. Elsewhere Singer writes:
Philosophers frequently introduce ideas of dignity, respect and worth at the point where other reasons appear to be lacking, but this is hardly good enough. Fine phrases are the last resource of those who have run out of arguments.  

Any more complex understanding of what it means to wrong someone – a baby or an animal, gets no foothold whatsoever in this view of what morality is. In *A Common Humanity*, Gaita comments that:

> It is often said that Singer, and others who think like him about when we would wrong children if we killed them, have followed their arguments wherever they go, however unpalatable the conclusions of those arguments may be. Maybe they did, but they did not reach their conclusions gritting their teeth as reason relentlessly compelled them to go somewhere they desperately did not want to go. Nobody is in that way compelled by arguments...”

To suggest that killing Max would wrong him because it dishonoured him would make no sense to Singer; but in the context of the idea of friendship, it makes a great deal of sense. Any conception of friendship would surely account for an understanding of honour or of dishonour. Friendship means that we do not dishonour our friends. Friendship with an animal would be violated if we painlessly killed the animal thinking that doing so does not wrong them.

5.

In the narrative threads of *The Philosopher’s Dog*, we see the ethical illuminated in a different way to standard philosophical approaches in which tenets of moral theory, of various sorts, are central to moral thought and the moral life. In this text moral thought and reflection are grounded in narratives that give texture to the concepts in which the moral life is described. Gaita’s work explores a way of reflecting upon ethical concepts that represents one possibility for doing philosophy. It does not thereby

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44 Gaita, 1999, p183.
exclude other possibilities, but exemplifies a way that philosophy as a reflective activity can be embodied and contextualised in life lived through one’s experiences and one’s capacity for imaginative transformation of experience through narrative, poetry and art. It is a gesture of redress in the sense of coming back, from some of the giddy heights of philosophical abstraction, to what ‘we already know’ – to a relationship with the world as we inhabit it.\footnote{This doesn’t have inherently conservative implications, nor does it signal resistance to moral change.} It seems Gaita is reminding us that a lot of philosophy can be done in the rough ground of thinking and living. I see his work, then, as an effort towards that ‘truth to life’ in the sense in which Heaney spoke of poetry. And I see it as true to life not just by way of recounting anecdotes from ‘real life’ but by engaging with the experiences that for many people will be familiar in their relations with animals. Gaita seems to be suggesting that things have gone awry when philosophy seems (as Cora Diamond put it) to hide our genuine insights from us. Thus Gaita’s mode of engagement, as the passages I have discussed show, is one in which we are invited to reflect on what we know, through experience, about animals.

Domestic pets can be clever, mischievous, funny, and tender; they can show concern for us; they can be disgruntled, disobedient, or try to please, or impress us. They can assent or object, go willingly or unwillingly. “Is it just anthropomorphism”, asks Gaita, to attribute these feelings and virtues to animals? As he says, he has written as though it is not, though, he also says “I do not believe that the animals I have written about have reflective capacities.”\footnote{Gaita, 2002, p21.} We tell stories about animals in this key all the time. It is a perfectly natural way we speak of our domestic animal companions. Our possibility for a sense of what constitutes friendship, including with animals, is part of what forms our sense of the meaning of friendship – we derive concepts such as loyalty, fidelity, trust, mutual enjoyment etc. from all the ways that we experience these things. We can, without error, sentimentality or contradiction, talk of friendship between a human and an animal. We – sometimes – find the concept of friendship to have meaning for
and give meaning to a relationship with a particular pet. When our ordinary understandings of things that populate our lives in ordinary ways become too estranged from philosophical ways of speaking about them, we should ask why this is so.

Friendship is still just one theme and this has been an exemplary discussion. Gaita’s ‘experiment in narrative philosophy’ in *The Philosopher’s Dog* takes it as essential that “our understanding of animals and our relations to them are often shaped by stories.”47 This is true of many other things as well—many other aspects of our lives in the world including our relations, and moral relations with one another. In the ways in which, and to the extent that, our understandings are shaped by stories, they must be kinds of reflective understanding. The concepts in play in a notion like ‘honouring the dead’ are not, so to speak, given by or given to, but are at issue in our practices; the concepts are subject to the meanings, and the meanings are not fixed. I am not saying that philosophers should abandon other modes in favour of story-telling. I cannot even say that it is incumbent on philosophers to recognise these modes (narrative, poetry). That is because, as I have been arguing, it is not helpful to lay down conditions, in the first place, for what philosophy must be; but we can at least recognise that what philosophy is, is still and will remain an open question. The space for philosophy Plato demarcated when he pronounced that there was an ancient quarrel with poetry was not fixed then, and it is not fixed now. Within that shifting space I have been arguing that it makes a great deal of difference what modes we as philosophers recognise and endorse as modes of reflection, as forms of attention and address, and as forms of persuasion; what we acknowledge as genuine possibilities for philosophical reflection—but not only philosophical reflection.

In opening philosophy up to the possibility of story Gaita can get at the details that allow us to get close to life in a way that is personal yet, importantly, not self-absorbed; that cultivates a mode of attention capable of inhabiting lived-ness and experience as a reflective space for philosophy. A

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rich, imaginative response, goes the gist of Gaita’s text, to the textured particulars of lived life, with all the details that a poetic mode of attention affords, is one possible pathway to understanding how things are in the world. We could call this a poetic mode of attention; Gaita may call it a mode of attention particular to the realm of meaning. They come to the same thing. That is, moral philosophy need not, but nevertheless often does, curtail a natural tendency to regard our experiences and our imaginative literature as morally salient as having moral force. Gaita emphasises the different casts of mind that philosophy and literature have been thought to require: “Generally philosophy aims straight and abstractly for the point, rushing past the kind of details that bring a story to life.”48 That these elements are (perhaps always) in tension need not mean they are in contradiction.

Philosophy is a reflective discipline. There are many possible spaces for philosophy – how philosophy will occupy them is not antecedently laid down. If philosophy is open to that, the effect is not just to be felt in its willingness to engage with literature in a different spirit, but also in its willingness to engage in philosophical reflection in a new spirit also. What forms philosophical reflection can take is an open question – more open than many philosophers think it is.

Conclusion

Having begun by looking at the antipathy between philosophy and poetry at the heart of the ancient quarrel that Plato both identified and in an important sense actually started, I undertook to show how this relation remains a deep and abiding question for philosophy. It is not just a question for philosophical reflection, but also a question of the nature of philosophical reflection. My aim has been to provide, if not resolution, then illuminating characterisation of the tension between the discourses, with an emphasis on what the quarrel means in and for philosophy. I have sought to understand what constitutes the quarrel and how it affects conceptions of philosophical practice. And I have sought to problematise the standard ways that philosophical conceptions of poetry, and of imaginative literature more broadly, are employed with the authority of the philosophical judge. In so doing I have attempted to count the cost for philosophy of its exile of poetry by identifying what philosophy’s prevailing modes of practice exclude. I have looked at a small selection of significant sites in philosophy – in its history and in contemporary practice – where this tension has been forcefully present, and found that, since Plato recommended the banishment of poets as a founding delineation for philosophy, their exile remains in various ways a part of philosophy’s self-image. In chapters on Plato, Aristotle and Kant, and discussions on contemporary practice centered on the analytic style of moral philosophy I pointed to a deep-seated philosophical effort to tame poetry and to instate philosophy as the discourse of methodological supremacy.

I argued that in its original iteration, the exile of poetry was constitutive for philosophy in that Plato, in what may be regarded as one of philosophy’s founding texts – The Republic – not only establishes the legitimacy of philosophy by specifically attacking poetry and recommending the exile of the poets, but he establishes its supremacy by unseating poetry in much subtler ways throughout the dialogue. I suggested that this exclusionary gesture has become deeply embedded in philosophy’s self-
image and that it underpins subsequent works which might have been expected to ameliorate the ferocity of that initial Platonic indictment: Aristotle’s *Poetics*, usually considered as a defence of poetry from the Platonic attack, and, later in the history, Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, a founding text of philosophical aesthetics. I have suggested slight revisions to scholarly opinion regarding usual reading of these three texts; revisions which are possible in light of considering what is most deeply at issue in the inherent tensions of philosophy’s attitude to poetry. I found that, following the Platonic indictment of poetry, there has been a tendency in philosophy to defend it on philosophical grounds, and to do this by inculcating it into the philosophical discourse. In Aristotle’s poetics, I suggested, poetry was analysed in terms of its forms and functions in an effort to secure its explicability within philosophical categories. I suggested that in Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement there is a paradox at the heart of philosophical aesthetics whereby poetry is revered and at the same time curbed by philosophy.

Given that the philosophical capacity to speak about poetry is so deeply influenced by its own tendentious relations to it, I suggested alternative ways of conceptualising the discourse of poetry through three exemplary concepts: witness, redress and invocation. I have tried to show how these concepts indicate forms of engagement which philosophy may, in many of its iterations, have missed because of its historically and foundationally limited attention to various aspects of our experience. I emphasised that the ‘use’ (as I put it, following Seamus Heaney) of poetry is to put us in touch with things in our capacity as witness; and in evocative tones that augment our experience, to inform the relationship we have with the world and ourselves in our reflective life, and in our life as it is illuminated by poetry.

To show that the exile of poetry has continued to be an operative force in philosophical practice, in some of its contemporary modes, I have focused on a particular, common conception of philosophical discussion in ethics. Specifically a view of what moral thought is that pins it to certain analytic
procedures of argument, and that disconnects it from the kinds of reflective activities conveyed by poetry and imaginative literature. I suggested there is a cost to philosophy of its exile of poetry. In moral philosophy that cost is evident in a style of philosophical thought that is limited in its capacity to reveal the full character of moral thought and the various seminal aspects of human life.

The quarrel in a contemporary iteration is discussed in the context of moral philosophy because the issue represents an important problem in the area of philosophical ethics, and because there has always been a strong moral element to the quarrel. Plato's complaints about poetry occurred in explicitly moral terms when he worried about the poets setting a bad example. In contemporary moral philosophy we do not encounter, straightforwardly, anything resembling the specificity of Plato's exile of poetry on the grounds of moral disapprobation. Yet the kinds of requirements for what constitutes properly convincing forms of thought, laid down by the familiar paradigm of analytic (moral) philosophy, fall under the auspices of Plato's exclusion of the poets from the republic. Philosophy's exclusion of poetry is informed by its conception of what constitutes genuine reflection, and that has a deep connection to prevailing views of the relations between morality and human nature at the very deepest level. I wanted to problematise the stipulations philosophers in the contemporary analytic tradition tend to place on moral thought, in terms of which of our capacities they want to insist moral thinking must involve: stipulations which usually turn out to be philosophical in a fairly narrow sense.

Alternative ways of constituting philosophical relations to literature have been considered through the thought and writing of Cora Diamond and then Raimond Gaita. I emphasised that there may be many ways for philosophy to occupy a reflective space, and I discussed Raimond Gaita's book *The Philosopher's Dog* as an example of one such possibility: a form of philosophical reflection in which narrative modes of attention are creatively, and morally constitutive. I endeavoured in that discussion to show the creative constitutive nature of narrative reflection for concepts whose moral
dimensions have roots in the everyday lived-ness of our experience. I concentrated on the concept of friendship – on how it is constituted, animated and given meaning through the stories Gaita tells of the experiences he recounts.

I must add that the contrast between our experience and the abstractions of philosophy is not the same as the contrast between poetry (or literature) and the abstractions of philosophy. Yet I have assumed they are connected in some important ways. I have written about philosophy's tendency to elevation from the 'rough ground' of life, and from forms of expression native to that rough ground. Philosophy, by its level of abstraction, removes us from our understanding of who we are. Our experience, and ordinary discourse about our experience is opposed to philosophical abstractions. Poetry has to illuminate that for us. Or else we risk supplanting human forms of experience by the universals of philosophy.

Some difficulties remain; let me try to briefly address them. Perhaps what I have said in my final chapters about contexts in which the moral dimensions of concepts such as friendship are embedded will raise concerns about relativism. The tenets of moral philosophy, an objection might run, are meant to be universalisable so as to provide objective solutions to moral questions. How can experience, imaginatively rendered, possibly get us there? I have already suggested that the goals of moral philosophy should not be thus limited. I have not had the space to directly address the difficult question of what morality does encompass, and what the goals of moral philosophy are, or should be taken to be; but what I have said in chapters five and six has implications for those questions. Going with Diamond's criticisms of a common way of defining the subject, I have agreed that moral thought extends to the modes of reflection instantiated in works of literature – of poetry and fiction. And looking at Gaita's philosophical style I have considered one possibility for a different sort of meeting of the poetic and philosophical discourses than had been possible in many of the philosophical approaches to poetry I had been discussing.
But those practices were not themselves meant to be definitive. I avoided stating specifically what morality should be, but indicated that the subject is much less clear-cut than many philosophers take it to be. Without the availability of all the resources of a critical and reflective vocabulary, we risk reductionist habits of thought, and we risk missing part of our moral nature. Yet, I have stressed, we can’t lay down ground rules in advance as to what, exactly, such a ‘critical and reflective’ vocabulary would be. I have tried to point to some of the things it would need to be responsive to – such as modes of attention, concepts like fellowship, friendship, and witness. As Seamus Heaney said, in a formulation that I have mentioned on several occasions, “I credit poetry for its truth to life, in every sense of that phrase.” I have invoked Heaney’s phrase to indicate the ‘truth to life’ of forms of thought and expression that are contextualised in and shaped by the forms of human life we live; that cleave to the contours of our concrete human lives. Where this blindness to the possibility that poetry and literature make a contribution to reflection on our moral life persists, something in the philosophical discourse suffers; something is missing in its capacity to see what is there, to adequately characterise our moral nature; and as a result it can fail to be ‘true to life.’

It may be objected that I have positioned my discussions in too narrow a philosophical space, and that where I address the quarrel with poetry in a contemporary context I succeed only in showing that these issues arise in a restricted, analytic context. In particular I have gone along with Diamond's assessment that O'Neill's comments regarding the use of argument to exemplify a view of how philosophical discussion is and ought to be carried on that is common. I have assumed that these comments represent the typical philosophical approach to moral questions. I do agree with Diamond on that point, and I've tried to make my discussion of her exemplary. I said that in some of its prevailing modes moral philosophy assumes a conception of moral thought in which other sorts of reflective practice disappear from sight – in particular the forms of moral thought that literature shows us. From this I take it that something has gone missing in
the orthodox philosophical picture of our moral life that could be redressed by looking again at forms of thinking native to literature.

Exploring, in Raimond Gaita's work, possibilities for philosophy that offer alternatives to the more usual conception of moral thought as objective and universal, I wanted to show a contrast to the more familiar methods of philosophical ethics and I wanted to show that the tension (antipathy) between the discourses is not exceptionless. Gaita shows how moral reflection of an experiential and narrative kind can be closer than modes of analytic philosophy to the topography of our lives – because it can be rooted in the concretely human forms of life as we live it. In a way, this chapter functions as a kind of antidote to the tensions set out between the discourses throughout the thesis. And it shows that philosophy is a fluid, adaptable and a many-faceted thing. I suggested that, in Gaita's work, philosophical thought is augmented and informed by the experiential elements he steeped it in, and this exemplifies how philosophy can operate in a reflective space in which literary modes of attention and engagement are active and fertile. Gaita's philosophy is nurtured by experience rendered in evocative and imaginative language, and the result is a rich reflection on aspects of the moral life not possible in a more strictly analytic space.

It may be noted that I have not, in my discussion of contemporary moral philosophy and the prevailing modes of philosophical practice, differentiated between the three generally recognised types or styles of moral theory – deontology, utilitarianism and virtue theory. Dealing with these areas with some specificity may refine some of the arguments that I have only been able to make in the broadest terms, however for the purpose of pointing to current practices in moral philosophy I have not found it strictly necessary to do so. It is possible that the virtue theorist will feel a particular grievance; they may want to deny that virtue theory is represented in the ways I have characterised contemporary moral philosophy because it does not take the kind of hard line I have been criticising. I agree that virtue ethics is more flexible with regard to styles of philosophical argument than the more purely analytic philosophy I
concentrated on. There has not been the opportunity here to treat virtue ethics separately. Further work in that direction, in the form of a more nuanced discussion of this particular style of ethical thought in relation to the issues I have raised about 'philosophy in general' would be fruitful because in some ways virtue ethics is more open to literary and narrative modes than other contemporary streams of ethics. However I would still have strong reservations about exempting it from my criticisms. Virtue ethics does show a greater willingness to engage with literature, but in my view it does so still for the most part in the spirit of Aristotle’s engagement with poetry which expands philosophy’s reach to encompass literature into its own discourse.\(^1\) Martha Nussbaum exemplifies this when she says, concerning Henry James' novel *The Golden Bowl*, that it is a work of moral philosophy. (I mention this briefly in Chapter Five.)

At this point a methodological consideration needs to be mentioned. I have not tried to establish a set of claims about philosophy that are incontestable. Rather I have tried to show certain aspects of philosophical practice, and our ideas about what it is, in a certain light. I have suggested that looking at the discourse of philosophy, and various claims it makes about its own nature, from the point of view of its complex and often vexed relations to poetry and imaginative literature, can be revealing, and can put pressure on certain aspects of our constitutive understanding of that practice. I have exemplified some areas where my criticisms have application – not as an exemplar of every practice of philosophy but as an invitation to see what might be revealed about any given practice by seeing what implications this relation has there. My claims are not proof against counter-examples and I have framed my discussions of the issues to allow the reader to extrapolate to other contexts. The chapters on Plato, Aristotle and Kant offer insight into a cross section of philosophy’s traditional

\(^1\) Martha Nussbaum is for instance a moral philosopher in the virtue tradition who, in sections of *The Fragility of Goodness* and in a paper on Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* does engage with literature in a way that surpasses the simple use of literary examples to exemplify moral principles by which I characterised moral philosophy’s usual relationship to literature in Chapter Five.
relation with poetry, and the discussions on Diamond and Gaita offer vignettes into other possibilities for philosophy in its relation to literature.

Whether philosophy is troubled by or enthusiastic about its relation to and differentiation from literature, an examination of this relation would be illuminating in many areas of philosophical, and meta-philosophical, reflection upon which I have not touched. I have discussed these issues in relation to particular strains in philosophical thinking, however I am reluctant to draw broader or more general conclusions about how the problems I discussed there might be generalised to other areas or styles of philosophical enquiry. I cannot hope to have exhaustively treated the possible points of engagement between poetry and philosophy. What I have hoped to do is show the quarrel’s foundational importance for the discourse of philosophy; show, that is, the origin of the tension; and to show just some of the ways in which that tension plays out at certain, highly specific sites in philosophy’s history and in some of its current prevailing modes of practice. There has not been the scope in this thesis to consider the many, different styles and modes of philosophy. In my analysis of the issue in both its historical and its contemporary iterations I suggested that its differentiation from poetry is ingrained in the very fabric of the long dominant and prevailing conception of what philosophy is. Given the limitations which necessarily restrict such an enquiry, further thought on these questions in areas of philosophy which I have not broached would enrich any continuing reassessment of the aims and methods of philosophy. There would be much to gain from comparative studies of how different styles of philosophical thought and practice relate to poetic and literary modes of thought. It might be that how any given philosophical practice positions itself in relation to poetry is a telling fact about the nature of that philosophical style. If my conclusions are not general, that does not mean they cannot be generalised, yet the best expression of that possibility will always take place against the background of highly specific engagement with particular expressions.

This research is a contribution to the ongoing engagement philosophy inevitably has with the nature and methods of its own discourse because
philosophy has tended to convince itself of its mastery over all it surveys, and appoint itself as adjudicator of other styles of thought. This has sometimes prevented philosophy from being able to distinguish what things are really like from what they are like, philosophically. It is my hope that this method can be a help to reassess some common ways of thinking about what philosophy is, and what it does or ought to do, in light of what literature or literary forms of thinking show us about ourselves and our relations in the world.
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