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IMAGINATIVE UNCONCEALMENT:
Heidegger's philosophy of *aletheia* and the truth of literary fiction

BY

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Abstract

This dissertation applies Heidegger's belief that works of art 'disclose' or 'unconceal' the world to the study of fictional texts in the English literary tradition. I supplement Heidegger's ideas with an account of the creative or innovative imagination, so as to provide an accurate explanation of the way in which works of fiction, born from the human imagination, relate to 'truth', 'life' or 'reality'. Heidegger uses an ancient Greek phrase, *aletheia*, to describe a type of truth that is not reducible to the propositional statements on which other truth-accounts rely. *Aletheia* literally means 'unconcealment' and, according to the Heideggerian philosophy of art, it is precisely by being embodiments of unconcealment that aesthetic artefacts communicate a knowledge that is as numinous and sublime as the experience of colour or music. This knowledge can be located wherever one looks for it, and I seek its presence in three fictional texts: *King Lear* by William Shakespeare; *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James; and *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by John Ashbery. Shakespeare's play demonstrates how a work of literature can be constructed from language *without* being reduced to the sum of its propositional statements. *King Lear* exemplifies truth-as-unconcealment because critics have offered directly contradictory explanations of the play's purported 'meaning'; one can make sense of this paradox by approaching the play as a work that 'conditions' such interpretations without necessarily affirming them, which suggests that its truth lies beyond the arguments deduced from the play's content. The philosophy of *aletheia* will also impinge on the recent 'turn to ethics' among literary theorists and moral philosophers. I follow the critic Robert Eaglestone in claiming that an *aletheia*-based reading of literary fiction makes more sense of the ethical elements within fiction than

interpretations (such as those of Martha Nussbaum) that convert fictional texts into exercises in Aristotelian morality. My reading of *The Portrait of a Lady* does not conceive of the novel as a philosophical thesis tending towards a 'moral point' but considers it, instead, as a work exposing the problematic dimensions of human existence. This disclosure of facets of moral reasoning in the novel's content finds its analogy in the Jamesian style, and I refer to Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention that non-propositional truth 'enters' propositional language through the idiosyncrasies of style, to explain how the densities of James's prose connects with the notion of truth as *aletheia*. But if *aletheia* is an irreducible and non-propositional truth, it is also a non-fungible truth, which means that the truth of one aesthetic artefact cannot be exchanged with or replaced by the 'world-disclosure' embodied in other works. To elaborate on this idea, I employ the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno, illustrating his reworked version of truth-as-unconcealment with Ashbery's postmodern poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. I treat Ashbery's demanding linguistic experiments as attempts to clear a space for authentic truth and imaginative freedom in a culture dominated by fungible commodities. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the consequences truth-as-unconcealment holds for contemporary literary criticism.

Key Terms

Adorno, Theodor

Aesthetics

Aletheia

Ashbery, John

Ethics

Fiction

Heidegger, Martin

Imagination

James, Henry

Literature

Nussbaum, Martha

Philosophy

Shakespeare, William

Truth

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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PREFACE

This study combines the Heideggerian philosophy of *aletheia* or truth-as-unconcealment with an account of the imaginative or innovative aspects of literary texts, to explain how works of literature relate to an 'extra-textual world' or 'external reality'. I argue that the Heideggerian notion of truth as a 'world-disclosure' inherent in aesthetic artefacts provides a better description of literary truth and significance than overly mimetic or 'propositional' theories of interpretation. According to the theory I seek to present, literary works embody a form of knowledge that is *qualitatively* distinct from the explanatory knowledge offered by such disciplines as the natural sciences and philosophy. It is important to distinguish between the different truth-claims of these discourses to avoid categorical misreadings of fictional texts: in this regard, the contemporary 'turn to ethics' in literary studies and philosophy often threatens to subsume literature under the category of moral philosophy, a theoretical move this study seeks to correct. It is also necessary, if fictional texts are to be treated in accordance with their specific attributes and capabilities, to examine the role of the imagination in producing unprecedented 'world-disclosures' over the course of literary history. To illustrate how fiction unfolds its particular type of truth, the study supplements its speculations on literary aesthetics with illustrative readings of three literary texts – Shakespeare's *King Lear*; James's *The Portrait of a Lady*; and John Ashbery's long poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Each reading emphasises the 'unconcealing' aspects of the work under discussion, and I have drawn on some of the parallels to *aletheia* that scholars detect within the philosophical theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Theodor

Adorno, to motivate my treatment of imaginative truth as it occurs within these texts. I should stress, however, that I intended the idea of 'imaginative unconcealment' to be as broadly relevant as possible, so that readers are finally invited to consider for themselves how the concept of *aletheia* relates to the texts *they* consider to be works of imaginative literature.

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INTRODUCTION

Theory and Aesthetics: a prelude to Heidegger's philosophy of *aletheia*

What does an obscure philosophical principle like *aletheia* have to offer contemporary literary studies? While it would take (and, indeed, *does* take) this entire study to explain precisely what the Heideggerian idea of truth means and what its relevance for literature is, this introductory chapter allows for some general comments about the exercise in literary aesthetics that is to follow, and the theoretical context that engendered the study's main themes. In brief, I have tried to introduce some of Heidegger's key-insights about artworks, as found in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1936, translated in 1971), to the study of fiction and fictional works' relation to that mysterious realm we call 'life' or 'reality'. The conventions of language allow us to discriminate between facts, fictions and falsehoods, yet we do not often pause to consider the implications of these distinctions: why would many readers (or so I believe) find it difficult to join with Plato's Socrates in banishing the poets from his ideal society for *lying*? Socrates seems to have blurred the categories, mistaking one thing for another, but how does one account for his mistake? In what sense can poems, plays, novels and stories be said to be truthful, to be telling the truth about that most nebulous of concepts, 'the world'? If we ask questions like these, we have moved from being readers of texts to philosophers of literature; the history of literary aesthetics begins with such questions. Yet the grand tradition of literary criticism that stretches from the ancient Greek thinkers to the present day also demonstrates how difficult it is to give sufficient answers to these enquiries.

For the most part, philosophers who believe that literary works *do* hint at some form of truth have tried to explain literature's relation to the world in terms of mimesis or correspondence-type theories. Although mimesis is a complex and highly nuanced topic in literary studies, the core-idea seems to be that fictional works incorporate truth by mirroring, depicting, resembling, or 'matching' reality, or life, in a direct (or 'realistic') or opaque manner (perhaps exemplified by the modernist text). Truth, according to the mimetic model, is a matter of verisimilitude. While I might be accused of grossly oversimplifying what is actually a vast body of thought, it does not seem too casuistical to say that mimesis always involves the notion of *representation*. In fact, the main way of understanding truth in Western societies is as a matter of mimesis or 'correspondence between a proposition or assertion and a state of affairs' (Eaglestone, 2004:599). A.D. Nuttall provides a concise example of this theory of truth when he writes that the sentence, '"[t]he cow is in the meadow" is true if the cow *is* in the meadow' (1983:46). Thus, the dominant account of how language can convey truth is also the primary explanation for the ability of fictional texts to approximate to the same form of truth; a work of fiction might not be factual but it can preserve information that is *like* the factual state of affairs the work seeks to mimic.

Heidegger's belief in truth as 'unconcealment' or 'disclosure' offers an alternative theory of fictional truth, one which has the virtue of *incorporating* (not refuting) the mimetic characteristics of literature. Heideggerian philosophy can help us understand why fiction can convey knowledge that is not accessible to other types of reports regarding the nature of the world. In the first chapter of this study, I discuss how the knowledge covered by

the word *aletheia* differs from the truth-accounts generated by other influential systems of thought that aspire towards mimetic knowledge, such as the natural sciences and analytic strands of philosophy. As we shall see, Heidegger is not the only thinker to have bracketed the aesthetic from the methods and aims of other conceptual systems; Wittgenstein comes startlingly close to affirming the thesis developed under the rubric of *aletheia*, in his sporadic references to artistic practices and in one particularly interesting apothegm in the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (see chapter 3). Indeed, it was recognising the many intriguing parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein that prompted Robert Eaglestone to write the essay *One and the Same? Ethics, Aesthetics, and Truth* (2004: 495-608), which in turn gave rise to the idea for *this* study. Eaglestone discusses *aletheia* in his meditation on Wittgenstein, and urges literary scholars to adopt and 'defend' this form of truth, but he does not himself indicate *how* the study of specific literary texts will change if we view them in the light of unconcealment. A large part of this paper is devoted, therefore, to showing how *aletheia* impinges on the fictional texts that, for various reasons, have become institutionalised as works of literature deserving of serious, scholarly attention.

Admittedly, turning towards Heidegger for insights on literature might appear somewhat anachronistic at present. For theorists widely acknowledge that Heidegger ranks as one of the 'founding fathers' of post-structuralist literary theory (see Rivkin and Ryan, 1998:334). And while literary theory is still offered in many university departments of English, there is a definite sense in which the 'theoretical moment' has passed (see Eagleton, 2003:1), so that to launch an exploration of literature under the aegis of

Heideggerian thought looks belatedly out of sync with our supposedly post-theoretical, post-post-structuralist age. There is no space here to rehearse the details of what has become a cottage industry for modern academic publishing, namely the much-vaunted 'death of theory'[1] or, if you prefer a more exact metaphoric description, the stagnation of a radicalism turned orthodoxy in a 'university "near you"' during the last decade of the twentieth century (Payne and Schad, 2003:ix). But a few remarks on literary theory and the abiding relevance of the Heideggerian philosophy of truth are, nonetheless, in order.

Thus, while it is true that Heidegger has profoundly influenced what we might now term the postmodern phase of philosophy, it is by no means the case that an appreciation of his *aletheia*-concept necessarily leads one down the road to a deconstructionist *mise-en abîme* of the kind anti-theorists are fond of detecting in the Heideggerian oeuvre. As I think of it, deconstruction is one possible *outcome* of Heidegger's project, including those parts of the project that deal with artworks and aesthetics. In the final chapter I briefly touch on the connection between truth-as-unconcealment and the post-structuralist destabilization of metaphysics, but I have not attempted, in my own readings of literary texts, to deconstruct the material I am working with (although 'Derrideans' will surely recognise affinities between my discussions of, for example, mystery and otherness, and the treatment such themes have had during the theoretical dispensation). Rather, this study seeks to apply *aletheia* to literary readings in such a way that, if one adopts a theoretical approach, one will find that the present work complements the 'conceptual framework' much of literary theory espouses. Conversely, it seems possible to mesh Heidegger's viewpoints on art (and, by extension, literature) with many of the emergent

[1] For a 'bibliography' of books dealing with the death of theory see Payne and Schad, 2003:x.

post-theoretical approaches to literature that are taking shape in the modern academy at the time of writing.

What are these 'post-theoretical' approaches? A decade ago, one would have been tempted to evoke the names of cultural materialism or new historicism as examples of theoretical movements that continued the post-structuralist hermeneutic of suspicion while reacting against its (perceived) de-contextualised emphasis on texts stripped of the material conditions involved in their formation. However, if the later work of the doyen of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, is anything to go by, historicist theories have gradually lost sight of their Foucauldian roots. Certainly, Greenblatt's most recent book on Shakespeare, *Will in the World* (2004), contains nothing in the way of methodology that previous generations of literary historians would find strange or innovating – it is a straightforward account of Shakespeare in his historic setting, with none of the overt claims about the textuality of history that populated Greenblatt's earlier theoretical output. In other words, *Will in the World* does not so much betray a post-theoretical standpoint as a thoroughly traditionalist stance.

The journalist Mark Greif has noted an interest in aesthetics as one of the most prominent post-theoretical 'topics on humanities agendas' (2004:2), so the description of an 'artistic knowledge' contained in this study should mesh well with the full-scale reassessment of aesthetics noticeable in Anglo-American departments of literature and philosophy.[2] Perhaps the most vocal reclamation of the aesthetic has come from authors like J.M.

[2] An important example of the resurgence of interest in aesthetics is the anthology *Literary Aesthetics*, compiled by Allan Singer and Alan Dunn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

Bernstein and Andrew Bowie, both of whom are involved in research projects concerned with the rise of Romanticism and the (concomitant) emergence of a systematised philosophy of art. Critics of these thinkers have labelled them defenders of a 'new aestheticism' and while neither Bowie nor Bernstein accept the appellation, it has become something of a commonplace to refer to them as 'new aesthetes' (see, for example, Eaglestone, 2004:596-7).[3] What makes the cognomen misleading is the fact that these authors do not seek to displace critical theory with an 'aesthetic alternative': Bernstein has deprecated claims that his writing pleads for a return to aesthetic values by stating that he is involved in the construction of a 'social epistemology' founded on the insights of Theodor Adorno (1997:90). While Adorno's is one of the key-voices of the present study (as the reader will discover), it is not immediately obvious how Bernstein's philosophical theories relate to *literary* studies as such. Andrew Bowie offers a more promising post-theoretical avenue of scholarly enquiry, since he is explicitly concerned with examining how Romantic conceptions of the self and of subjectivity can be appropriated to explain inconsistencies in theory's positions with regard to these issues.

Bowie veers away from the oft-cited theoretical belief that 'the rise in the public sphere of the idea of the autonomous self is . . . linked to the rise of modern capitalism and its breaking of the bonds of feudalism' (1997:107). In his opinion, theory's idea of a self that is entirely determined by social forces fails to account for the ability of human beings to indulge in the 'meaningful innovation' an *aletheia*-based vision of the aesthetic tends to discern within works of art (Ibid:108). Bowie acknowledges that artists require socio-

[3] Titles associated with the 'new aestheticism' are Bowie's *Aesthetics and Subjectivity, from Kant to Nietzsche* (1990) and *From Romanticism to Critical Theory* (1997). Bernstein is the author of *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1992).

cultural surroundings, but insists that they are not embedded in their context: if they were, one would not have been able to register such startling dislocations in the history of any given art form. In this regard, the new aestheticism's critique of social determinacy finds an echo in the fierce reactions that have recently been levelled at the Foucauldian model of power relations and ideological 'entrapment': 'there is nothing in the subversion/containment model that can account for genuine conflict and change' (Riebling, in Easterlin and Riebling, 1993:179). Bowie does not address historicist assumptions but is at pains to modify the 'decentred' conception of selfhood, which, so he argues, supplanted Romanticist philosophy's own attempts to come to terms with the intellectual dilemmas surrounding human freedom, individuality and subjectivity. The decentred version of selfhood is faulty because it unwittingly employs a reflection model of subjectivity. This means that one cannot identify what it means to be oneself, a *self*, by entering into a 'reflexive' or 'mirror' attitude:

> If I look in a mirror to see myself as an object I will only recognise *myself*, as opposed to a random object or person, if I am already aware that it is myself as subject that I am to look at *before* the reflection. The external image in the object world cannot itself provide the criterion which allows me to see the reflected object as *myself*, as the subject that is looking at the image. . . . For my memories to be in the first person at all, the experiences they are based on must initially be immediately and incorrigibly mine if they are to be reflexively . . . re-identified as mine. The "unity" involved in *this* theory of self-consciousness is, therefore, not at all a total self-transparency – what

> Derrida and others term "self-presence" – or some kind of imaginary harmony of oneself with oneself. (1997:111-2)

The inability of consciousness to 'objectify' itself leads Bowie to argue that subjectivity is not reducible to any set of relations that might be said to compose the individual self. This is very important for the Heideggerian scheme of truth because the irreducibility of selfhood manifests, for Bowie, in the production of aesthetic artefacts that are themselves irreducible to whatever explanations of their makeup materialist critics might offer. We will see Heidegger making the same point in chapter 1. Aesthetic irreducibility stands as a remonstrance against the theoretical attack on such alleged 'humanist' convictions as individual freedom: 'unless we *already* have some immediate sense of freedom via the very fact of our self-consciousness, we would not even *recognize* [sic] its instantiation in transformed socio-economic circumstances' (Ibid:116). Bowie then cites Herbert Schnädelbach to the effect that only a human being who has an 'existential structure' allowing him or her to conceptualise autonomy can experience alienation, and by the same token, aesthetic appreciation (Ibid.).

Many of the arguments of the new aestheticism are directed against the pursuits of contemporary rationalism in the guises of naturalistic science (what Bowie calls 'scientism') and mainstream philosophy. Similarly, Heidegger introduced the notion of *aletheia* as a foil to traditional philosophy, and readers will note that my study consistently contrasts the 'unconcealment-type knowledge' enabled by *aletheia* with the textual output of present-day philosophy. I should make it clear what I mean by

'philosophy' because popular renditions about the nature of the discipline tend to conflict with the claims philosophers themselves make about their viewpoints and methodologies. Arguably the best guide to contemporary philosophy, the volume edited by Brian Leiter entitled *The future for philosophy* (Oxford, 2004), does not hesitate to expose what the editor feels are populist myths about the subject. It seems that, if postmodern theory is moribund in departments of literature, the same movement never exerted any influence over Anglo-American philosophy at all. Postmodernism, if one can believe Leiter, 'is non-existent in all the leading philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world, where it is regarded . . . as sophomoric sceptical posturing' (p.19). Similarly, the supposition that literary theory has absorbed philosophy so that philosophical writing is now, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with literature, is *not* accepted by most contemporary philosophers.[4]

The distinguishing hallmark of present-day philosophy is its staunch empiricism. Leiter sums up the 'naturalistic turn' as follows: '[according to] the naturalists, the key is for philosophers either to adopt and emulate the methods of successful sciences, or for philosophers to operate *in tandem* with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch' (Ibid:3). Since the knowledge this brand of philosophy wants to cultivate is identical to the 'propositional truths' discussed in the first chapter, it is perfectly legitimate to contrast imaginative writing with philosophical argument. Having said this, there *is* one branch of philosophy that does display an overt interest in literature:

[4] If Leiter is to be believed, this applies to 'Continental philosophy' as much as to 'Anglophone philosophy', descriptive labels which he regards as fast becoming 'meaningless' in the context of today's global intellectual exchange (2004:12). Mark Greif provides a useful assessment of the 'situation' of philosophy in contemporary France, which he brands a 'civic humanism' born of a 'neo-Enlightenment' sensibility (2004:5-6).

philosophy of ethics, including the sub-discipline of moral philosophy. Yet another post-theoretical transition concerns the so-called 'turn to ethics' among humanities scholars. The ethical turn recently 'celebrated' its twentieth 'anniversary' (see Eskin, 2004:557), and has had a number of significant consequences for scholars of literature and philosophers alike[5]. Perhaps the most important, from the perspective of this study, is the fledgling desire to develop 'ethical readings' of texts; interpretations of literary works that take as their explicit focus the moral or ethical messages assumed to reside within literature. The most famous exponent of an ethical approach is the neo-Aristotelian philosopher Martha Nussbaum, but Michael Eskin cites several other authors who have contributed to the widespread deployment of fiction *as* moral philosophy (Ibid.). Naturally, thinking of literature in this manner will affect how we view the relation of the fictive work to the world: while ethical readings are usually conducted from within traditionalist mimetic frameworks, they add a didactic dimension – literature shows us what reality *should* look like. The question, for many critics of the ethical turn, is whether such readings are able to give an equitable interpretation of the fictions they purport to analyse. Is the truth of literature reducible to the moral message that, conceivably, can be gleaned from any given text? Chapter 3 of this study seeks to answer this question by examining truth-as-unconcealment in the context of the debate on literature and ethics.

The arguments in this work deal with general problems in the field of literary aesthetics. But theories of interpretation properly earn their keep by being practically applicable, which is why I have tried to match whatever broad statements the first chapter asserts

[5] For example, the return to a humanist or 'anthropocentric' literary criticism is often associated with the reemergence of ethical debate. For a discussion (and example) of anthropocentric criticism see Valentine Cunningham's *Reading after Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

about ‘literature’ or ‘fiction’ with illustrations from individual literary works. At an early stage of the project, it became apparent that Heidegger’s philosophy of truth required an additional element for *aletheia* to be converted into a ‘workable’ hypothesis about literature (Heidegger’s writings on poetry – the only literary art he deigns to discuss – are extremely vague and meandering). This is why the title of this study appends ‘imaginative’ to the Heideggerian neologism ‘unconcealment’. I believe it is the imaginative aspects of fictional texts that link their mode of truth-telling to the philosophy of *aletheia*. To prove this, I have selected texts that (to my mind, at least) demonstrate with great force how powerfully innovative the imagination’s ability to disclose the world can be. In the case of *King Lear*, I take the fact that the play has undergone periodical rewrites as an ironic testimonial to Shakespeare’s unsettlingly candid vision of the body as locus for the sympathetic imagination. The desire to change the tragic ending of the play becomes, in my reading, a point of entry into the dynamics of the Shakespearean world-disclosure (another translation for *aletheia*).

My second reading deals with the novel *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. As with *King Lear*, many readers may have wanted to see the ending of this text rewritten: why does Isabel Archer choose to return to Gilbert Osmond, and what does this signify for the moral vision James is supposedly trying to focalize through the text? I use these questions to stimulate thought about fiction’s way of ‘representing’ existential and/or moral dilemmas. Nowadays, Jamesian fiction is often discussed in the frame of reference of ethical philosophy – Nussbaum concentrates on texts by James in many of her essays – so I have compared the conception of the novel as an elaborate moral argument with an idea

of the text as an imaginative *exploration* of the world of moral discourse, in other words, as a projection of the unconcealing truth that 'is at work in the work' as Heidegger would put it. This chapter goes on to argue that thinking about fictional works as embodiments of *aletheia* can change how readers approach the journey into regions of good and evil that, undoubtedly, so many narratives undertake. Finally, I consider what would happen if we exchange the notion that a novel 'teaches' us about life (as insightful and worthwhile as such a perception may be) for the idea that the narrative metaphorically 'shows' us the world. My suspicion is that, in substituting one 'fictive mode' for the other, we may come closer to an appreciative understanding of the truth of *The Portrait of a Lady* and other works of imaginative literature. As I mentioned in the preface, I draw on parallels between Heidegger's thought and that of Wittgenstein to prove my point.

For the final reading presented in this study, I have selected a poem that self-consciously resists appraisal in mimetic terms. *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, by John Ashbery, is a dense postmodern text, in which the trope of a mirror becomes (ironically) a medium for fracturing the belief that language has an unproblematic correspondence with the reality 'beyond' the looking glass of the text. The themes touched on in previous chapters – body, self, world, words, and truth – recur in my analysis of this poem, but they have now suffered a sea-change and all appear strangely transformed in the poetic gaze Ashbery casts upon them. To explain why the poem seems so wilfully intent on alienating its readers, I take up the aesthetic theory of Theodor Adorno. In many ways, Adorno continues the Heideggerian legacy of artistic truth, but his writing on the modernist aesthetic 'updates' the concept of *aletheia* so that the creative imagination is

discovered to possess an inextricably social aspect. Bernstein's research on Adorno forms an important backcloth to the analyses of the postmodern poetic provided in this chapter.

In the final chapter, I consider some of the difficulties attending the philosophy of *aletheia* and the practical relevance of 'imaginative unconcealment' for the academic study of literature. The problem with any *experiential* truth is that, unlike other types of knowledge, its value and significance invariably gets lost in translation: there is no rule or guideline for 'applying' *aletheia*, because it is not a proposition or a 'fact' one will be able to extract from whatever text one thinks comes imbued with this property. This obviously poses an obstacle for literary studies: how does one write about, let alone *teach* a truth that is not reducible to the spoken or written word? In this chapter, I (hesitantly) offer some solutions.

If this study is correct in its conclusions, the arts and sciences will never be able to join in the synthesis some philosophers and scientists are optimistically expecting.[6] Aesthetic truth consists of an entirely different kind of knowingness than the information about the world the hard sciences are so apt at producing. This does not mean, however, that science cannot be instrumental in helping to further our understanding of literature and literary aesthetics. The popular science author Stephen Jay Gould is, I believe, correct when he states that the 'ugly duckling' (or crypto-swan) of the humanities should be encouraged to play with the scientific ducklings, on the condition that he/she does not pretend to be one of them (2003:200-1). Gould feels that 'once [the arts and sciences] invoke their goodwill to sort out the legitimate differences, they will realize the enormous

[6] See, for example, the work *Consilience*, by E.O. Wilson (London:Abacus, 1998).

weight of common interests, and [recognise that] they can have ever so much fun together, horsing around in the pond and swapping stories, because, after all, swans do share many features with ducks' (Ibid.).

The potential for a mutually affectionate partnership between science and aesthetics leads on to another prominent, post-theoretical trend in contemporary literary studies. I am referring to the increasing interest, among scholars of literature, in theoretical interdisciplinarity. To be sure, critical theory has always displayed a considerable affinity for procedures imported from other sectors of the humanities (for instance, from linguistics, psychology, sociology), but the new interdisciplinarity extends its sway to incorporate advances made in biology, systems theory and, most noticeably, neurophysiology and neuroscience. A relatively early example of this trend is the collection of essays, *After Poststructuralism: Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*, edited by Nancy Easterlin and Barbara Riebling, and published in 1993 as a volume in the major critical series 'Rethinking Theory' (Evanston: Northwestern University Press). Of course, not all academics have welcomed this move: some cultural theorists, specifically, disparage attempts to explain human behaviour from the outlook of what they consider to be a 'crude philosophy of science' (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999:370).

For the most part, I agree with the argument (proffered by Edgar, Sedgwick and like-minded critics) that cultural artefacts like literature cannot be 'explained away' by socio-biology or cognitive psychology. But we should be wary of dismissals of interdisciplinary research that look as if their rejections are based on scholarly bias, rather

than on a fair dispute of the particular claims being ventured. If, for example, a literary theorist is conducive to psychoanalysis, then it can only seem like begging the question when the same theorist takes issue with input from neuroscientists: the interpretation of texts is not helped by clinging to orthodoxies in the face of evidence that might upset one's attachment to outdated models of thinking, whether of literature or of the human mind.

The issue of interdisciplinarity is not of peripheral interest to my thesis. This is because of some very recent findings in neuroscientific studies: over the past few years, scientists have constructed some very insightful theories to account for the brain's ability to produce creative thoughts, the basis for the imaginative knowledge on which fictional works are reliant. In the interests of interdisciplinarity, and because I think these findings merit consideration by scholars of literature, I have included a very brief appendix in which I touch on some speculations of neuroscientists regarding the innovative, imaginative mind. Readers will also notice that the study mentions the concept of *qualia*, one of the most hotly debated topics in modern philosophy of science (see Leiter, 2004:139). To my mind, these new currents in science provide the necessary orientation for Heidegger's philosophy of aesthetic truth in a twenty-first century intellectual climate.

CHAPTER 1

The truth of literature

Truth as unconcealment

Aletheia is an archaic Greek word, which scholars will usually translate simply as 'truth'. Literally, it means to 'uncover' or 'expose' something, though Heidegger prefers to use his own neologisms when he writes on the topic: he speaks of 'unconcealment' or 'world-disclosure' to suggest that it is not the revelation of some new fact that is at stake, but the exposure of something long hidden and primordial. Heidegger's interest in the word stems from its popularity with the pre-Socratic philosophers: because he saw his own project as a radical re-examination of traditional Western philosophy from Socrates onwards, Heidegger was naturally attracted to an alternative conception of what it might mean to say that something is 'truthful' (see Norris, 1999:168-9). Accordingly, he uses the phrase to distinguish between two types of knowledge about the world, two 'kinds of truth' available to members of modern society (Young, 1997:93).

The first form of truth is the one we inherited from Socrates and Plato. This notion of truth underlies the speculations of all traditional philosophy and the scientific enquiries that flow from philosophical reasoning (as Plato passes the torch to Aristotle). Heidegger thinks of the knowledge such truth generates as mimetic or descriptive, knowledge that seeks to describe physical entities or the attributes of physical entities. He also characterises this knowledge as *propositional* because it results in factual propositions about the contents of the material universe. Propositional knowledge has an affinity for

tabulations, lists, and categories; it seeks to explain through enumeration. The contemporary desire, among physicists, for a scientific 'theory of everything' exemplifies the propositional understanding and its view of the world as a 'collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there' (Heidegger, 1971:44). Heidegger also thinks of this knowledge as *utilitarian*: scientific reasoning yields practical dividends because it enables technological progress. The knowledge science cultivates has pragmatic use-value; its truths are not only 'empirical' but also 'instrumental' (Eaglestone, 2004:598). Finally, the method governing the accumulation of this form of knowledge is *reductive*: its truth depends on an atomistic probe into the constituent parts of entities, followed by a description of these particles in propositional terms. If it is a philosophical argument, the method requires the movement of reason from one point to another, necessitating the exclusion of irrelevant information.

Misreadings of Heidegger's work will sometimes allege that he seeks to replace this conventional account of truth with the considerably more esoteric philosophy of *aletheia*. In fact, as Julian Young writes, his 'claim, rather, is that truth of this kind has a 'derivative' status . . . since it is 'founded on' truth as 'disclosure' (1997:93). Propositional truth is derivative because it 'only cultivates a domain of truth already disclosed in some other way' (Carman, 1998:373). In other words, there are truths that fail to fit into the list of empirical descriptions provided by positivist theories of reality and the purpose of Heideggerian philosophy is to establish what kind of knowledge these truths provide. Wittgenstein had the same intuition regarding what he called the 'book of the world'. This book references 'all relative judgements of value and all true scientific

propositions and in fact all true propositions that can be made' but is deficient because 'there will simply be facts, facts, and facts but no Ethics' (quoted in Blackburn, 2005:131). Heidegger also believed ethics could not figure in the categories compiled by philosophical thought (Eaglestone, 2004:601). We explore his and Wittgenstein's insights regarding ethics in the third chapter of the study. Here it is enough to note that Heidegger assigns some forms of knowledge a propositional truth and other forms of knowledge an 'expositional' dimension. The question now concerns the nature of this second, unconcealing mode of truth: what are its characteristics?

For his answer, Heidegger logically looks to phenomena and practices that do not meet the standards for enquiries aimed at producing propositional knowledge. He thinks, for instance, of the contrast between the scientific descriptions of colour and the experiential understanding of colour. Intuitively, we know a scientific treatise on colour cannot convey the *redness* or *greenness* to a person born blind: if we 'analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths it is gone' (Heidegger, 1971:47). Modern philosophy of the mind confirms this sentiment: Thomas Nagel has even coined the word *qualia* to describe 'the subjective qualities of conscious experience [such as] the way vermilion looks' (1995:736). Subjective experience is inaccessible to scientific description; the causes and effects of an experience might be completely clear to science but 'what it is like' to have the experience is fundamentally *irreducible* (see Nagel, 1998:280). The experience of colour would then be one form of knowledge that propositional truth fails to accommodate. One might relate this to the idea of *aletheia* by suggesting that colour

has to 'reveal' itself to be 'known' – the way we *know* that the most astute blind researcher on the light spectrum will lack a felt understanding of what she is studying.

Aesthetic irreducibility and particularity

Heidegger thinks a work of art provides another example of irreducible knowledge. Unfortunately, as many researchers have noted, he consistently fails to formulate what precisely he understands under the category of 'art' (see Bernasconi, 1998:378). It is clear, however, that he considers artworks to be particular embodiments of truth as *aletheia*. He states this explicitly in *The Origin of the Work of Art*: 'art is truth setting itself to work' (Heidegger, 1971:74). Throughout the essay, Heidegger figures *aletheia* through spatial metaphors and 'visionary' motifs reminiscent of the Romantic imagination. So, for example, truth as unconcealment allows an 'entity' portrayed in a painting to 'emerge into the unconcealedness of its being' (Ibid: 33), and the ideal visual artwork ensures an 'opening of our vision' (p.39), and 'opens up a world' for the inspection of its spectators. In one of the essay's most provocative statements, the knowledge incarnated in a painting, or a sculpture, or a poem, is said to 'make a space for spaciousness' (p.45). This means that an artwork projects an imaginative space in which elements of the 'real world' show up for what they are; in removing them from their 'everyday context' and displaying them on a canvas or between the pages of a book, the artist lets us reconsider the contours and contents of the world in which we live. It is an undisputed fact that the world is drenched in colour, yet it is precisely because we are surrounded with such superabundance that we might be inclined to forget the shaded nature of reality. For one of Heidegger's disciples, Theodor Adorno, the simple swathes

of red or black constituting some modernist paintings are attempts to re-educate our eyes by isolating one aspect of the tremendously diffuse visual spectrum (see Bernstein, 2004:152-3).

The realm of the aesthetic is therefore dynamic and enlightening: 'in the vicinity of the work we [are] suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be' (Heidegger, 1971, cited in Cooper, 1997:233). And this property of art has as much to do with our own ability to look at certain objects in ways which situate them as sites of unconcealment as it has with the originating truth safeguarded by the work itself (Young, 2001:51). This is why it is impossible to provide an objectivist theory of art in the manner of, say, physics, because the 'world' disclosed between the boundaries of a musical composition or a novel is 'the ever nonobjective' (Heidegger, 1971, cited in Cooper, 1997:240). Art is not reducible to a rule about its form, content, or social purpose and Heidegger leaves *us* with the decision as to what manifestations of culture we want to consider 'world-disclosing'. This essentially subjective attitude does not have to be a lapse into vagueness; Heidegger provides us with an important question we can ask of our encounters with texts: we are invited to determine how a specific work can 'give access to aspects of the world which would otherwise fail to be articulated' (Bowie, 1997:117).

It should be obvious from these comments that Heidegger anticipated many of the so-called formalist ideas regarding the 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarization' worked by literary texts (Eaglestone, 2004:600). From a Heideggerian viewpoint, however, the formalist (and structuralist) fallacy comes from its attempt to pin poetic innovation down

to the linguistic components of a work. There are several reasons why such an approach to *aletheia* is inadequate. Most importantly, when Heidegger distinguishes between the knowledge contained in a scientific report and the truths conveyed by a lyric poem, for example, he is not discriminating on the grounds of a perceived difference between the kinds of language both texts respectively employ. On the brute level of linguistics, Robert Frost's poem *The Ovenbird* and the article on ovenbirds in the ornithological textbook are identical. Yet one is an empirical description of a physical entity, not very different from other, independently written articles on ovenbirds, while the achievement of Frost's poem depends entirely on its *particularity* and on the reader whose context and preference allow him to appreciate this particularity as a unique 'articulation' of an 'aspect of the world'. The poem does not 'state'; it 'speaks' and Heidegger claims that even paintings possess this form of speech (Cooper, 1997:233). It would be useless, however, to try to extrapolate the 'speaking' from an analysis of the words being spoken, as futile as an attempt to dissect the quintessential redness of red. Coming to terms with aesthetic irreducibility has significant implications for literary criticism, as Timothy Clarke writes:

> The resistance of a work to theoretical understanding lies in the fact that, crudely speaking, it has more the mode of existence of a kind of action or of [a] practise than of a static object. So one cannot give "the meaning" of a work like *Bleak House* any more than one can give "the meaning" of a dance, or a particular way of life. To ask for "the meaning" of the work is a kind of category mistake: it is like asking for the height of an idea or for the meaning of the French language. It is rather the matter of a singular mode of "being" (2002:47).

Julian Young notes that this attitude still allows for art criticism or literary theory, but it places a bar on the extent to which they can interpret any given text: 'Art criticism of a technical character, so long as it remains tentative and *ex post facto*, is, of course, possible. But art theorizing – in the sense of plucking out the heart of its mystery – is not' (2001:50). This will necessarily create a problem for persons who want to write *about* the unconcealment-aspect of literary texts, and I shall attempt to address it in my own readings of literary works.

The context for unconcealment

We have already canvassed two characteristics of truth as *aletheia*: it is irreducible and particular. A third, related characteristic is that, unlike the laws of physics or the genetic code, *aletheia* is historically contingent. According to Heidegger, the perspectives opened up by artworks do not amount to 'something timeless and supertemporal' and to emphasise their contingency he even allows for the symbolic *death* of art. Overexposure of an artwork, for instance, can blunt our sensibilities to it, so that its disclosing force could lapse into a cultural commonplace (for a discussion of Heidegger's belief in the 'death of art', see Harries, 1998:376-7). Alternatively, the historic context in which a work spoke meaningfully might end and the codes necessary for its understanding could vanish: difficulty in understanding Shakespeare's language can occlude the import of what he is saying. Also, the extent to which our understanding of aspects of the world (concerning love, for example) have been shaped by his writings can dim their originality and keep us from appreciating (and interrogating) the world they project and in which

we, arguably, have come to live – for better or worse. Two comments by critics bear out this idea (and emphasise, again, its unavoidable subjectivity). Paul Johnson writes of Michelangelo's depiction of Adam and God about to brush fingertips, that it 'was thrilling until endless photographic repetitions turned it into a stale cliché' (2003:280). And Harold Bloom says of Hamlet's immortal 'To be or not to be' speech that it 'now appears stale with repetition' (2000:215).

These evaluations are only of tangential interest, but the contingent nature of *aletheia* is not restricted to its embeddedness in history; it applies to different works sharing the same context. Robert Eaglestone puts the point as follows: '[t]he world unveiled will vary from work to work . . . the world of a Greek temple is not the world of an Henri Matisse painting nor the world of *Finnegans Wake*, *The Satanic Verses*, or *War and Peace*' (2004:600). The same criterion applies to thematic content: '[w]hat is revealed is contingent . . . we would not think in precisely the same way about the terrors and violence of colonial power had it not been for *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart*, *A Grain of Rice*, and *The Life & Times of Michael K.*' (Ibid.). These texts accomplish an understanding of postcolonialism that can at best be supplemented by 'objective' or 'factual' historic records and statistical studies that equate victims with numbers and atrocities with quantifiable losses. Their truth is contingent because they possess an irreducible particularity: some aspect of the world would have remained unspoken if *The Life and Times of Michael K.* were simply another rendition of *A Grain of Rice*. This is why Heidegger says that there is a difference between 'using words' to make an artwork and 'using them up' in a list of particles in motion (1971:48).

Non-utilitarian knowledge

What we need to emphasize about the idea of imaginative unconcealment is that it does not provide an 'ontology' of art or literature. Heidegger, it will be recalled, distinguished between propositional knowledge and irreducible truth. It follows from his distinction that *aletheia* cannot itself be described in a 'propositional assertion': it is not 'the mythical literary-ness, the essence of literature' (Eaglestone, 2004:600). I have stressed that the formulation offers an invitation or opportunity to think about the way in which literary texts engage with reality, not a prescription restricting their significance to their imaginative or innovative qualities. As such, *aletheia* opens itself to criticism from a number of theoretical fronts, especially because Heidegger claims that this form of knowledge is non-utilitarian (see Cooper, 1997:235-6). Against this, Barbara Hernstein Smith argues that the notion of an artefact or practice deprived of use-value is ultimately nonsensical and a philosophical bogeyman: knowledge has to have a function to qualify as knowledge or truth in the first place, and function always implies pragmatic interest for *someone* or other. Hernstein Smith writes:

> To those for whom terms such as "utility", "effectiveness" and "function" suggest gross pragmatic instrumentality, crass material desires, and the satisfaction of animal needs, a concept such as use value will be seen as irrelevant to or clearly to be distinguished from aesthetic value. There is, however, no good reason to confine the domain of the utilitarian to objects that serve only immediate, specific, and unexalted ends.'
>
> (1988:33)

This does not create an insurmountable problem for Heideggerian philosophy. We can unqualifiedly confirm that literature has 'use value' without reducing that value to the satisfaction of identifiable or even unconscious needs, so it remains true that a fictional work can have a dimension *beyond* its overtly utilitarian purpose (as therapy, or entertainment, or didactics). Hernstein Smith is entitled to her economic metaphors for literary (and human) relations, but they do not disqualify the idea that art, including literary art may still have a significance 'which is neither merely instrumental nor [is it merely] an object of consumption' (Bowie, 1997:109). Heidegger's insight is that the functions we validly append to a fictional text do not exhaust the knowledge such a work embodies.

Visionary knowledge

We can make a few other comments on the different conceptions of the world produced by propositional knowledge and *aletheia*, respectively. In this regard, A.D. Nuttall discerns the following difference between the métier of factual reportage and realist fiction: 'Conceptual knowledge is increased by the addition and elaboration of propositions. Experiential knowledge is increased by deepening, by intensification' (1983:76). He adds of the 'realistic artist' that he or she 'works by deepening our experience of the possible reality he [or she] represents' (Ibid.). This is relevant to our discussion of *aletheia* because it indicates how an artist might achieve the condition Nagel thought was beyond the remit of scientific analysis, the condition of understanding what it is like to *be* something or to *experience* something (see above). Nagel was trying

to determine the limits of the human imagination and I want to suggest that thinking about the imaginative qualities of literary works can help us to understand their ability to 'disclose' the world as opposed to simply 'mapping' or 'reporting' it. The fact that an author is able to engage *creatively* with their surroundings – both sensory and linguistic – seems to me to contribute integrally to their ability to open views on the world that are unprecedented and innovative. I believe the sympathetic imagination allows, crucially, for the (admittedly limited) entry-point a human being can achieve in the subjective states Nagel considers irrevocably closed to reductionism. I also think works of literature are places where such points of entry open up to the reader, so that any given 'world-disclosure' begins in an act of imaginative vision.

A theorist might object that such an approach to literature is intolerably laden with the rhetoric of obsolete Romantic ideas. As a rejoinder, let me make a few observations on the textual tradition(s) we have come to call 'imaginative literature'. First, there is no doubt that the label is of relatively recent vintage or that it was shaped into the dominant conception of literature through a confluence of socio-historic factors, including the ideological interests of several thinkers associated with German and English Romanticism. According to Bruce Robbins, 'it is only around the time of Immanuel Kant [that literature] acquires the . . . sense of creative or imaginative writing, as distinguished from the moral, the true [ironically], and the useful' (1998:155). Critical theory has made much of the historical motives that led to the emergence of a restricted definition of literature (see, particularly, Eagleton, 1996:16-8). Yet it does not follow that identifying these factors invalidates the definition or deprives it of theoretical accuracy. Rather, we

can understand the eventual recognition of a strong creative impulse in certain strands of writing as a late but accurate assessment of attributes (creative, innovative, imaginative) that have always formed an indispensable component of socially valued texts. Changes in literary fashion might cause societies to deemphasise or, conversely, overstate the importance of creative ruptures or innovation within circumscribed generic forms, but the very presence of literary *changes* already testifies to the existence of an authorial imagination. Robbins is correct: 'To say that literature is a recent and historically shifting concept [does not] imply that the concept must be abandoned' (Ibid.).

Second, the role institutions of higher learning played in the 'reification' of the Romantic idea of literature is well known and most scholars would not dispute that some form of ideological privileging attended this process as well (see, again, Eagleton, 1996:20-6). The same criticisms apply, however, to a theoretical rejection of 'imaginative literature' on the grounds of this academic privileging of poems and narratives over other genres (and I readily concede that the 'imaginative' criterion could apply to many works not traditionally found on university reading lists). Works of fiction are (generally) dense semantic texts and admit to various interpretations: if it is true that idealist humanism promoted its own interests through some highly tendentious appropriations of Biblical and Romantic tropes of 'inspiration' and 'universal vision', then this gives us all the more reason to launch a new, self-reflexive investigation into the disclosing properties of fictional texts. The alternative – to dismiss claims because they carry the taint of ideology – risks being trapped in the circular reasoning Jonathan Bate identifies within some objections to Shakespeare studies:

> In answer to the question 'Why has the Shakespeare Effect been greater than the Jonson Effect?', the New Iconoclast will reply: 'Because Shakespeare is a site of greater cultural authority than Ben Jonson – he is a talisman which people want to have on the side of their own ideology'. But this argument is strictly circular: why is Shakespeare a site of greater cultural authority? Because people have made a greater investment in making meaning of him. Why have people made a greater investment in making meaning out of him? Because he is a site of greater cultural authority. . . .We need another explanation. (1997:322)

Aletheia provides the other explanation literary studies needs if it is to engage in full with the conspicuous attachment of value to texts over extended periods. I will conclude the debate on the Romantic origins of 'Literature' with Frank Kermode's succinct defence of the category. Kermode writes: 'lots of things were invented in the last two hundred years that we rather approve of, and if we did invent literature two hundred years ago, well, very good, I think it an excellent idea' (in Payne and Schad, 2003:58). This does not pretend that there are not important theoretical problems accompanying the definition of 'literature' or attending concepts like 'canonicity', but it does imply that the label is useful beyond academic debates, not least of all because it can accommodate historically marginalised or neglected texts.

The 'sense' of a proposition

It is obvious from our discussion of the subjective imagination that the truth-telling mode of fictional texts corresponds closely with the idea of 'sense', as in 'the sense of a thing'.

Heidegger and Wittgenstein both meditated on this aspect of subjective experience but it is Wittgenstein who makes the distinction between a 'proposition', which could be either true or false, and the 'sense of a proposition', which does not lend itself to the same assessments of truth or falsity (Eaglestone, 2004:599). Wittgenstein's hypothetical 'Book of the World' consists entirely of propositions but they need a context for them to be meaningful, the way any sentence needs an entire linguistic and conceptual framework for a speaker to understand to what it refers. This context provides 'the sense of the proposition' (Ibid.). The relevance for literature is that what Robert Eaglestone calls the 'sense of uncovering' or the making of a context for an understanding of the world, forms part of the difference between fictional knowledge and propositional knowledge.

Consider the statement, 'the ovenbird sings in summer', which can be checked against a 'factual situation', and the last four lines of *The Ovenbird* by Frost[7]: 'The bird would cease and be as other birds / But that he knows in singing not to sing. /The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing.' Remember that we are not dealing with linguistic differences; Frost employs straightforwardly assertoric sentences. Yet his poem is not a bland description of the ovenbird as an 'entity in the world' but an elucidation of the bird as figured through a dense world of personalised connections. In other words, the poet creatively combines snippets of knowledge to produce *new* knowledge, shifts in perception, the human endowment to a natural form. New Criticism was adept at exposing the *devices* poets use to work these transformations but a consideration of metaphor and personification seem to me incomplete if imaginative truth, *which is entirely metaphorical*, is not understood as the goal towards

[7] In Ferguson, et al., 2005. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., p.1233.

which such devices tend, and in which they come to context, the way birdsong speaks of a 'diminished thing'. Like many other aspects of literature, the 'making of sense' often becomes just the rehearsal of uncritical platitudes ('poets look for meaning') but once we begin to ask about the nature of this sense ('what is the meaning a poet makes?') we have started thinking about *aletheia.*

The anthropomorphic ovenbird in the poem echoes William Blake's sentiments on nature: 'by Blake, mere nature, as perceived by the physical eye and unhumanized [sic] by the imagination, was spurned "as the dirt upon my feet, no part of me' (cited in Greenblatt, *et al.*, 2000:10). The desire to put some sense into the world is also evident in other Romantic poets: Samuel Taylor Coleridge launched incisive polemics against what he called the scientific 'philosophy of mechanism' (Ibid.). This makes it hard to reconcile imaginative writing with a philosophy that thinks of itself as just another branch of the natural sciences (see the introduction). The problem becomes particularly astute when analytical philosophy impinges on literature, on its portrayals of the relationships human beings have with one another. Jane Adamson notes how literature's 'sense of life' differs from philosophy's 'abstract "conceptions" of life': 'A rich "sense" of the density of our lives involves bodily senses as well as mind, one's "whole soul" and imagination, emotions as well as thoughts' (1998:104). She argues that to obtain a 'sense of the density of our lives' we are not limited to the tools of philosophy, 'its arguments, formulae, reasons, or ideas' because such an understanding depends just as crucially on 'personal capabilities of experience, including imaginative experience' (Ibid.). Adamson goes on to quote John Keats and the quote seems to capture something of the sensibilities

of *aletheia*: 'I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning [sic] – and yet it must be. Can it be that the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections [?]'(Ibid.) As we shall see, it is because philosophy puts aside what literature employs that an attempt to yoke the two together will cause significant problems for literary studies.

If we return to the notion of 'sense', we make out that it informs all the other characteristics we assigned to truth as unconcealment. The 'sense of the world' a literary text communicates is not reducible to propositional or utilitarian knowledge, although authors necessarily construct their works out of propositions. Wittgenstein sheds light on this apparent paradox. According to Kathrin Stengel, Wittgenstein believed that 'there is, indeed, no other language than propositional language' (2004:616). However, if there are truths that 'lie outside the realm of what can be expressed *in* the words of propositional language', there might still be a way to express a numinous truth or truths '*with and through* words'. It is extremely difficult to describe how a writer creates a 'sense of things' because our descriptions are couched in the rhetoric of propositional knowledge. This makes it ironic that literary criticism or theory should seek to comprehend its subject matter – texts suffused with this 'sense of the world' – through the vocabulary of the hard sciences, a vocabulary constructed on the desire to reduce, pare down, dissect, analyze.

As Robert Eaglestone remarks, 'we seem very attached to a certain mode of analysis that seeks to understand an artwork as an object of productive knowledge and that relies on one understanding of truth and not upon the idea that an artwork is "world revealing'

(2004:606). He urges critics to 'defend a noninstrumental theory of truth' (Ibid.), but unfortunately gives no guidelines as to how such a theory should operate on a practical level: if 'institutionalised reading' is always, to some extent, involved in 'using' literature, it is hard to see how it could plausibly embrace a 'non-utilitarian' aesthetics while still remaining a critical discipline. In any event, it is clear that the 'sense of the world' captured in the fictional perspective is non-reductive and closely allied with the sympathetic imagination. This helps to explain why literary texts, unlike scientific treatises, are exceedingly hard to paraphrase: '[p]ropositions, as they are extensible "laterally" by elaboration, are . . . capable of being contracted into a summary form. But experiential knowledge cannot be summarized without a far more urgent sense of loss' (Nuttall, 1983: 76). It also explains why, according to the novelist Toni Morrison, she would not have written *Beloved* if she could have written its dust jacket copy (see David, 2000:122).

Aletheia and the communication model

I have already mentioned two problems concerning the concept of *aletheia*: first, it can lead to vague platitudes about literature and, second, it is not particularly predisposed to a critical practice. These difficulties demand a clearer understanding of poetic truth's relation to the literary process. In this regard, Roman Jakobson's influential 'communication model' can help orient the ideas we have explored in this chapter. The three components of the communication model are, of course, *Sender*, *Message*, and *Receiver*, respectively corresponding with the literary terms of *Author*, *Text*, and *Reader*

(see Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999:217). The Heideggerian theory of truth alerts us to various unconcealment-related questions we can ask of each of these components.

To begin with, *aletheia* allows us to consider how an author interacts with her culture. In this philosophy, if the author does not deal in passive reiterations of existing linguistic or conceptual material, then neither does her originality reside in completely spontaneous aesthetic emissions. Imaginative unconcealment is the result of metaphors or juxtapositions, in other words, it has to do with novel combinations and rapprochements with known realities: Heidegger's wording makes 'world-disclosure' seem like the discovery of buried treasure, and the creative artist is the person who goes to the trouble of digging through her language to drag possibilities and potentialities into daylight (see Cooper, 1997:241). To come to terms with her achievement, we need to know something about the cultural context before and after truth is 'cast forth' (Heidegger, 1971:74). We can ask what part an author played in the evolution of literary forms or ideas, without supposing that this history will necessarily lead towards a teleological end-point. The author is seen, at once, as embedded in a specific time and place and as the singular transformation of her age. Stanley Cavell reflects this attitude in his essay on Shakespeare, *Disowning Knowledge.* He writes:

> It is a particular man, call him Shakespeare, we are dealing with, and while it is doubtless true that a knowledge of the conventions he inherited is indispensable to the full understanding of his work, the idea that these conventions supply him with solutions to his artistic purposes, rather than problems or media within which those purposes are worked out, is as sensible

> as supposing that one has explained why a particular couple have decided to divorce by saying that divorce is a social form'.
>
> (1987:48)

There are many questions we can ask of fictional texts, but thinking about them in the light of *aletheia* allows for a consideration of their innovative features and their particularised claims to our attention. How does *this* work add a dimension to the world that would have been missing had someone not written it? What elements of the world does *this* work make us see, and in what ways do its visions differ in kind from the seeing and knowing embodied in *that* work, in those poems, in these plays? To conclude, there are the questions that map out the reader's role in the fashioning of imaginative unconcealment. After reading this text, where am I in relation to where I used to be? Where do I stand with this work, within this world? For Jonathan Bate 'works of art can themselves be imaginary states of nature, imaginary ideal ecosystems, and by reading them, by inhabiting them, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth' (2000:251). This is only one example of how a work can open onto/into the world, an opening it achieves because of the particular truths it manages to tell. As I have said, the possibility of a text being world-disclosure rests, in the final instance, on the reader's willingness to perceive it as such.

Perhaps the most intriguing implication of *aletheia* for readers and reading has to do with the *approach* to fiction it implicitly prescribes. For it should be obvious from the stress on non-utilitarian or irreducible truth that critical accounts which use texts to demonstrate

determinate points or as illustrations for philosophical arguments are not, from this viewpoint, standing in the right relation to the work under hand. This shall be a refrain of the readings to follow: the contemporary turn of moral philosophers to literature constantly betrays an impulse to employ literature in a manner that, for all its nuances and accuracy, fails to respond adequately to those parts of the fictional vision that challenge or complicate philosophical enquiry.

CHAPTER 2

Shakespeare, *King Lear*, and the concealment of unconcealment

Propositionality, irreducibility and the need for new metaphors

A play like *King Lear*[8] aptly demonstrates how a work of literature can 'un-conceal' facets of reality in the sense Heidegger described. As with all other linguistic texts, the play is manufactured from propositional language, yet it cleverly eludes being reduced to any single propositional truth. Ironically, the best evidence that this is the case comes from the many attempts by literary critics to provide just such a synopsis of the work's supposed 'meaning'. The results of these scholarly enquiries have not only been wildly divergent; they have also often been directly contradictory. As Ann Thompson's review of the history of *King Lear* criticism, simply entitled *King Lear* (1988), reveals, the tragedy has been variously interpreted as ultimately redemptivist and conclusively nihilist; resolutely Christian and vehemently 'anti-Christian'; as an unambiguously sexist and an uncompromising forerunner of modern feminism. 'How,' we might exasperatedly ask with Thompson, 'are such radical disagreements possible?'

I want to suggest that we are not just dealing with interpretive motes in theorists' eyes. *King Lear* generates mutually contradictory readings because something in the play's composition *enables* serious scholars with the best academic intentions to construct analyses of the work that, taken collectively, can make Shakespeare criticism feel like a fool's enterprise. I believe, furthermore, that Heidegger's idea of truth-as-unconcealment

[8] All references are to the Penguin edition of *King Lear*, edited by G.K. Hunter (London: Penguin, 1996).

can help us make sense of this and other aspects of the play. But if we are to truly engage with *King Lear* under the aspect of *aletheia*, we need to shift metaphors. We need to select different verbs to aid us in detecting what the tragedy *does*. Three brief examples will illustrate what I mean. First, consider this sentence, which encapsulates a view of *King Lear* that was popular until about the middle of the twentieth century: 'It is unselfish Christian love that redeems Lear and prepares him, not for a Stoic nirvana, but for a Christian heaven' (Campbell, in Campbell and Quinn, 1966:432). Next, consider this sentence from a critic writing in the 1980s: '[In the play] all moral structures, whether of natural order or Christian redemption, are invalidated by the naked fact of experience' (Brooke, quoted in Dollimore, 1984:82). Finally, consider a statement that, so I believe, comes closest to an appreciation of the tragedy as an enactment of Heideggerian unconcealment: 'almost any pair of elements one looks at in this play will reveal the essential characteristic of art . . . like two rhymed words, two verse lines, two metric feet, or two syllables, they will be alike in at least one respect and different in at least one other' (Booth, excerpted in Bloom, 1987:59). This ambiguity makes it more accurate to say that the play explores, rather than explains or argues about, the themes critics have detected within it.

If we say that *King Lear* 'explores' issues relating to Christianity, stoicism or Renaissance humanism, as opposed to asserting that the play 'argues' specific points in a doctrinaire manner, we have shifted metaphors and selected what I feel is the correct verb for the process of 'unveiling' that is 'at work in the work'. A more Heideggerian way of putting it would be to say that we have chosen to observe how the tragedy 'opens' a

world and populates that world with concepts, allowing us to observe what fortitude or the lack of fortitude might look like, what salvation or damnation might mean within particular circumstances and under specific contexts. This is how Heidegger defines what an artwork is capable of doing: '[b]y the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits' (1971:44). I take him to mean that a work of art exposes the contours of existence by foregrounding the sensual, emotional, linguistic, conscious, irrational reality in which human beings are grounded for the duration of their lives. This separates the 'story' art tells from 'factual' narratives that are wholly concerned with the mute exchanges between composites of matter, caught up in various diagrams of time and space. When Greenblatt writes of *King Lear* that it displays both 'distance and contemporaneity' (in Bloom, 1987:109), he comes close to espousing the type of aesthetics covered by *aletheia*.

Here we have to respond to the claim that commentators read their views into Shakespeare, so that it is not so much the play that figures in a world-disclosing fashion as readers who construct an extremely knowledgeable Shakespeare by scrutinising his works in a way that will yield ambiguous or complex or polyvalent readings. First, we need to emphasise that reader-response theory does not pose a challenge to any conception of *aletheia* because Heidegger emphatically locates the production of truth in the exchange between the artwork and its audience – the first chapter made this point (and see Young, 2001:50-52). The truth of Shakespeare is a truth engendered by the reciprocal workings of the three constituent parts of the literary 'communication' model.

Second, Jonathan Bate has convincingly argued that reader-responses, which produce diametrically opposed viewpoints, have to be conditioned in some way by equivocal elements within the text. One discovers this in readings of *King Lear*, for example, where interpretations of the same *scene or even line* of the play yield, not a proliferation of responses but, consistently, critical commentary on *opposed ends* of an interpretive spectrum (compare Goddard, 1987:10, with Dollimore, 1987: 74, for two completely different viewpoints regarding Cordelia). According to Bate, it was William Empson who, in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* first 'demonstrated critically that a text may have two contradictory meanings at once, something impossible under previous literary theory' (1997:315). Hence, Bate suggests, it becomes possible to think of literary texts, including *King Lear*, in a 'both/and' fashion, rather than an 'either/or' way, effectively positing these works as fictional embodiments of 'negative capability' (1997:331).

Bate's idea of the Shakespearean text as a kind of matrix generating polarities has a precise affinity with Heidegger's philosophy of primordial truth or *aletheia* 'setting the frame for a content' that might show up as ambiguous or dual-sided (Eaglestone, 2004: 600). The point is that critics have concentrated on describing only one side of what is actually 'a foray, a many-sided experiential "hypothesis," an adventure, a "suppose"' (Adamson, 1998:103). Consequently, they have fallen into the trap of thinking reductively about *King Lear*, slotting the play into convenient categories when the work is at pains to show just how problematic such formulations are. *King Lear* finds and forges connections between an encyclopaedic array of symbols, motifs, images, themes, and tropes. The play establishes links between the lives of savage animals and the

familial bonds which structure society, between the loss of one's possessions and the loss of sanity, between the absence of eyesight and the gain of insight, between the ability of language to measure, apportion, weigh, balance, divide, and the inability of words to seize and capture love, loss, betrayal, and sorrow. In what follows, I will try to stipulate how the tragedy disclosed particular truths about body and mind in such an arresting way, that many have attempted to hide rather than face this form of unconcealment.

King Lear, withdrawn and rewritten

The reception history of *King Lear* is, in part, a story about absences. For 'nearly two hundred years, this Shakespearean tragedy was only given in adapted versions featuring happy endings' (Dunton-Downer and Riding, 2004:356). We might think of two important vanishings regarding the play: the disappearance of the original text (or texts; *King Lear* is preserved in a Folio edition and a very different Quarto edition) from English stages during the eighteenth century, and the absence, within its rewrites, of a death scene for Cordelia. Something about the play inspired its concealment; perhaps the same aspect that prompted some critics of *Lear* to react with various degrees of revulsion. Charles Lamb thought that 'to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting' (cited in Campbell and Quinn, 1966:437). *Lear* is in bad taste, and the solution to bad manners is to hide them: Lamb thought the play should not be acted but he does make an interesting assessment of King Lear's monstrous moods, which he calls 'storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all

its vast riches' (Ibid.). What the representation of the decrepit body conceals – the body embodied by the actor on the stage – the written words, abstract and hygienic, reveal to the reader who might safely peruse them, safe from the distraction of the 'case of flesh and blood' (Ibid.). Yet, it is once we begin to think about the source of that distraction, ask ourselves why the sight of Lear so distracted Lamb, that we approach (I believe) one of the play's avenues into unconcealment. The question, then, is what the tragedy caused Lamb to see, to make him look away.

Imagined blindness and imaginative sight

Vision – in a literal and a figurative sense – is one of the central themes of *King Lear*, as Stanley Cavell recognised (1987:62). The play abounds in references to 'eyes' and 'sight', and the gain of insight and understanding through the loss of eyesight (in Gloucester's case) and the deterioration of the mind (in the case of Lear himself). Like Gloucester, one can have 'spectacles' to focus one's eyes and still not see the truth of a situation (1.2.36); alternatively, 'a man may see how this world goes with no eyes', as a deranged Lear tells the fool (4.6.148-9). The paradoxes of vision do not stay on the level of motifs, however. The scene of Gloucester's blinding directly engages the audience's own sense of seeing, exposes *their* visions to the sights of a sudden, jarring discontinuity in seeing, as Cornwall commands: 'Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly!' (4.1.86). *We*, of course, do *see* explicitly how horrifically possible it is to prevent eyes from looking, to reduce sensory engagement of the world to mere gross matter or 'vile jelly'.

An earlier generation of commentators castigated the tragedy for its bad taste in *displaying* the blinding scene with its messy, 'pulp fiction-style' emphasis on the bloody facts of the body. The play reminds us of the ever-present but unacknowledged possibility that bodies can turn from extensions of the mind to things that rupture and bleed and, in thus breaking apart, can distract the mind from the pursuit of normal perception. This is disarming knowledge because our bodies work best when we are not aware of them. Our everyday approach to the body is somewhat utilitarian, and Heidegger thought we only truly *look* at implements when they malfunction: 'Heidegger speaks of situations in which some kind of breakdown interrupts the smooth flow of everyday existence as the point at which [the] world stands out of its usual inconspicuousness. . . . The car, for example, fails to start. In such a situation . . . one is likely to become suddenly aware of the network of life-connections that is one's world and in which the car plays a vital role' (Young, 2001:37).

In the same way, the imaginary interruption of the workings of the body on the stage makes for sensory recoil, as the fleshly nature of the eye asserts itself, blindingly. This disruption can leave a bad taste in the mouth: 'The blinding of Gloucester, in a scene of more than Senecan savagery and horror, is not to the taste of a modern audience', wrote Oscar Campbell in 1966 (p.432). Yet the body can grant its own visions. Stephen Greenblatt notes that if 'Shakespeare explores the extremes of the mind's anguish and the soul's devotion, he never forgets that his characters have bodies as well, bodies that have needs, cravings, and terrible vulnerabilities', but the 'body in *King Lear* is a site not only

of abject misery, nausea and pain but also of care and a nascent moral awareness' (2000:1108).

The play refuses to acknowledge a divide between intellectual knowledge and tactile understanding: 'the relationship between Gloucester's physical eyeballs and his metaphorical insight does not clearly subordinate the latter to the former' writes Hunter in his introduction to the Penguin edition (1996:24). And the work does not have to entertain such a subordination, because it is a feature of the play that it *enacts* its chosen metaphors. The *symbolism* of the blinding is concretely manifest in the graphic *sense* of the blinding. I think we diminish the play if we use it to point to a truth independent of or beyond its surface: truth is what it means for Lear or the fool to speak *thus*, for Cordelia to die *as such*, for the language to compel a distinct sense of things in such and such a way. Jonathan Bate summarises Wittgenstein's idea of the language game as follows: 'let us attend to the particular thing we are doing with words here, let us not attempt to make language instrumental in a passage to some higher realm of metaphysics' (1997:323). This is why Samuel Johnson's shock at first witnessing the death of Cordelia (see Adamson, 1998:107) is not simply an emotional response but a testimonial to the experiential truth of the play, for its ability to move its audiences (if, indeed, they are moved) is an effect of truth as unconcealment. This is hardly a profound insight but not one that a theoretical analysis of the play should fail to take into account. Simon Haines rightly warns against 'the fundamental error' of 'separating the self into a part which feels and a part which fears, controls, measures and rules the feelings' (1998:35), and

arguably the play itself militates against such a separation: 'The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (5.3.321-2).

Madness and disruption

Shakespeare took the story of King Lear from a previous play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters*, and comparing his version of the tragedy with *The History of King Leir* helps us to understand the creative changes he introduced as he reworked his source material. Most noticeably, the original play concluded happily, but Shakespeare also supplemented the narrative with the intermittent spells of madness Lear suffers from the close of Act 2 onwards. The madness is as quintessentially Shakespearean as its equivalent (or pseudo-equivalent) in *Hamlet*. There are the streams of gibberish that might not be gibberish at all (see, for example, 3.4.102-5) and the ambiguous wisdom sayings – has the king's mind suddenly cleared (or 'opened') or is his insanity at its most insidious when his deliberations *appear* sound? Madness fractures the categories on which language seeks to get a grip, and the play makes much of the resulting indeterminacy and confusion. Speaking of his daughters, a ranting Lear condemns them for not being 'men o' their words. They told me I was everything' (4.6.103-4), and we are tempted to think of Lear's own words as a nonsensical misattribution of gender to Regan and Goneril, until we remind ourselves that he is quite literally speaking the truth: they truly are *not* men of their words. The king is mad; the king is extremely perspicacious; the king's madness allows him to be extremely perspicuous; the king's perspicacity is a front for his madness. Thus, the play can cause

that ‘we lack a hold on categories’ and it can show ‘that categories lack the power to hold reality’ (Booth, 1987:60).

Another example demonstrates what Jonathan Bate refers to as Shakespeare’s dramatic ‘ambidextrousness’ (1997:328). The first scene of Act 1 concentrates on Lear’s disavowal of Cordelia after she refuses to take part in his egomaniacal love test. This makes it easy for a reader to assume that Lear and the two deceitful sisters are, for the moment at least, acting the villains, while the upstanding Cordelia is being her usual, exemplary self. As critics have pointed out, however, this characterization of the scene does not do justice to the considerable complexity involved in their exchanges. Wayne Booth notes that, for all the overt differences between the attitudes of the two characters, Cordelia’s statements on love are ‘only a variation of Lear’s’ (1987:67). He is referring to the king’s desire to see love measured in copious amounts of rhetoric, a desire met by the flattery of Regan and Goneril, as apparently contrasted with Cordelia’s declaration that she loves him ‘according to [her] bond / No more or less’ (l.93). The play invites us to see Cordelia’s modestly proportioned sentiments as an honest counterpoint to the excessive speeches of the sisters, but this can lead to our overlooking the fact that Cordelia speaks of love in the language of ‘property and ownership’ – just like her father. The play is filled with comparable incidents wherein characters and their actions are imbued with a dimensionality that massively complicates synopsis-style evaluations. Booth accordingly calls *King Lear* a ‘triumph of both endurance or duration and of indefiniteness or “indefinition”’ (cited in Thompson, 1988:42).

Of course, not all readers will be impressed by the play's preference for ambiguities and superabundant tropes. But taking note of all these factors *does* have consequences for literary criticism. For one thing, it should make readings of the play less dogmatic about what the tragedy 'means'. Second, it militates against the idea that *King Lear* functions like a traditional philosophical argument, posing grand existential problems and then attempting to 'solve' them. Unlike philosophy, *King Lear* seems less in love with the acquisition of wisdom than with the effects of asking questions. When the mad king wants to know what the 'cause of thunder' is (3.4.148), should we expect the play to provide him with an answer? If it fails to comply, does this render the work *unsuccessful* at conveying truth, or does it instead suggest that, in the words of Singer and Dunn, 'the truth found in literature is somehow qualitatively different from the truth as it is presented elsewhere' (2000:7)? An *aletheia*-based reading of *King Lear* will emphasise how the play *already* imparts valuable knowledge simply by addressing itself to the possibility that a human being can demand an account of purpose, by means of this and other comparable questions. And King Lear is certainly not shy of asking them: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (1.4.225); 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?' (5.3.306-7).

Gestalts and ambiguities

Bate uses the famous duck-rabbit illustration (see appendix 2) to visualise the 'determinate indeterminacy' of the Shakespearean 'language-game'. His insights derive primarily from Wittgenstein, who was reportedly fascinated by the picture. Bate derives

two ‘rules’ for interpreting the ‘language game’ from this gestalt-image. Both rules are relevant to the concept of *aletheia*, since the work of art (as defined by Heidegger) itself functions like a gestalt. The first ‘law of Shakespeare’ is that truth is ‘aspectual’ and ‘not singular’ (Ibid: 327). *Aletheia* obviously allows for a plurality of perspectives since the kind of knowledge involved in a world-disclosure is ‘ever non-objective’ and not reducible to propositional statements, which can only be ‘factual’ or ‘false’. The second ‘law’ has to do with the *performance* of this aspectual truth. Shakespearian plays do not operate in the mode of propositional knowledge; instead, they run like vivid enactments of Wittgenstein’s philosophical method: ‘to choose an example and work it through with close linguistic attention; the working through did not *lead to a conclusion*, it *performed the point*’ (p.324). Shakespearean performativity implies that his plays will impede assessments of their ‘worth’ or ‘truth’ in assertoric terms; to put it crudely, the ‘point’ of *King Lear* is *King Lear*. The idea of a performative truth is synonymous with the experiential quality of artistic truth, as covered by *aletheia*. Thus, for instance, Timothy Clark in his book *Heidegger* attempts a ‘thought-experiment’ to find out whether *Hamlet* will reduce to categorical or propositional statements (one of Clark’s examples: ‘*Hamlet* gives a close analysis of the nature of kinship’), but the ‘experience’ of *Hamlet* (like the experience of colour) keeps slipping away. After a few of these statements, he admits defeat: ‘we might reckon that the “unclarified” version exceeds the mode of merely propositional truth, without being merely untrue or false’ (2002:45). As the final chapter indicates, a like-minded awareness of the performative aspects of imaginative unconcealment will have practical implications for literary criticism and literary theory.

Philosophical reductionism and imaginative breadth

Jane Adamson contrasts the philosopher's desire for 'neat' arguments with the 'untidiness' of morally demanding situations in Shakespeare's fictions. She writes:

> In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Troilus and Cressida* or *King Lear*, the hurly-burly of moral experience cannot be neatly categorised into public/private, fact/value, vice/virtue, impersonal/personal, and so on: these works explore the blurriness and leakiness of such supposedly watertight compartments. . . . The plays' tough scepticism makes it the more ironic that they have so often been subjected to over-neat, casuistical interpretations which annul their drama of questioning and reduce them to some unilateral statement, 'message', position. (1998:88)

Adamson's comment underscores the irreducibility of a drama like *King Lear*. The play undoubtedly has use-value: one thinks of Aristotle's belief that tragic works induce catharses in their audiences. The question we face is whether this use-value exhausts its truth, so that the play is finally a sophisticated form of therapy. I believe a fair assessment of *King Lear* will preclude such a therapeutic approach: if anything, the proliferation of ambiguities worries the psyche, as Johnson's distress at re-reading the play's conclusion demonstrates. A more reasonable handling of the play begins with its expository elements: it assumes that the work looks at the world and wants to know how consistently the tragedian maintains this looking. Perhaps the consistency of the poetic vision *is* the

moral an ethical philosopher aspires to uncover. Joseph Conrad certainly thinks it is the task of the novelist to 'snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life [and to] hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood' (2000:1956). We have already mentioned that much of the mood of *King Lear*, much of its sense, has to do with the dispersal of sense, with the mood of madness. What we now have to consider is how this madness serves to 'disclose its inspiring secret', as Conrad would say (Ibid.). Note that the disclosure is not of 'some unilateral statement' but of a mystery that remains, in the light of perception, mysteriously compounded, made up of 'the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment' (Ibid.).

Madness broadens Lear's mind until, paradoxically, it touches on the bodily needs of other living beings. As a supreme monarch, he 'discloses the fantasy of disembodiment which lies at the heart of the most grossly material of powers' (Eagleton, 2003:181). The bouts of insanity adjust this vision until his imagination encompasses what it might feel to feel for another. Delivered to the unmerciful elements, Lear confesses to the fool that his 'wits begin to turn' (3.6.1150), and then betrays the shift in sensibility when he asks him if he is cold. Gradually, the king is drawn into an awareness of the fact that the bodies of others mirror what demands and sufferings he is able to identify within his own flesh:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you

> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel . . .

The knowledge is dearly won: the senses speak eloquently because they have been deprived of the comforts that would turn the mind from contemplating their physicality; as sudden lack of clothing or shelter reinforces the skin's capacity to painfully register the cold, and as the 'unfed sides' proclaim their own existence (see Eagleton, 2003:184). And Cordelia's death will remind Lear of the most basic property a body can possess: 'I know when one is dead, and when one lives. She's dead as earth' (5.3.260). His mind finally faces the limit set by the imagination, the point where words double back on themselves:

> 'Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never!' (ll.307-8).

One cannot overstate the role of the imagination in the author's construction of these scenes or the reader or viewer's appreciation and understanding of them. Fiction operates in tandem with the imagination. Imaginative writing of the kind practised by Shakespeare often concentrates on the fabrication of personalities, voices that cause their auditors or readers to impute emotions and thoughts to the fictitious beings who reside 'in and beyond' the spoken language. It is obvious, then, that characters are products of a sympathetic mindset, a mindset that both the author and the reader of a text employ to make the configurations words need to become characters or events, to 'resemble' or 'reconstruct' reality. The limits of this sympathy seem to be the limits of the imagination itself, which is why our imaginations are often thought of in terms of freedom or liberality. Thus, fiction's mode of truth telling mirrors the extent to which the author of a

work indulges in this freedom to 'speak' the world, and the freedom her readers grant her in pursuing this vision. Granting imaginative freedom to an author is an ethical act on the reader's behalf. Allowing a text to disrupt or question our thinking is an ethical act, and a deeply sympathetic concession to a work, because it exposes the reader to the vulnerabilities of having his world encounter a realm that may feel irrevocably alien or confusing or in need of critical adjustments or even abolitionary measures.

Making sense of the imaginative unconcealment *King Lear* offers, we need first to come to terms with the freedom of the text (the freedom we grant) to *inhabit*, rather than admonish, idealize or serve. This freedom works like a feedback loop: in bestowing freedom upon a text, the reader grants himself the opportunity to freely inhabit the world his attitude, his mode of imagining and thinking, has opened up for that text. *King Lear* depends for its revelatory force on this liberality: '[i]t is a sign of *King Lear*'s astonishing freedom from orthodoxy that it refuses to offer any of the conventional answers to [the] question [of suffering], answers that serve largely to conceal or deflect the mourner's anguish' (Greenblatt, 2000:1108). Such an approach can undoubtedly be challenging; literature has a tendency – born of its disclosing creativity – to unsettle or question or clap the eyes onto unsavoury sights, sights they would perhaps flee from rather than see. Fiction might tease us with hints that the riddle will soon be unravelled, promise us a world with a uniform appearance, but even its solutions and conclusions may have a way of destabilizing our viewpoints: 'Shakespeare tantalizes us with the comfort to be had from ideologically Procrustean beds to which he refuses to tailor his matter' (Booth, 1987:61). When the matter comes to an end, when Cordelia dies and Lear dies with her

corpse in his arms, we might feel discomforted rather than relieved. The play ends very determinately and concludes with maddening indeterminacy. This creates a problem for one-sided interpretations of the close of *King Lear*. And perhaps imaginatively attending to the ambiguities in a fictional text (and the characteristic is certainly not limited to Shakespeare) will make it harder for a reader to put a work to use in the service of any particular ideology (which is not to deny that texts can be complicit in ruling ideologies). If it is conceded that a text can broaden the mind, then it is conceivable that it might extend the imagination beyond the hold of any single world-view, any single ideology.

On the level of ideas, *King Lear* surely *does* betray an investment in the discourse of the mortal body. Peter Conrad explains that the 'characters of *King Lear* can be hurt because their living depends on softly pulpy, physical extremities, on limbs or organs too frail and too easily restrained or damaged' (2003:171). Knowledge of these physical frailties can inspire deeds of great cruelty, directed toward the easily wounded flesh, but imaginatively indwelling another's skin can also stir an innate propensity for caring. As Stephen Greenblatt writes in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the play contains many 'signs' of pity for suffering bodies, which can be 'as simple as offering one's hand to someone who is frightened' (2000:1108).

If the text extends its hand, or hands, what would happen if one grasped it? What happens to sight when, like Gloucester, one depends on the eyes of another to make one's way through the dark? Adamson believes the result is a reading founded on the 'Blakean claim about the need to cleanse the doors of perception' (1998:89). She locates in both

Blake and Shakespeare an awareness that 'different eyes see different worlds' and that a change of worldview can involve something as dramatic as imaginatively merging with another self. Many readers might agree that the truth of literature is most profoundly at work when a reader puts on the knowledge of what it *truly* feels like to live another life, move as part of another world. Moral philosophy would be untroubled by these ideas, but following them through to their logical conclusion will reveal a potentially insurmountable problem for an 'overly neat' ethical philosophy: if fiction can inspire fellow feeling it can also glamorise or even celebrate a complete lack of compassion. This is a consequence of its *showing* the world, as opposed to what the world *should be*. This is yet another consequence of fictive freedom.

Jonathan Bate notes Tolstoy's revulsion at the sheer indecency of Shakespeare's plays in general and the amoral pessimism of *King Lear* in particular. Tolstoy's mistake, so Bate reasons, is that he expected moral sincerity from the play, but paradoxically it is the play's artistic *insincerity* that arguably ensures its truth as an imaginative 'world-disclosure': if the poet is talented enough to 'pretend keenly to feel what he expresses' he can 'pretend equally keenly to feel the opposite things which he also expresses. He can infect the spectator with the feeling of what it is like to be Goneril as well as that of what it is like to be Lear' (1997:150). Shakespeare creates provocative portraits of human beings coming to terms with their humanity, and convincing visions of psychopathically insensitive individuals like Iago and Edgar. The blinding of Gloucester again serves as an apt symbol for the peculiarities of the imaginative appetite: we want to look away, but do we really? What horrid fascination arrests our eyes, what secret desire keeps them

clapped on the world of carnage on the stage? 'Exuberance is Beauty,' the motto of William Blake, suitably captures the aesthetic capaciousness of the play, which is as adroit at wreaking havoc as it is at making contexts for mercy to show its face. The third chapter investigates how this dangerous exuberance in literature will influence the construction of ethical readings of fiction.

Imaginative world-making in *King Lear*

I have touched on the irreducibility of *King Lear* and on the inadequacy of attempts to translate its achievements into fixed propositions. What I want to discuss in the remainder of the chapter is Shakespeare's creative innovations, so as to offer proof of Bowie's statement that innovation in art can facilitate the 'articulation' of the world (see the introduction). Stephen Greenblatt quotes Yeats's 'phrase for the quintessential Shakespearian effect', namely the 'emotion of multitude' (2000:792) as particularly descriptive of *1Henry IV* but it relates just as easily to the varied psychological landscapes in *King Lear*. In this play, Shakespeare employs a technique discernible in many of his works: populating an imagined space with characters who seem to be contrastive polarities, but who are actually mirrors of one another (we have already seen an example of this with Lear and Cordelia). *King Lear*, then, will very often disclose how close to its opposite any given stance truly is, and this adds to its deprecation of univocal propositional knowledge. A. D. Nuttall explains the creative process behind this perspective as based on the insertion of a 'latent system of allusions' beneath the grand dramatic sweep of a play, a system which, 'instead of corroborating the stark opposition of good and evil in the play's main action, subtly undermines it' (1983:128).

Moments before dying, Lear interrupts his 'set-piece speech' to make a very bathetic request: 'Pray you, undo this button' (l.309). For Jonathan Bate the button is itself an unconcealment: he writes that 'Shakespeare is most Shakespeare' when he incorporates such details in his works, because 'it is the art of immediacy which memorably impresses that sense upon our sensibilities' (1997:152). One can dispute this characterisation of the playwright but it is surely interesting that Shakespeare intertwines an exploration of a universal truth – that death is forever – with such a slight, insignificant action. Now, heroes were dying tragic deaths millennia before Shakespeare set out to write *King Lear*. But in the undoing of this button, tragic pathos acquires a different kind of conviction, one that is (arguably) all the more convincing for being out of line with the vast sentiments of the classic model. This is a grubby death; it involves the sordid and the commonplace.

The button, this tiny trace, is part of the process whereby Shakespeare (and other Elizabethan-Jacobean playwrights) introduced changes to the stuff of tragedy, bringing it down to earth, so to speak. Shakespeare, so Greenblatt imagines, 'loved to reveal the presence of ordinariness in the midst of the extraordinary' (2004:388). Ironically, in this new fictive dispensation the world stands revealed as a familiar and well-known place, cluttered with indispensable trivialities and small tokens of intimacy. Narrative begins to take on a 'domestic' tone, because stories are no longer simply imposed on characters; instead, they flow from the dilemmas and allegiances of human relationships: '*Othello* is the story of a hero who went into a house' (1983:134). The irresolvable 'messiness' of

much of life is brought to light, including how it can, catastrophically, end at any moment.

King Lear provides its own commentary on the imagination's skill at conjuring up a world. This comes in Act 4, scene 6, where Edgar, still incognito, leads blind Gloucester to what the latter believes is a Dover cliff (actually, the same heath on which the king's troubles played themselves out). Gloucester wants to climb the 'cliff, whose high and bending head / looks fearfully in the confined deep' to hurl himself to death from its top (4.1.74-75). Edgar deceives his father by telling him that they are ascending the 'horrible steep' cliff side, although Gloucester rightly wonders at the level feeling of the ground. Edgar goes on to pretend amazement at his father's manifest inability to hear the sound of the surging sea, and speculates that his sense of smell and hearing became impaired with the loss of his vision – an ironic reversal of the usual gain in auditory clarity that accompanies the absence of sight, and which Gloucester has evidently undergone:

> Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speakest
> In better phrase and matter than thou didst
>
> (4.6.8-9)

Edgar needs to convince Gloucester of the reality of their surroundings, apparently to work some kind of change in the old man's attitude (we will recall that Gloucester falsely believed Edgar had plotted against him, which led to Edgar's adopting a disguise in the first place): 'Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it' (4.6.34-5). The plan involves a simulation of the world in which the son's voice supplies the perspective from the make-believe hilltop, drawing attention to the 'sight' of crows and jackdaws that

appear, from this dizzying height, as small as beetles (ll.13-14). Shakespeare employs one of his trademark conventions: the rich imaginative workings of the mind *within* the play's context become metaphors for the 'external' nature of the theatrical experience. For like Gloucester our visions are guided through language to perceive, not a bare stage, but a vast cliff with mushroom-gatherers dangling from its sides (ll.14-6), and 'fishermen, that walk upon the beach' but who 'appear like mice' (ll.16-7). In this scene, we have a make-believe reality housing another make-believe reality but, ironically, the second flight of fancy only serves to disclose an 'ordinary', sublunary reality. Again, Greenblatt produces a choice quote when he writes that Shakespeare 'understood, and he wanted the audience to understand, that the theater [sic] had to have . . . both the visionary flight and the solid, ordinary earthiness' (2004:53).

Edgar's visionary flight of fancy persuades his father that the cliff is real and Gloucester proceeds to jump, 'falling forward' as the stage direction would have us believe. This provides Edgar with the opportunity to lift his father's spirits and he does this through another convenient fabrication: assuming, now, the role of a stranger who happened to see the Earl plunge down the cliff, he rushes to his side and tells him that he saw a demon guide Gloucester to the summit, before magically vanishing. Gloucester's 'perpendicularly'-shaped leap, has miraculously left him injured: 'Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air, / So many fathoms down precipitating, / Thou'dst shivered [cracked] like an egg; but thou dost breathe; / Hast heavy substance; bleed'st not; speak'st; art sound' (ll.49-52). The insight echoes Lear's experience: under the spell of an illusion (madness in Lear's case; fantasy in Gloucester's), the sense of the body, of being

embodied or encased in this 'worldly' material, is enigmatically reinscribed in the mind of the 'deluded' subject. Gloucester should have been dashed to pieces but was not; the absence of imagined bruises restores the feeling of what it means to have flesh fortunate enough to have withstood 'heaven's plagues' (4.2.65).

Cordelia, we know, is *not* as fortunate. Fate will grant Lear the restoration of his sanity, centred in his acknowledgement of his daughter and the faithful Earl of Kent:

> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
> And to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful; for I am manly ignorant
> What place this is; and all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
> Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia. (4.7.60-71)

Lear's recognition of the living Cordelia is followed, comparatively quickly, by his recognition (cited above) that she is 'as dead as earth', though he continues (imaginatively, one might add) to test the possibilities: 'Lend me a looking-glass; / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then she lives' (5.3.261-2). If a careful scrutiny of her lips comes to nothing, 'it is certainly extraordinary,' as Anne Thompson remarks, ' that Shakespeare does not make it clear beyond critical dispute whether Lear is supposed to see signs of life or signs of death on Cordelia's lips' (1988:40). The play

carries its frustrating ambiguity through to the very end, and continues to disturb understanding when it seems, intransigently, to *insist* that *something* discloses itself in Lear's dying words, although we cannot tell what it is: 'Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!' (5.3.309-10).

The body of Cordelia, housing its mystery, present on stage and within the pages of the play, impervious to even the most incisive attempts to pierce through Lear's words, is an absence in the revised versions of *King Lear*. In Tate's revision, there is no need to go on looking at the words of the play, because the living Cordelia has invalidated them. The body of the dead Cordelia, however, reveals more eloquently, what is at stake in looking, looking, and looking away from the play as a shocked Johnson elected to do. For two hundred years, performances of the tragedy turned away from the text and the body at the end of it. Heidegger, we know, considered human existence 'a life story unfolding between birth and death' (Guignon, 1993:7). Perhaps the absenteeism of Cordelia's death proclaims with a force not even the sight of her body could match, what knowledge the body of the text discloses: knowledge that would keep us from looking at it, showing ourselves in the act of looking away.

The art of *King Lear*

We should never forget that *aletheia* is, in principle, part of a philosophy of aesthetics. If Heidegger is correct, objects or experiences become art *if* someone recognises their potential for disclosing or unveiling reality. Of course, this is not meant to be an

exhaustive definition of art; Heidegger makes it clear in *The Origin of the Work of Art* that he is not dealing with discussions of beauty, which he sees as a subjective effect of *aletheia* (see Cooper, 1997:234). But, as the first chapter suggested, truth-as-unconcealment has several virtues: because it describes what art *does*, it escapes an elitist aesthetic and leaves the appreciating spectator free to decide *which* artefacts 'open up' the world in an imaginative, innovative manner. The idea, then, is that a reader, viewer, or auditor constructs art by choosing to respond to the work's potential for exposing a reality beyond the compilation of facts and forces to which our grammars would otherwise be restricted. Perhaps we can even imagine a person who is able to view *everything* as a disclosive revelation. For the purpose of this chapter, however, it was enough to consider a single play – *King Lear* by William Shakespeare – with the notion of *aletheia* in mind.

This has meant approaching the play as a legitimate recipient of aesthetic contemplation. Such a perspective might strike many readers as a very natural attitude to adopt towards this tragedy, but literary theory has been noticeably sceptical about an over-awed appraisal of the work's aesthetic attributes as 'proof' of its putative literary superiority, especially when these 'instinctive' reactions are offered without properly substantiated motivations. But it remains the case that a considered account of the text as an artwork is conspicuously absent from the thousands of readings that have appeared in the past two decades. Kiernan Ryan, in a 'retrospective' essay about the critical treatments of *King Lear* from 1980 to 2000, laments what he calls their 'blatant flaw' (2002:10). This would be 'an abject neglect of *Lear*'s qualities as a work of art' and, concomitantly, 'a failure to

engage in detail with the poetic language and dramatic form that are indivisible from its identity as a source of pleasure and an object of study' (Ibid.). Perhaps one can begin to remedy this oversight by introducing *aletheia* into the picture.

CHAPTER 3

The Portrait of a Lady and the ethics of unconcealment

As the introduction to this study suggests, contemporary literary theory actively pursues the idea of an ethics of reading. Theory shares a concern for questions of morality and the purpose of life with its close ally in the humanities, the discipline of philosophy. Critics sometimes refer to the resurgence of ethical debate in these two fields as a 'double turn towards ethics and literature' (Eskin, 2004:597). 'Double' relates to the fact that academic cross-fertilization is taking place: literary theorists look to moral philosophy for insights regarding fictional texts, and moral philosophers turn to works of literature to illuminate problems about human responsibility, kinship, and choice, to name just a few examples. The notion of a 'turn' is more controversial: theorists have pointed out that 'ethics' have been on literary studies' agenda since at least the days of F.R. Leavis (see Eskin, 2004:559; and Eaglestone, 2004:596-7), and that so-called anti-ethical theories, such as deconstruction, only appear antithetical to ethics from a tendentious, reactionary point of view. Nevertheless, there is widespread consensus that philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond are to the current critical scene what post-structuralist thinkers like Derrida and Foucault were to a previous generation of theory (see Parker, 1998:1-17). How does the ethical turn impinge on the concept of *aletheia*? The first part of this chapter considers the question by examining the claims of theorists and philosophers alike. The novel *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James[9] serves as the fictional testing ground for these assumptions about ethics, reading and imaginative

[9] All page references are to the Penguin edition of the novel, edited by Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin, 1986).

literature. The chapter's second part discusses the notion that truth as *aletheia* is identical to ethics. In both parts, the figure of Martha Nussbaum plays an important role, primarily because her work on Henry James has sparked the greatest reaction from literary critics.

Neo-Aristotelianism

Nussbaum, and the philosophers who share her standpoint, begin their enquiries into morality with Aristotle's famous question: 'How should I live my life? (see Weston, 2001:84-5). Neo-Aristotelian interpreters of literature ask this question of fictional texts, repudiating the divide between creative writing and philosophical argument. In Nussbaum's view, a work of literature is actually a very sophisticated philosophical argument, and its departures from the conventions and style of logical reasoning have to do with the epistemological or metaphysical problems a fictional text addresses. According to her, there are 'some views of the world and how one should live in it . . . that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language . . . more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars' (1990:3). This 'allusive' language is, of course, the discourse of imaginative literature, and Nussbaum's characterization of it dovetails very neatly with our discussion of literary knowledge in the first chapter. This makes it all the more ironic that she seeks to transport literature into the realm of philosophy, a realm Heidegger insists deals with descriptions and propositions and not with the disclosures demanded by works of art. The problem, in other words, lies in the belief that literature treats of the same issues as philosophy in a different way, when the

truth of literature actually consists in its worldview being a whole world away, comprising an entirely different *mode* of knowledge. Having said this, a closer look at Nussbaum's idea of literature's relation to the truth is in order. She writes:

> one of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game . . . is that it speaks . . . *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections . . . it searches for patterns of possibility – of choice, and circumstance, and [their interaction] that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities'.
>
> (1990:171)

At first glance, Nussbaum seems to find support for her view in the novels of James, who did confirm a link between his own fiction and philosophy – James depreciated the novels of Dickens, complaining that the latter was 'nothing of a philosopher' (Weisbuch, 1998:104). However, a close examination of his fiction suggests that his *modus operandi* was less to reach philosophical solutions through fiction, than to explore fictional problems through the gaze of philosophy. This might not seem like a profound distinction but, as Jane Adamson argues, it has very important consequences for a treatment of the Jamesian aesthetic. She highlights the difference between James's approach to the 'problematic' of the moral life and Nussbaum's by comparing a description the novelist gives of his self-appointed task with the interpretation of that task by the philosopher. Nussbaum thinks the novelist achieves truth by *clearing away* the complications of the world, or life: 'Responsible lucidity can be wrested from the darkness only by painful, vigilant effort, the intense scrutiny of particulars' (1990: 148). This purports to be an

interpretation of James's comment that the 'effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in face of the constant force that makes for muddlement' (Ibid.). Nussbaum thinks James wants to wrest truth and light from the confusion of the world, lead the captive minds from Plato's cavern and into the 'muddle-free' clarity of a responsible life-course. Adamson disagrees: she sees James as being *in love* with muddlement, acknowledging that it is the very stuff the world is made of, which is why he considers it a 'constant force' and not an obstacle for fiction to overcome. This is why he can follow his reference to artistic tension with an appraisal of the 'muddled state' as 'one of the very sharpest of . . . realities' (cited in Adamson, 1998: 96). The two sentences describe different approaches: '[o]ne is evocative, the other prescriptive and admonitory' (Ibid: 94).

There is a difference between the question, 'how should I live my life' and the question, 'what does life look like?' I think the imaginative dimension is closer to offering answers to the second question than it is to meeting expectations inherent in the first. Of course, some fictional texts do engage with moral problems (especially in the case of the novels of Henry James) but it seems like irresponsible reading to insist that literature solves or even wants to solve the issues it may often, with great assiduity, *explore*. A major difficulty for a purely ethical reading of literature is that it amounts to yet another instrumental approach, yet another appropriation of fiction to deliver answers that are somehow independent of the particularity of the work. Moreover, the answers have a tendency to be inflections of the same 'positivist assertion' – as Eaglestone has written, using literature to answer Aristotle relies 'on an idea that literature offers a certain sort of

truth . . . which can offer – or be made to offer – axioms or propositions . . . a sort of "the moral of the story is . . . claim (perhaps, "be sympathetic").' (2004:605). Thinking about a text's capacity for imaginative unconcealment means thinking about the way in which it could (depending on its particular vision of the world) complicate categories, as the reading of *King Lear* showed. The shift from 'prescriptive' to 'evocative' is a shift from one category to another, one mood to another and one way of reading to another.

A related difficulty concerns the inability of Nussbaum's ethical approach to accommodate the challenges of fictional texts which are not novels. She admits that lyric poems raise 'different issues' from the ones she is interested in (1990:46), prompting Eaglestone to wonder whether her writings really engage with 'literature' or with a rather narrow 'subset of the literary' (2004:604). If this is indeed the case, her readings can hardly be relevant to general literary aesthetics. Think of the poem glossed in chapter one, Robert Frost's *The Ovenbird*. How does this answer to my need to know how to live the good life? If the poem fails to deliver an overt moral, should this 'lack' devalue it for me? Perhaps the moral of a poem is the poem itself, which leads one to consider whether narratives might not be moral(s) in the same sense. In other words, a fictional text might fulfil an ethical obligation simply by existing, by 'being', a sentiment the previous chapter hinted at. I mentioned there how closely involved an imaginative reading strategy is with the bestowal of freedom, and that granting a text this freedom is an ineluctably ethical response. Such a response recognises the semantic density of fiction and aspires to 'do justice' to elements within a work that might upset what appear to be the main argument a philosopher seeks to extract from it. Arguably, reading in this way makes the

most sense not only of Jamesian fiction but of many authors whose fortunes rise and fall with changes in moral attitudes. Thus, the novelist Angela Carter writes of D.H. Lawrence that it 'is impossible for any English writer in this century to evade the great fact of D.H. Lawrence, but taking him seriously a novelist is one thing, and taking him seriously as a moralist is quite another' (quoted in Wood, 1998:133). As Carter recognised, taking texts seriously is not the same as using them didactically.

Philosophical reading

Cora Diamond notes that philosophers are 'trained or encouraged' to read in certain ways and not in others: '*We* look for arguments, for theories, for supporting data or counter examples' (1998:49). From a Heideggerian perspective, the danger of this methodology is that its presumptions condition its results. The analytical encounter with literature produces knowledge, but the knowledge has little bearing on the truth of literature, because its truths are propositional and reductive, relating not to the 'world-disclosure' of the work but to distillates of its factual contents. Literature comes to seem like an elaborate and rather artificial way of saying what a brief synopsis could communicate. The introduction already suggested how, increasingly, modern philosophy operates within the framework of the natural sciences and Diamond confirms that the philosopher or theorist 'does not speak to us as someone who must respond with creative imagination and fulness [sic] of feeling. S/he is one or other kind of detached investigator, and is often modelled more or less on the scientist; his or her language, and the formal features of what s/he writes may be more or less modelled on the modes of writing of scientists' (Ibid:56). She then goes on to provide evidences for the distinction between creative

writing and philosophical argument, concentrating on the notion we have already discussed, that of *particularity*.

Particularity, for Diamond and Adamson, powerfully corresponds with another vital aspect of *aletheia*, the 'sense of a proposition' as opposed to the attributes of the proposition itself. Literature flees from the generalities philosophy aims to establish; in this sense a fictional text is closer to the truth of our relations with other human beings: 'the sense of the particular person, of who he is, who she is, of *this* person, is central in our relations to friends, parents, lovers' (1998:59). It is because the literary imagination exercises itself through particulars (Cordelia; the ovenbird; this poem; that novel) that it speaks in a different voice from a system bent on mapping the world in equations or diagrams. Diamond calls novels 'texts engaged in the shaping of the language of particularity' (Ibid: 64). A work of imaginative literature is a kind of witness to the particularity of truth; fiction has always named its subject matter. It is because fiction *names* instead of 'appending predicates' (p.59) that Isabel Archer inhabits one world and Cordelia another, so that the subtlest change in circumstances of *this* character produces disclosures and sets of disclosures decidedly distinct from a comparable change in the fate of *that* character. Imaginative unconcealment deals in a sense of difference, it is a knowledge 'variable in quality and degrees of intensity (playful, or absorbed, vigilant, obsessed and so forth), depending upon its object (this joke; this moral miasma, this predicate; this baby; this abstract idea; this death; or whatever it be) (Adamson, 1998: 98). The 'theory of everything' fails to theorize literature precisely

because it wants to seize ‘everything’, wants to iron out the ‘muddlement’ and trivialities fiction keeps introducing into the theorist’s schemata.

Eden and imaginative evil

Robert Eaglestone notes how Nussbaum substitutes a ‘heuristic moral lesson’ for the ‘complex artwork’ that, arguably, a novel by Henry James really is (2004:603). Elsewhere he castigates her for indulging in ‘a very determinate reading of [an] indeterminate novel’ (1999:79). This creates the impression that a post-structuralist reading with a strong emphasis on textual indeterminacy might remedy the situation, but Eaglestone in fact thinks that the deconstructive approach to literary ethics inevitably issues in mere reversals of the propositions the neo-Aristotelian ‘camp’ offers: aphorisms that warn against aphorisms are still aphorisms (2004:605). If the truth of imaginative literature can be said to resemble anything, it would be more like a gestalt of the type Booth locates within *King Lear*: a set or series of determinate indeterminacies. But this seems like a very restrictive definition and I do not want to pursue it. Instead, I would like to offer a rather quaint metaphor that might suggest to the reader how I think a novel like *The Portrait of a Lady* stands in relation to questions of good and evil. The metaphor is the Garden of Eden from the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Readers who are acquainted with the myth will know that the Garden houses a forbidden tree, the fruits of which contain the knowledge of good and evil. Human beings are issued with an ethical imperative not to partake, but are nonetheless free to disobey (risking banishment from Eden).

Now, I want to argue that of all the components of this story, fiction resembles the *Garden* most of all. The creator of a fiction projects a locus in which good and evil can take root, so to speak, but the 'setting' for these polarities is only directly linked to the work in so far as it grants them the freedom to exist. Novels, poems, plays, and stories present us with likelihoods, absurdities, conflicts, or brutal visions that come about when an imaginative choice sets the play of elements going in one direction, rather than another. Robert Weisbuch remarks that when Isabel steps into the 'declining, drowsy Eden' that is the estate of Gardencourt, 'the dog barks, she scoops it up, and the place begins to move' (1998:113). The dynamics of Isabel is the trajectory of the novel: the Jamesian imagination zeroes in on the slightest of the protagonist's mental or physical gestures and then goes on to examine the ripples as her life shapes itself through an accumulation of these particulars. Isabel's aunt tells her not to flaunt propriety by sitting up 'with gentlemen late at night' (1986:120), and the girl's rejoinder offers a valuable insight into her character – She says, '. . . I always want to know the things one shouldn't do'. Her aunt is puzzled by this assertion of imaginative freedom: '"So as to do them?" asked her aunt', followed by an answer that is even more telling: '"So as to choose," said Isabel' (Ibid: 121). As I have said, the novel tracks these choices, and the vast preponderance of the decisions Isabel takes are in one way or another bound up with moral obligations, but stating that the work progresses through a series of such choices is not the same as saying that a moral message is presented. This is important, because the novel's irreducibility is to some degree dependent on its resistance to the axiomatic. For Adamson, imaginative literature, read from an imaginative perspective, 'is not a moral thesis' but a 'foray, a many-sided experiential "hypothesis," an adventure, a "suppose"'

(1998: 103). The challenge is to read *The Portrait of a Lady* while keeping the resonances of words like ‘adventure’ and ‘suppose’ in mind.

Suppose Isabel had not married the dilettante Osmond Gilbert – we would not have had a novel. Her union with Osmond flows from her personal freedom: equipped with the autonomy bought with Mr Touchett’s financial endowment, Isabel chooses to subsidise the art lover and, ironically, ends up as one of the fine pieces in his personal collection. The plot coalesces round two of her choices, both born from freedom but the first performed under a misapprehension: Isabel will not know until shortly before the novel’s conclusion that Madame Merle has made a ‘convenience’ of her by coaxing her into a marriage with the father of Merle’s child. The second choice is, paradoxically, both the result of greater cognitive freedom *and* a greater awareness of duty. Isabel chooses, in full knowledge, to return to Osmond. The novel exposes the reader to the enigma of her freedom in acting so detrimentally to her future happiness. The ending, I believe, does not answer to the Aristotelian question because it does not indicate that this decision was made for the *good* of Isabel (and I am thinking of ‘goodness’ in the lofty, Aristotelian sense of the word). We are not taught, if teaching is what we desire, that Isabel’s life-story *required* her to retreat into her residual Puritanism. There is a consistency to her character, which may explain the return: ‘She goes back . . . to work through the consequences of her idealistic blunder, and thus assert a continuity in her own consciousness’ (Bloom, 2000: 181). The novelist J.M. Coetzee speaks of the ‘special fidelities’ of the writer, on which the entire process of making a fiction hinges (2003:223). Perhaps *The Portrait of a Lady* relies for its truth on just these fidelities, this

need to follow Isabel wherever her freedom takes her. She returns to Osmond because she wants to remain true to her vision; if this freedom provides the framework for an ethical reading, I can accept it. Yet the vision fails if we say Isabel made the right choice or the wrong choice or that she makes the choice for us to somehow emulate it: such thoughts turn the 'suppose' of the novel into the 'absolutely' of dogma.

Imaginative literature makes sense of the particularities other forms of knowledge will attempt to bypass to be able to offer a unified version of the human world, bleached of colour and devoid of names. What Nussbaum considers an 'obtuseness' James grapples with, Adamson calls the 'ordinary liabilities of consciousness' (1998: 97). Racing towards a solution, the rational argument neglects how incontestably chaotic reality can be, whilst fiction will often pause to consider how irrationally exclusivist this logic-driven force is:

> Like Shakespeare, [James] often explores (as in his portrait of Isabel Archer) how moral insight can become disabled when it is driven by will. Isabel's achievement of increased self-insight is portrayed as a painful, blunder-prone process . . . of unlearning some habits of mind and gradually learning to read with a different sort of eye' (Ibid.).

Imaginative vision has its costs: it is much riskier to move from mindset to mindset, than it is to stay the course and prove the point. Yet the rewards are also richer: conceptual frames expand; the world's vocabulary becomes enriched with every new character and each new way of looking at a blackbird, or an ovenbird, or a dying human being. Isabel

wants to know the look of improprieties, so that she may be free to choose them if she wishes. In many ways, literature is also an archive of choices, possibilities, routes one might have taken but did not, improprieties and horrors and blindingly shameful events.

According to John Carey, even Charles Dickens, 'the great prophet of cosy domestic virtue' had to come terms with 'the fact that violence and destruction were the most powerful stimulants to his imagination' (quoted in Miller, 2005:2). There is no place for the stimulus of evil in the neo-Aristotelian scheme; yet perceptive critics have long recognised the propensity some imaginations have for fictions made from terror (not least of all, Shakespearean fictions). As Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle rightly point out, there is 'something diabolical about the literary' (1998: 155). How we treat the diabolical text, the one that flaunts its disregard for Aristotle's question, will determine how much freedom we grant the poetic disclosure, even the disclosure that exposes our discomfort. We know, from such works as *Paradise Lost*, that the world figured through the imagination can have Faustian dimensions: an ethics of reading should make space for Milton's Satan, winging his way through airy dreamscapes towards a newly made earth, nothing but destructive curiosity on his mind. The epic fantasy of demonic hubris is not at all tangential to our discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady*: 'Milton's epic is very much the basis for James's attempt . . . just as in Milton's poem, everything is pointed toward a defining of freedom' (Weisbuch, 1998: 112). This is also why Weisbuch claims James needed an 'imagination of evil' to make his novel convincing (Ibid). How does one define freedom? One way is to create a world; another is to write a novel. Either way, the word is – by definition, as it were – broad enough to contain all of the 'zeal' that

informed James's writing of the novel, or so he tells us in his preface to the text (1987:55). Andrew Weisbuch adds that what Isabel finally chooses is 'to make her own world' (1998:116). One can hardly ask for a more spacious metaphor than that.

Imaginative identity

Isabel's imaginative freedom finds its clearest expression in her conceptions of selfhood:

> I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. (1986:240)

The passage reads like an exercise in deconstruction: Isabel's identity defines itself through its difference from everything else, yet it has no essence of its own, or perhaps its definition is this continual deference. Whatever we make of it, her statement is interesting because it opens to the awareness that individual freedom manifests itself as much in the belief, the imaginative belief that one is possessed of such an attribute, such a freedom, as in some fixed, Platonist form or archetype. The limits of your freedom are the limits of what you are capable of imagining. *The Portrait of a Lady* adds this vision of the world to the realm of imaginative literature. The addition is a result, of course, of the Jamesian shift towards modernism, as literary prose begins to disclose reality through introspection: 'Characters in fiction seem never to have thought, really thought, until James; indeed, James invents interpersonal thinking, as his characters respond [to each other] with the utmost verbal and physical nuances' (Weisbuch, 1998:102). Isabel's way of thinking is necessarily shaped by other literary consciousnesses (she is an avid reader)

so that James might be said to be presciently aware of the theoretical claim that novels 'interpellate' their readers with the individualism they offer the imaginative mind: 'She herself was a character – she couldn't help being aware of that' (1986:156).[10] A reading concerned with Jamesian innovations will consider carefully how his visions of consciousness as peculiarly interactive with the 'external' world has pioneered the depiction of intuitions about the psyche, intuitions we might today regard as commonplaces of both fictional narratives and psychological speculation. If anything, *such* a reading will avoid converting *The Portrait of a Lady* into a 'heuristic moral lesson'.

The novel certainly implies that self-knowledge complicates the moral imagination; as the mind broadens so the world broadens but, concomitantly, easy platitudes come to seem intransigent and quick solutions to philosophical dilemmas begin to feel like illusory canvassing over the sheer expansiveness of the world. Thinking about her disastrous marriage, Isabel recollects that she had 'taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end' (1986:474). *The Portrait of a Lady* shows, rather than solves, the situation in which Isabel finds herself for the greater part of the narrative and to which she willingly returns: criticism of the novel provides a hundred suggestions about the life she will lead beyond the last pages of the novel, but these hopes for Isabel occupy an imaginary world beyond the scope of the narrative. The novel does not know whether Isabel will finally have an Aristotelian sense of her life, whether

[10] For a discussion of this claim see Easterlin, 1993: 105-125.

in acting according to the 'statutes' of her vision she has acted for the best or invited her own destruction.

Knowledge and love

The title of Nussbaum's collection of essays on fiction is *Love's Knowledge* and Charles Altieri argues that she reconstructs 'James as a great philosopher about love . . . which she makes sound like only morality on a higher plane' (cited in Freadman, *et al*.,1998:117). Yet a reading designed to show us how James thought love – or morality – could mend all misfortunes is a misreading of the forces at work in his fiction. Altieri notes that James is 'continually trying to understand or justify his own fear of the sacrifices love exacts and the muddy binds it imposes on consciousness' (Ibid.). The lesson for philosophy is that the 'muddy' particulars are not gratuitous: fiction eradicates conflict, evil, and choice at the expense of terminating itself, '*nothing lost* is nothing gained'. Propositional knowledge's error is to assume that what stands in the way of an 'instrumentalized clarity' (Clark, 2002:55) is an absence of knowledge, as opposed to a different form of truth. Adamson explains this idea in a discussion of Keats's belief in two 'styles of mind':

> The first is capable of truth-discovering because it is alive to what is questionable, and imponderable, beyond our knowing – it is aware at once of mystery and of doors into the dark. The other tends to the sterility of knowingness by reductively closing off inquiry [sic] in QEDs. The former is most memorably defined in [Keats's] letter about how 'the Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darkn'd, and at the same time on all sides

> of it many doors are set open – but all dark – all leading to dark passages . . .
>
> (1998: 101)

This is why we can claim imaginative unconcealment has taken place in *The Portrait of the Lady*; it is *because* the work shows its reader the 'darkened world' (1986:474) that a state of illumination is achieved: we look upon the true, dark face of things when we look with Isabel's eyes at her world 'where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure' (Ibid.). Of course, to think of the relation between literary works and the imagination is, ideally, to respond to an open invitation, or, rather, many open invitations, so that the truth of the world is incessantly 'updated' as it were. So the billowing mind in the modernist novel needs the fierce 'body-ness' of the Shakespearean text to drag it back to visions of corporal limits and restraints, the bellies and hands and buttons James's genteel aesthetics does not allow him to consider. The mission for reading is to populate the world, 'colour' the world, so Milton's Satan and Bunyan's God have a place (the reader will recall that spatial metaphors suit *aletheia*) in which to coexist and clash. The kind of reading mind I am envisaging is one alert to colour, not the monochrome of an either/or, body or mind attitude. I think reading in such a frame of mind is an act of extreme sympathy, because it spurns nothing, and is ever attentive to 'the possibility for every being and for every thing to differ incessantly in its difference', Bertrand Ogilvie's definition of *aletheia* (2004:130). Literature celebrates the variable.

The Portrait of a Lady contains many scenes in which the graded texture of experiential knowledge shows through an overstepping of emotional boundaries. When Isabel begins to sense Madame Merle's clandestine relationship with Osmond, she feels herself beset by an intimacy not describable in 'love as morality' terms: '"Who are you – what are you?" Isabel murmured. "What have you to do with my husband?" It was strange that for the moment she drew as near to him as if she had loved him' (1986:563). Again, the parallels with post-structuralist theory and the aversion to propositional categories are obvious. Imaginative fiction excels at pricking the membranes between our definitions, as Chaucer also recognised: 'By [its] contrarie is everything expressed' (quoted in Adamson, 1998:109). One would pay *aletheia* its due if one could cultivate an analysis in which a deconstruction and reconstruction of a text occurred simultaneously, though I confess to not knowing what such a reading would look like. Perhaps, like the famous Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit drawing[11], such an exposition would consist of a series of statements written in such a way that the same statement appears to now say one thing, now another, though this would create the artificial impression that fiction is simply a matter of polarities (as opposed to gradations). Eaglestone is aware of the problem when he writes that neither a neo-Aristotelian nor a deconstructive reading of a literary work seems to get beyond 'determinacy' or 'indeterminacy' to uncover the truth of literature.

Ethics and truth

In the first chapter, I promised to examine the role ethics plays in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. The two thinkers have much in common:

[11] See Bate, 1997:328.

Heidegger's belief in 'primordial truth' and 'derivative truth' forms a direct parallel with Wittgenstein's discrimination, stated in a more down-to-earth way, between 'propositions' and 'the sense of propositions' (cited above). The idea of the language game is also pertinent: criticism of literary texts should approach works on their own terms and not ask for a correspondence between literary truth and the truth expressed, for example, by the language games of science and analytical philosophy. Wittgenstein, however, sounds a very mysterious note when he speaks of ethics. In his master-text, the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, he delivers this strange dictum:

> It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words
> Ethics is transcendental
> Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.[12]

What does this strange aphorism signify? Eaglestone suggests that it relates to transcendental truth, the truth of *aletheia*, which refuses to be pigeonholed in axioms or mimetic descriptions: there are assertions (making up the discourses of science, philosophy and 'everyday speech') whose truth or falsehood one can determine by 'looking through' the words to the empirical reality to which they refer, and discourses (making up the arts and the ethic realm) whose truths seem self-contained (2004:598-9). Think of Isabel Archer's description of her consciousness. A materialist critic might take offence at the extreme personal individualism she expresses, but whatever one makes of them, her words simply do not admit to falsification, they are non-contingent to her and thus beyond propositions – if I find it impossible to think without using the pronoun 'I', then 'I' has to be a non-contingent truth for me. I am simply unable to do without such a

[12] Cited in Eaglestone, 2004: 595. Kathrin Stengel's translation of the statement is worded slightly differently.

conception of myself and therefore it sets a boundary (what Heidegger calls a 'truth-horizon') for every sentence I make about the world – 'I' is what I will tacitly assume every time I make a statement about reality. Wittgenstein thinks this is true of aesthetic judgements as well: I can listen to the most incisive critiques of my evaluations, but no amount of theorizing will switch off my feeling towards the object of my pleasure or displeasure. He famously declared that 'the science of aesthetics' could no more tell us what beauty is than it could communicate 'what sort of coffee tastes well' (see Bate, 1997:321). The implication, then, is that principles such as the 'Good' or 'Art' are truthful in a primal sense, indeed 'Good' and 'Beautiful' are two ways of saying the same thing.

Heidegger had precisely the same intuition, as Eaglestone shows: 'once the thinking has been divided into categories or fields, it is suspect. Even such terms as "logic", "ethics", "physics", begin to flourish only when original thinking comes to an end' (2004:601). *Aletheia* is the truth that 'lays bare the ground in which [ethics and aesthetics] are "one and the same" before they are, as it were, divided by forms of enquiry' (Ibid: 606). Eaglestone concludes by quoting J.M. Bernstein to the effect that we must take up the 'challenge . . . to think through what truth, morality and beauty (or its primary instance: art) are when what is denied is their categorical separation from each other' (Ibid.). But this seems to me a very problematic directive, because it amounts to a suggestion that we think through what we experience when we drink good coffee. Thinking through our sensory experiences is precisely what we do not do while we are experiencing them, so that making the essential unity of ethics and aesthetics a *topic for study* comes down to a

contradiction in terms. Heidegger was clearly aware of this fact; his deep distrust of the philosophy of aesthetics testifies to his belief that theory could kill art (Young, 2001:15).

It might not be possible for a study such as this to do anything with Wittgenstein's aphorism, beyond stating it. But I think the idea of ethics and aesthetics being mysteriously co-joined does help to clarify the earlier comments regarding the depiction of (and fascination with) 'evil' in fiction, from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to *The Portrait of a Lady* and beyond. Of course, it is not as simple as declaring literature's intoxication with the a-moral for the dichotomy between good and evil is another pair of categories literature has often attempted to disrupt. Thus, it could be argued that the hubristic Promethean hero of the Romantics is not a glorification of evil but an emphatic declaration of the moral compulsion to rebel against an oppressive authority, though a simple inversion in binaries is not enough for the kind of comprehension *aletheia* requires, in its ethical and aesthetic aspects. What we need is an ethics to safeguard imaginative freedom and not a polemic against any particular moral code. We might then be in a better position to understand why a writer like Chaucer felt compelled, in *The Canterbury Tales*, to precede a page of retractions with five hundred pages of vice and sin, and why Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello, in the fiction of the same name, defends her writing as follows: 'I am open to all voice, not just the voices of the murdered and violated. . . . If it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my eyes to them, I will not judge them' (2003:204). To put it concisely, being 'open' is what *aletheia* is all about.

In this regard, Robert Weisbuch suggests that James finally dispenses with the 'Miltonic imagination', although it would be more suited to the spirit of this study to say that he adds a world-disclosure to the history of fictional development. In any event, James creatively transforms literature's thinking about good and evil, entering 'new words' into a 'biblical and Miltonic lexicon', which was 'insufficiently flexible, too impoverishing of a full and empathizing consciousness [to enable a] complete recognition of self and other, which is Jamesian salvation' (1998:118). Eden changes as our narratives change, and examining important transitions in the evolution of imaginative awareness (of self, of other) will help us to understand where, fictionally speaking, we come from. The benefits of such understanding should be self-evident: even if we set out to challenge the accepted 'visionary canon', we can hardly launch an *ethically* astute attack if we have insufficient knowledge of the literary consciousness (itself replete with the rights of alterity, lest we forget) or consciousnesses we choose to destabilize. Andrew Bowie agrees with this intuition: 'the desire to get away from the ideological power of [influential] art works is testimony to their revelation of how modern societies may still come to value [the aesthetic]. By unconsciously informing so many of our evaluations, such works may also become part of the very world we inhabit in ways we can no longer even fully analyze' (1997:109). This observation surely extends to the consciousness of good and evil which, for good or ill, decidedly informs our outlook on the world and which James's fiction so sedulously modifies or reinterprets.

Ethics and Style

Kathrin Stengel offers another interpretation of Wittgenstein's dictum. According to her, Wittgenstein is not making a claim about the 'ontological identity' of either ethics or aesthetics, but effectively reasoning 'that only in conjunction, in their complex unity, can ethics and aesthetics be considered individually at all' (2004: 612). The unity of ethics and aesthetics relate to their mutual 'inexpressibility' through propositional language. Like Heidegger, Wittgenstein feels that philosophical metaphysics incorrectly assumes a correspondence between so-called higher category truths (Art, Ethics, Literature) and factual or 'real world' conditions. In other words, the rules of separate language games have become confused. Again, we should not draw the conclusion that linguistic types are at stake here: all language is propositional, all artworks constructed out of physical materials. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein distinguishes the 'logical truth' of factual statements from value statements that testify to a truth which 'in and through language eludes logical propositionality' (2004:614-5). Wittgenstein calls writing on art or literature - such as this study - 'running against the walls of our cage' (Ibid.).

Now, one is entitled to ask why we should have thought of concepts like 'ethics' or 'art' if they had always belonged to the unspoken sublime. Wittgenstein's answer, touched on in a previous chapter, is that transcendental knowledge can be expressed *through* language or, as Stengel puts it, 'shown' (Ibid: 615). The possibility exists, therefore, that purely propositional language can gesture towards a space outside the walls of the cage. Up to this point, Wittgenstein's thinking closely follows Heidegger's but, as Stengel demonstrates, he then introduces a truly novel hypothesis: ethics and aesthetics reveal

themselves in language through *style*. Stengel writes: '[s]tyle – as an aspect of linguistic performance – possesses characteristics similar to the pictorial form as an aspect of the logico-linguistic structure.[13] Style infuses speech and expression with life' (p.616). Truth enters writing through style because style, while working through propositions, does not reduce to the assertoric: a computer can write, but only a human being possesses a writing style. Style, we might say, gives language its colour and brings the world into the words. Wittgenstein complements Heidegger in this respect: style discloses or un-conceals reality, since it 'reveals a person's perspective on the world. . . . A person cannot but speak or write in "his or her style" and in doing so reveal his or her attitude toward life and the world' (Ibid.). A writing style embodies an ethical imperative because a person's 'value judgements' or 'life view' implicitly surface whenever they write; style is thus the humanizing tendency in writing and inseparable from an individual's use of language, though without reducing to linguistic components. Consequently, when style invariably communicates its ethics, a responding aesthetics come into play, which is why Wittgenstein thought the two concepts were indivisible.

What does style have to do with the imagination? Wittgenstein observes that using language always amounts to a projection of 'such notions as causality and necessity' (p.618). This projection is imaginative, being 'based on the mind's capacity to create the dimension of infinity by adopting the perspective of eternity' (Ibid.). The aesthetic imagination steps in whenever something moves from 'life' into 'my life'; from assertoric statement to a glimpse of the human face, the face Virginia Woolf identified

[13] 'Pictorial form' refers to the fact that a 'picture' is more than the elements it depicts; a picture 'cannot itself be pictured; it is . . . like a scale applied to reality . . . that cannot itself be measured while measuring' (Wittgenstein, cited in Stengel, 2004: 614).

behind any and every piece of writing. We have seen Heidegger contrasting knowledge of the world as 'the mere collection of countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things' with the artwork's articulation of truth ('the painting spoke'). Wittgenstein thinks analogously of the world where 'everything is at is, and happens as it does happen' (cited above), but from which value is absent, until an imaginative sense of wonder breathes 'life' into the compilation of statistics, facts, and mute physical forces. This is why 'wonder' is the fundamental ethical and aesthetic principle (p.620). The enthralment of the world causes life to flourish with Shakespearean superabundance, which makes wonder ethical. And wonderment at the rich world stimulates the creation of art in all its manifestations. Style, in writing, is the channel for this impalpable manifestation.

The ethical truth of Jamesian stylistics

These insights apply with great force to the fiction of Henry James. For even if style is only considered in its conventional sense, as an 'author's choice of words and their arrangements in various patterns' (Cohen, 1973: 196), James stands out as an undisputed master of literary stylistics. It would then be of great significance for an understanding of his work to try and establish how the peculiarities of the powerful, and often labyrinthine Jamesian style shapes the disclosing truth of his writing, and by the same token, the ethical perspective this truth conveys. With Wittgenstein's help we have moved beyond the seemingly insoluble impasse literary studies faces from an irreducible, endlessly mobile subject matter. Descrying the unity of ethics and aesthetics through authorial style certainly sounds like a promising scholastic project.

It would be impossible, within a study of this length, to discuss properly how truth enters through style in even a single of James's novels. However, I do want to draw attention to a fascinating comment Alastair Fowler makes with regard to Jamesian style. Fowler describes James's way of writing (in the later novels) as 'syntactically mimetic' (1987:313), meaning that the syntax mirrors, or purports to mirror, what the language seeks to describe. This greatly innovative feature has close links to the imagination or consciousness, as both these components of the mental life feature in James's fiction. Weisbuch cites a hyper-complex example from *The Portrait of a Lady*: 'Not for an instant should he suspect her of detecting in his proposal of marrying her step-daughter an implication of increased nearness to herself, or of thinking it, on such a betrayal, ominous' (1998:102). The sentence relates to the subtle and strange manner in which, as Weisbuch states and I mentioned above, an individual personality ponders the effect within itself, of some brief contact with another consciousness, another personhood. The language refracts so as to mimic this momentary conflation of self-understanding with deep reading of the other's motives, the other's presence as perception of this presence ripples through the mind. Weisbuch detects a scintillating exploration of moral receptivity in the passage from which this sentence comes, which deals with Isabel's handling of Lord Warburton, whom she suspects of wanting to marry Osmond's daughter to be near her: 'she discovers a way to say to him by an undertone, a glance, an air, "I trust you, so do look to your motives and I give you perfect freedom to do as you will knowing you will do rightly. . . And Isabel accomplishes this by her own act of generous and intensely subtle thinking, thinking that is beautiful and self-expelling' (Ibid:118). I would argue that the intensely subtle presentation of such acts of thinking in the style, in

the being of the novel, constitutes an outstanding occurrence of imaginative unconcealment: the Jamesian achievement is both unprecedented and revelatory.

Another evocative example of syntactic mimesis comes from the close of the novel, when Isabel is finally about to kiss (and kiss off) Caspar Goodwood. Caspar tells her that the world is very big, and Isabel, with an 'immense desire to appear to resist' insists that the world is in fact very small. But her vision of the world is already starting to swell as possible lives swim into view, and so the language swells poetically to encompass the change in consciousness:

> She said it at random, to hear herself say something; but it was not what she meant. The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters. She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent. I know not whether she believed anything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next thing to her dying. This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on. . . . This however, of course, was but a subjective fact, as the metaphysicians say; the confusion, the noise of waters, all the rest of it, were in her own swimming head. In an instant she became aware of this. 'Do me the greatest kind of all,' she panted. 'I beseech you to go away'.
>
> (1986: 635)

Caspar will stay long enough to kiss her, and this *confirms* Isabel's resolution to return to her husband. Despite many thoughtful analyses from James's day to ours, and despite the painstaking attention James pays to the mind's directives, the novel leaves some of the mystery of human motive intact. If *The Portrait of a Lady* discloses truth, it also enfolds a secret.

CHAPTER 4

Adorno, Ashbery, and Concealment as Unconcealment

Adorno's aesthetics and the culture industry

In this chapter, I draw on the ideas of Theodor Adorno, one of Heidegger's most influential followers, to present an *aletheia*-based reading of John Ashbery's long poem, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, written in 1977, a year after the death of Heidegger. (The reading is 'prefaced' by an introduction to some strands of Adorno's aesthetic philosophy, followed by a brief discussion of another poem of Ashbery's, *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*.) Adorno's major contribution to art criticism is his elaborate treatise *Aesthetic Theory* (1969), often called the 'pivotal document of twentieth-century philosophical aesthetics' (Bernstein, 2004: 139). In this text, Adorno sets out a view of modern society as an institution symbolically founded on a 'sacrifice of the particular to the universal', by which he meant that entities in contemporary society figure as interchangeable units as opposed to distinct, one-of-a-kind individualities. If 'objects (including human beings) are seen, formed, and treated as representatives of a type of item (white swan, Coke, worker), then they each become ultimately replaceable, fungible, by another of the same kind or exchangeable against a monetary equivalent' (Ibid:144). The result of this large-scale absorption of singularities is, in one of Adorno's most famous neologisms, the culture industry. The culture industry refers to the wing of capitalist economy responsible for the production of aesthetic artefacts, with the production of these artefacts governed by the demands of the marketplace. In short, the culture industry produces artworks as commodities, whose existence depends entirely on

their ‘exchange value’ or ‘their ability to command other products in exchange’ (Zuidervaart, 1998:17).

In Adorno’s writings, Heidegger’s formulation of *aletheia* takes on social significance. An artwork’s particularised ability to communicate the world grows stale as endless reproductions of the work blunt its newness (Adorno writes from the point of view of a jaded cultural spectator) or epiphaneic qualities; and the irreducible, ‘personalised’ nature of the aesthetic vanishes before the onslaught of a consumerist art, an art produced for immediate consumption and to provide discernible results. This could sound like elitism beneath a thin veneer of socialism, but as the quoted sentence from Bernstein shows, Adorno is very concerned with human beings: what he fears is that the loss of a particularised, personal truth regarding art might precede the loss of these attitudes towards *persons* in modern society. What happens if a person is viewed as a type? They become as interchangeable (read: disposable) as the commodities composing a civilization’s economic fabric. This is one reason why, according to Adorno, modern(ist) art pushes its avant-gardism to such noticeable extremes: the modern artwork is a reaction against de-particularising tendencies in the culture industry.

If, as we have seen, truth as imaginative unconcealment is centred in the language of imaginative particularity, then it follows that the drive towards homogenisation, which Adorno finds in modern culture, will in effect, repress, or obliterate the embodiments of *aletheia*. This is a somewhat problematic contention: it depends for its validity on a distinction between ‘mass-culture’ and ‘modernism’. We might temper the sentiment by

suggesting that Adorno's critiques apply, not to specific works or groups of works, but to contending propensities spread over culture at large: like Heidegger, Adorno leaves the reader free to decide where the 'art' ends and 'consumption' begins. Certainly, Adorno does not simplistically equate popular pluralism with 'democracy' or 'freedom'. In this respect, Andrew Bowie seems to possess the most balanced view of how such 'canonical artworks' as the fictions of Shakespeare or Henry James fit into the cultural domain. Bowie deprecates Adorno's 'authoritarian idea of the most advanced "state of the material" which all serious art must live up to, on pain of it being devoid of critical truth potential', yet hastens to add that the 'abolition of the aesthetic into the attitude of "Well, it's what I like" is the swiftest path to a consumerism which has no resources for resisting the manipulation of taste by multinational corporations and reactionary political interests' (1997:118). The point, then, is that simply appending the label 'popular' (or 'high', for that matter) to a cultural artefact does not automatically safeguard the interests of any particular group: relatively speaking, the *production* of popular culture is always in the hands of the few.

Modernist art and alienation

Adorno thinks modernist art is actively in flight from mimesis, because representation has become, in the post-Enlightenment West, an often-insidious mechanism for the conversion of 'the world' into 'the facts', as positivist reason mutates a changeable, fluctuating reality into the mute object of a 'dead, habitual kind of perception' (Diamond, 1998:45). These sweeping declamations are perhaps best taken as a kind of explanatory

hyperbole; either way, modernism represents the phase in art's history when artworks become obsessed with defining themselves. The main reason for this solipsism is that, beset by the clamouring marketplace, the aesthetic seeks to locate a conceptual (imagined and imaginary) sphere (world) where pragmatic, propositional logic fails to function. In order to promote truth as *aletheia*, knowledge with a value beyond the current exchange rate, the modernist artwork and its postmodern successor flaunt their apparently useless or 'merely ludic' qualities. As Terry Eagleton says: the 'idea of doing something purely for the delight of it has always rattled the grey-bearded guardians of the state' (2003:39). Although it might not always be apparent, such artworks do make a political statement: '[s]heer pointlessness is a deeply subversive affair' (Ibid.). Bernstein elaborates on the freedom the self-achieved setting of modern art obtains for the imagination: if 'nonfungible particulars' enter this setting, 'then artworks will be construed as intuitions that are not reducible to a covering, classifying concept, or sensuous particulars for which no universal is adequate (2004:151).

In the first chapter we saw how Heidegger thought an artwork reconciled the senses with the world by snatching aspects of reality from 'ordinary existence', where we might forget about them or take them for granted, and then displaying these fragments, colours or ideas for the sake of reminding us. This is why a minimalist painting drains itself of all but a single colour, and this is why Ashbery takes as his poetic theme the 'experience of experience' (see Atchley, 2004: 201-17). Art gains some autonomy through the act of extrapolating itself from all but the most basic rudiments of material existence, but it makes the excision at the expense of dramatic social involvement as immediately

apprehensible commentary or criticism of the modern world. This is why the oblique politics of aesthetic output like Ashbery's is sometimes mistaken for a-political elitism. Apologists for 'high culture' are certainly attracted to the dense allusiveness of his poetry while detractors attack his work for supposedly enshrining 'the corrupt aesthetic of capitalist consumerism' (Wroe, 2005:2). Given the penurious state of poetry in the domain of public publishing, this is a very strange claim to make. In any event, Adorno ascribes the strategies of distancing and difficulty to modern art's need to flee its cooptation by the mass media, or a utilitarian market.

The result of the modernist flight is alienation (see Scruton, 1998:63-78, and Bernstein, 2004:148-9). Art is necessarily elegiac about its inability to consort freely, intimately, easily and perhaps even effortlessly with the community as a whole. Ashbery's poem *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*[14] brilliantly articulates the frustration and melancholy attending the poet's desire to make sense of the bewildered reader trying to make sense of the perverse complexity of his verse. I quote the poem in its entirety:

> This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
> Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
> Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
> You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.
>
> The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.
> What's a plain level? It is that and other things,
> Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
> Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be

[14] In Ferguson *et al*., 2005. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, p.1739.

A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
As in the division of grace these long August days
Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

It has been played once more. I think you exist only
To tease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there
Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
Has set met softly down beside you. The poem is you.

Paradoxes and Oxymorons, one of Ashbery's most accessible texts, begins as a manageable meditation on readers and their relations to texts. The poem wants to speak plainly, face-to-face ('Look at it talking to you', l.2), unobstructed by theory and devoid of laborious textuality. The problem slips in when the speaker pauses to examine what 'plainness' might mean. If plain language is plain sailing, 'a plain level' should be easy to define; the path towards the meaning of the phrase should be 'level' and straightforward. In fact, it is far from clear what clarity means. This is a 'plain' poem, yet the meta-writing plainly does not fit the usual conventions, which is why the reader begins to fidget, unaccustomed to such 'unadorned', straightforward speech. Perhaps, then, 'conventional plainness' is the highly stylized, artificial mode of writing and speaking, and this strange interface is the true mimesis, as ordinary as reality. Alienation is an ironic side effect of 'our' inability to come to terms with something as affably obtainable as this poem, and knowledge of our exasperation distresses the poem, because it earnestly 'wants to be yours'. What can it reveal but the inconsolable tragedy of imaginative concealment? The reader, of course, is the one who undertakes to conceal his or her imagination, not the poem. The poem is very frank about its lack of knowledge, quite open.

The leap into obscurity occurs in the second line of the third stanza, as the 'role-pattern' of playing at language games and versifying – the first line is already at the fringes of comprehension – issues in the puzzling 'division of grace these long August days / Without proof'. We know a comparison is involved: 'play' is like 'the division of grace', which seems to mean that the creation of poetry obeys a type of patterned order, but this pattern is like the logic of dreaming, making sense only on its own terms, as is arguably the case with the stanza as well. The length of August days might be a blessing, a bestowal of grace, until the experience gets lost in the translation from open-ended event to the mystifications of putting poem to page, as the 'steam and chatter of typewriters' erase the plain receptivity that has no need of 'proof' (l.11). The speaker concludes his bizarre rumination by affirming that the game has been played once more (l.13); confusion has once again been courted and, once again, it is the reader who should face up to the responsibility of alienating the poem. The poem has tried its best to adjust its clean contours to the intractable 'level' of the readerly mind, but as soon as it accommodates its nature to life, the thing itself vanishes and leaves the reader of life (the poem) with the mystery of the poem (the reader), sitting next to it, unobtrusive and wholly alien. Readers are the poems poets try to solve.

Such are the radical innovations within Ashbery's imaginative vision. How does one connect his work with Adorno's description of the modern artwork? To begin with, there is the great issue of Ashbery's superlative complexity. It has become a commonplace of literary criticism to assert, after Eliot, that the modernists dealt in difficulty because they found the world a tremendously difficult place. This is doubtlessly true, but leaves us to

ask what the reasons were that motivated such wonderment at the modern situation in the first place. There are obviously many factors involved in the development of a modernist aesthetic and they have been admirably dealt with in many detailed studies of the movement, but Adorno's formulation of modernism is among the more refreshing, since he traces the story of modern art back beyond fin de siècle experimentalism, to the very beginning of the Enlightenment period. Drawing on Heidegger, Adorno also claims that art quietly starts dying with the rise of the discipline of aesthetics. Art, in the modern world, cannot serve as a cultural focal point, in the grand manner of Heidegger's Greek temple, which 'fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for *Dasein* [humanity]' (cited in Cooper, 1997: 238). The Enlightenment is involved in unyoking art from its communal sources, because Enlightenment philosophy initiated the 'rational process through which the world was freed from superstition [causing] the death of the gods [and ending with] the destruction of specific qualities' (Bernstein, 2004:144). This explains why Heidegger's salvaging of *aletheia* is an ironic excavation of a truth long hidden and concealed.

The modernist artwork is not a retreat into irrationality; *aletheia* is not the opposite of reason or logic but a necessary *condition* for the flourishing of a balanced rationality and a self-aware (and not a carnivorous) logic. Adorno therefore sees modern art as an attempt to reason with reason itself: art calls out to the Cartesian cogito that its drive towards disembodied abstraction has been misguided, since 'reason in fact has material

and sensuous conditions of possibility that it does not and cannot adequately acknowledge' (Ibid:144). As we shall see, *Self-portrait in a convex mirror* is, in part, a figurative re-enactment (in a pastiche-style) of the great trajectory that begins with the West's Renaissance, extends through the Enlightenment and 'ends' with the psychic dissolutions of postmodernism. The tortuously detailed 'dream-patterns' in the poem become more navigable when we understand the motives behind the adoption of a postmodernist perspective, in which the trope of concealment speaks the truth of unconcealment, and vice versa. We are still traversing the realm of the imagination; with the difference that the once-steady ground beneath our feet now comes to feel like fiction, while the plaintive whine of poetry sounds out solid and concrete in the distance. This is not, I should emphasise, because Ashbery rejects 'empirical reality' but because he diligently broods over the warp and weft of the world. The postmodern poetic has an ethics, but its morality consists of a paradoxical devotion to a reality *not* detectable in a 'real world' woven from unreal simulacra – where the 'image' and the 'type' has crowded out the real, and synthetic materials constitute the 'natural' look of things, imaginative disclosures are of fictions that were once alive. It is because the *real world* is clogged with simulations that Adorno declares, 'only what does not fit into this world is true' (1969:69). He does not espouse an irresponsible anti-realism but takes a very levelheaded look at a social reality that increasingly resembles a virtual world.

Imaginative disclosures in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

Adorno died in 1969, while completing *Aesthetic Theory*, so he would only have been acquainted, if at all, with an emergent postmodern literature (he was, however, very well-

read in modernist texts; *Aesthetic Theory* is dedicated to Samuel Beckett). To be sure, this chapter is concerned only with the brand of postmodernism that belatedly carries on the modernist project. Bernstein defines this 'type' of postmodernism as follows: ''[a]uthentic postmodernist works of art, on my account, are not negations of high modernism, but its continuance otherwise, in the absence of any standing conditions that make that continuance possible. In this respect, authentic postmodernist works inevitably sign and mourn the lapse of the conditions that made modernist art possible' (1997:99). We have already come across the 'mournful' attitude in *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*, whilst I interpret the 'signing' to mean that the 'authentic' postmodern text underscores the modernist impulse, but is kept from endorsing its practice by the exigencies of irony. Postmodernism needs the ironic mode to insulate its aesthetic efforts from appropriations by ideological forces, which would otherwise reproduce themselves through these artworks.[15] Of course, a complete disengagement with modern society is impossible and so, arguably, is an 'ideology-free' text, but such poetry as Ashbery's tries its best to achieve the *relative* purity of an abstract art form, music being especially favoured for its ability to communicate non-propositional truth. I have said that modern art flees mimesis and the flight often aims towards the freedom embodied in a musical score. With regards to music Ashbery has commented as follows: 'What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story'. He adds that he would like to duplicate these elements in his poetry. Of all forms of imaginative writing, poetry is obviously closest to music in its rhythmic, aural affiliations, but Ashbery aspires towards the

[15] This is my interpretation of postmodern irony. For an alternative interpretation, see Scruton, 1998: 86-8.

impossibility of capturing the *abstract content* of music in his language. This is yet another reason for the extreme complexity one encounters in his poems.

Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror, a dense work divided into six main sections, opens with a reference to the painter Francesco Parmigianino, who in 1524 painted his masterwork after a reflection captured in a convex mirror (and reconstructed on a spherical, painted piece of wood), a painting so lifelike that it was sometimes mistaken for a 'real mirror' and a 'true reflection'. The opening lines begin *in medias res*, so to speak: 'As Parmigianino did it, the right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect / What it advertises' (p.188).[16] Note that the speaker does not inform us *what* should be done in the manner or mode of Parmigianino and the thought will remain half-explained until the close of the poem, nearly thirty pages later. Presumably, the sought-for-comparison is with the making of poetry, the construction of 'Ashbery's' own self-portrait or identity. This identity is as mobile as the language will allow, and *Self-portrait* showcases the poet's love of verbs suited to his mind's 'eel-like darting' (Vendler, 1981, quoted in Bloom, 1985: 188). What is interesting about the description of Francesco's hand is the counterintuitive suggestion that an embodied nature holds no impediment, but rather, gives a free reign to fluid exchanges with reality, as the movements of a hand keeps a body in flux, continually adjusting its appearance and position in space.

In these lines, the postmodern body reveals itself in the alien mimesis of a distorting mirror. A paradox attends the disclosure: we shy away from what seems grotesquely

[16] All page references are to *John Ashbery: Selected Poems* (1985).

modified, but the painting (and the poem) is not indulging in unbridled fantasy but representing with careful verisimilitude what a transformed physicality really looks like. Body and poem combine threatening or defensive gestures (the hand is 'thrust at the viewer') with the need to 'advertise' their commoditised state, since what is shown is always (in one way or another) for sale. The painter's face, like the hand, 'swims / Toward and away' but Ashbery imposes a restriction on the face; unlike the flexible hand Francesco's head is '[s]equestered'. The mind, conventionally seen as roaming and airy, is confined by its enlightened awareness of the 'walls of its cage', knowledge that puts a bar on the freedom behind the painted face. Although the painter's mirror 'chose to reflect only what he saw' and Francesco had freedom enough to paint whatever he could see, this emphasis on sight masks a growing fear that visibility sums up the state of the world. Enlightenment produces the security of a prison cell, as lines 24 to 28 indicate. Ashbery first tells us that the soul 'establishes itself' and then questions the extent of its freedom, for 'how far can it swim out through the eyes / And still return safely to its nest?' The pioneering innovations of the two self-portraits are tinged with desperation: both imagine the imagination as unbound; yet when the mind is let loose to comb through the entire universe it 'inadvertently' discovers its leash. Imagination is the mere formation of images; freedom is an accumulation of metaphors.

Ashbery thinks of the suspicious enquiry into the workings of the mind, the epitome of philosophical pursuits, as the tragic exposure of a great mystery or riddle to an understanding of its non-existence. Our dilemma is our knowledge; we have driven the divine wind from the world and now the 'secret is too plain' (p.189). The secret is that

‘the soul is not a soul, / Has no secret, is small, and it fits/ Its hollow perfectly’. The burden of enlightened knowledge would have been unbearable, if it were not for the intimations of transcendence contained within music, though music’s message is no longer decipherable: ‘The words . . . seek and cannot find the meaning of the music’. Adorno, musicologist as well as philosopher, has a comparable intuition about the state of music in modern society. ‘Art, especially music, is relatively autonomous of repressive social structures and thus represents a demand for freedom’, is how M.J. Inwood summarises his aesthetic commitments (in Honderich, 1995:8). Of course, we have seen how something as plain as a ‘plain level’ resounds with problems and significances, so a ‘plain secret’ has to harbour a great many allusions. In piercing through essentialist consolations, the mind encounters the greatest mystery: what one does with one’s entrapment in a ‘life englobed’. The solution does not lie in Cartesian regressions; to ‘stick one’s hand / Out of the globe’ is not worth the effort since the surface of the mirror ceaselessly curves towards containment. Perhaps one should abide by listening to the music, or looking at the artwork. Heidegger confirms that the ‘“the task” is not to *solve* the “riddle” of art but to “see” it – a [belief] that indicates the difference between his own mediation on art and so much of contemporary philosophical aesthetics’ (Young, 1997:132).

Like Francesco, reaching forward and pulling back as his hand confronts the remit of its orbit, we need to learn to live within our ‘condition’ (p.189). This is only possible, so the poem suggests, if the dimensions of our world have been disclosed to us. We need to follow, consistently and with great fidelity, the line of thought until it begins to loop

towards the curvature of a self-contained universe, for there 'is no way / To build it flat like a section of wall . . . / It must join the segment of a circle, / Roving back to the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part'. It is ironic that postmodernist art is so often accused of 'merely' delighting in the delirious play of endlessly regressive images, when authors like Ashbery display such an intense probity towards a world that *is* partly a media construct, a kingdom of hollow images. The detachment of the speaking voice in the poem does not sap the work of pathos, the poem takes its playing seriously when the speaker declares that Francesco's eyes 'proclaim that everything is surface' (p.190). Truth has not vanished but now appears to resemble itself, without the backlighting provided by a resident spirit, once thought to glow behind Francesco's eyes. The truth is that the world still surfaces, because the 'surface is what's there' and 'nothing can exist except what's there'. We might say we have leaped from one paradigm to another, out of metaphysics and into reality, but this is to mistake our movements, since we have only actively *resumed* our standing on the surface level produced by our language, a language that cannot *say* what lies outside the walls of the cage. The first part of the poem concludes with these lines:

> And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,
> No words to say what it really is, that it is not
> Superficial but a visible core, then there is
> No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.
> You will stay on, restive, serene in
> Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning
> But which holds something of both in pure

Affirmation that doesn't affirm anything.

(p.190)

The idea of an 'affirmation that doesn't affirm anything' applies beautifully to music and to *aletheia*, a truth fabricated from propositions but not in itself propositional. The world contains everything and yet refuses to be housed in any one thing. Ashbery goes some way towards realizing the goal of finding words for what words cannot say, and this links his aesthetic effort with Adorno's demand that modern art should intentionally cultivate an 'intentionlessness' (Bernstein, 2004: 153). Art achieves this Zen-like condition through 'images that are not images of anything' and whose existence 'mark the limits of the constitutive, transcendental subject, a self-relinquishing of transcendental subjectivity, and so a relinquishing of the idea of the world as mere mirror of the subject' (Ibid.). This is why the second part of *Self-portrait in a Convex mirror* breaks the speaker's isolated contemplation of Francesco and introduces memories of 'friends / Who came to see me, of what yesterday / Was like' (p.191). There follows a kind of vision of what the remembered quality of life is like, as the speaker recalls how 'many people came and stayed a certain time / Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you / Like light behind windblown fog and sand'. The imaginative reconnection of the alienated self with the world induces a strange metamorphosis, because the *restored* self seems to have dispersed beyond logically apprehensible *restoration* as a fixed, definable entity. Rather, because memories are disclosures of experiences that have 'passed away' and so possesses an otherness in relation to *this* moment and *this* 'I', the speaker exchanges pronouns and says 'no part / Remains that is surely you'. The enigma of the Other now vouchsafes what is believable and, accordingly, what is to be respected: 'My

guide in these matters is your self'. Ashbery proceeds to reconstruct the world around the 'polestar of your eyes which are empty / Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing' and the reconstruction affirms, gently, that there is a world encompassed by the 'circle of your intentions' (p.192). Continuously, generously granting the existence of others provides the mooring the self needs to keep from dissipating.

The third part of *Self-Portrait* exchanges the remembrance of past things for the dilemma of the present. Adorno's notes on commodity culture find their echo in the speaker's observation that 'propositionally speaking', truths keep on multiplying, as objects are added to the world; but while 'more keeps getting included' this sprawling output happens without 'adding to the sum' (p.193). This is not only because the universe is a gestalt, a closed system, but because the deepest reading of reality through the lenses of modern science will only yield a greater number of similar components. The parallels with the 'fungible' entities of a profit-driven world are obvious. Ashbery is also concerned with the kingdom of images, the tenuous dream world modernity manufactures from a 'vacuum' strangely resembling Francesco's globed mirror. This world is '[f]ed by our dreams, so inconsequential until one day / We notice the hole they left'. Still, the speaker yearns for an overarching vision in which the dreams of modernity reappear, this time to 'nourish / A dream which includes them all, as they are / Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror'. This, then, is the world as disclosed through *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* and it is a fiction of startling originality and dissonance: the world reveals itself as a vast dream sustained by every individual act of dreaming; a poem-like unit assembled from numerous discrete contradictions. Now we are in a better position to

understand why Ashbery indulges in these seemingly impenetrable 'disjunctions': for one thing, they 'mirror the complexities of late capitalist American society' (Forbes, 2000:517), and they also 'remind us of the gigantic / Bits and pieces of knowledge we have retained' (Ashbery, quoted in Bloom, 1985:194). There is at more at work in these lines than generic postmodernist fragmentation; the poet dashes language against the impervious world, so as to comprehend, in the loss of form, the beauty of what was lost: 'we realize this only at a point where they lapse / Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape' (p.193). The third section ends with an assuaging statement: we should not disavow the dreaming since its 'arrangement' opens a space where '[s]omething like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification' (p.194). Perhaps poetry comprises the codified version of the world as it dreams or imagines its shape and its shapelessness.

In the relatively short, fourth part of the poem, the speaker wonders how the reappearance of a forgotten thing, a forgotten belief or allegiance inveighs on consciousness. As Derrideans will know, many of the ghosts of the past will forever haunt the corridors of language, and nothing short of universal amnesia can clear the secular world of annunciations, subtle arrivals of angelic mystery. So Ashbery writes that an 'angel' could look like 'everything/ We have forgotten, I mean forgotten / Things that don't seem familiar when / We meet them again' (p.194). Remembering the impossibility of ever reconstituting the fresh thrill of the 'High Renaissance', the spectator can nonetheless contemplate the deep surface of Francesco's mirror and recognise the 'distorted' semblance of the Renaissance's intellectual and aesthetic 'consonance'. The mirror's

true-to-life misrepresentation is executed with a precision which forces the spectator to assume – 'fooled for a moment' – that he or she owns the visage captured in the 'glass' and Ashbery introduces a long simile to account for the enchantment that ensues from this mistaken self-recognition. He compares the feeling with the sight of a snowfall, surreptitiously appearing while 'you' were sleeping, and which you had no reason to expect but which – like some unearthly visitation – will haunt your mind through the remainder of the day.

The mood of death pervades the fifth part of the poem. Adorno's aesthetic theory is close by, for this deathly presence is as much a societal 'shadow' as it is a disclosure of individual extinction. Ashbery pictures New York, the poet's home, as woven from an impersonal 'business', a corporate mirage sustained not by the intimacy of speech but through indirect and second-hand forms of communication, by 'gesture' and 'hearsay' (p.195). The city forms the base or 'backing' of the artist's studio and the poet's livelihood; yet the same city greedily encroaches on the 'life of the studio' and is attempting to reduce the breadth of artistic vision (the verbs Ashbery elects to use to describe the process are 'siphon off', 'deflate' and, a poetic modification, 'island'). But the city itself is falling prey to a strange blight, a wind blowing 'outward along the capes and peninsulas / Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes / And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea' (p.196). The wind seems to have several characteristics. First, it carries an overly refined language or 'preciosity', which links the ominous overtones of the breeze with the arrival of Ashbery's own poetic voice, as one of the members of the experimental 'New York School' (see Wroe, 2005:1). Second, the wind brings with it the 'inertia' implicit in a non-affirmative affirmation, as the poem's ironic avowal of non-

commitment keeps the speaker (and, by implication, the New York School) from intervening in the world in anything but the most tangential manner. This inertia is a death-in-life because, like the 'open secret' of the ocean which is at once made of clarity and the vast deep, the poem's knowledge condemns it to a spectral existence in the cultural world.

Artistic inertia has a 'positive' dimension: it makes us pay closer attention to 'life', as thinking about death can reinforce or 'defamiliarize' the easily overlooked particulars of living. Bernstein notes that, in Adorno's aesthetics, the death of art as the symbolic keystone of a culture is not the only death the modern imagination is capable of dying: if 'art loses its critical capacity it ends, will end, for a second time' (1992:5). So the point is to keep on looking, to keep maintaining the autonomy of the Other's alterity. Thus, *aletheia* attains a paradoxical dynamism: the overtly languid inspection of every claim *is* the militant refusal (born from a fixation on the Other's inalienable right to 'flourish') to 'consider one single [claim] as final and exclusive, which means that all truth asserted as such and frozen in its identity, is an error' (Ogilvie, 2004:128). The final part of Ashbery's poem also concedes that '[t]he locking into place is "death itself," / As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler's Ninth' (p.197). The reward for this critical awareness is the unconcealment of *aletheia*'s nature as the final lines of the fifth part reveal: the world is a 'metaphor / Made to include us, we are a part of it and / Can live in it as in fact we have done, / Only leaving our minds bare for questioning / We now see will not take place at random / But in an orderly way that means to menace / Nobody'. It is the nature of *aletheia* that is here disclosed, because, as Gideon Calder writes, 'Heidegger's

interpretation of . . . truth . . . lends much to the idea that the creativity of the metaphorical process is central to truth rather than a superficial distraction' (cited in Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999: 235).

Now beauty emerges in all its 'sensuous particularity' as Adorno would say, and Ashbery agrees that beauty only comes to clarity when a feature or an element is considered in 'relation to a specific / Life'. Ashbery here complements Wittgenstein: ineffable life unfolds through the truth of a singular specificity, which shows as beauty, and this singular beauty is a feature of an individual life, which means that its unfolding is irrevocably ethical. The speaker even allows for a question about the possibility of metaphysics; note that the dialectical form prevents the idea from acquiring dogmatic encrustations. 'But what is this universe the porch of,' so the enquiry begins, '[a]s it veers in and out, back and forth, / Refusing to surround us and still the only / Thing we can see?' (p.198). The possibility that the globule is somehow a projection of 'Love' is considered, but Ashbery thinks the force that once united everything has now shaded into a 'vague / Sense of something that can never be known / Even though it seems likely that each of us / Knows what it is and is capable of / Communicating it to the other'. An ironic aside follows, in which the artist's perception of the world's 'explosion' threatens to dismantle the need for poetry or painting; such is the existential force of reality's beauty. Ashbery writes: 'We don't need paintings or / Doggerel written by mature poets when / the explosion is so precise, so fine. / Is there any point even in acknowledging / The existence of all that?' (p.200). And, still, art comes about as the world's 'game' in which an ideal society is '[o]rganized as a demonstration of itself', disclosing its nature to

members who are themselves team players, and who track the persistence of creative revolutions. The speaker glosses aesthetic innovation in the following lines:

> It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
> What the artist intended. Often he finds
> He has omitted the thing he started out to say
> In the first place. Seduced by flowers,
> Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though
> Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining
> He had a say in the matter and exercised
> An option of which he was hardly conscious,
> Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions
> So as to create something new
> For itself, that there is no other way,
> That the history of creation proceeds according to
> Stringent laws, and that things
> Do get done in this way, but never the things
> We set out to accomplish.
>
> (p.201)

This extract testifies to the poetic imagination's need to renovate itself. The individual poet comes to seem like a conduit through which the world's disclosures are brought to light, as previous visionary traditions are swept up and transformed during successive artistic periods. In our own age, imaginative unconcealment comes in the wake of a reason 'which fails to take account of aesthetics' (Bowie, 1997:108), with a resultant misidentification of the imagination as rationality's 'oppositional other' (Bernstein, 2004:158). Adorno views such a bipolar attitude as itself irrational, because 'a part of reason – nature controlling, instrumental reasoning – is taken as the whole of reason' (Ibid: 145). In this dispensation, art is demoted from the realm of truth and becomes,

simply, entertainment or a prop for ideological posturing. By contrast, contemporary 'scientism' is perceived as being in touch with the world's truth: 'Each person / Has one big theory to explain the universe / But it doesn't tell the whole story / And in the end it is what is outside him / That matters, to him and especially to us / Who have been given no help whatever / In decoding our own man-size quotient' (p.202). Adorno sees art's wilful refusal to feature in the 'theory of everything' as the 'last *systematic* hold-out against the self-destruction of enlightened reason' and the artworks that most conspicuously enact the struggle are the 'self-absorbed, hermetic works of high modernist art' (Bernstein, 2004:145). John Ashbery's postmodernism continues this hermetic tradition. Alastair Fowler writes that Ashbery's avoidance of 'external reference' leads to the 'quantum jump' of 'difficulty' achieved by his poems (1987:374).

Finally, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* returns to Francesco's eerily looming hand, which the poet beseeches the painter to 'withdraw' (p.203). Why should this withdrawal be called for? Perhaps, Ashbery is defending the importance of responding to the world's enchantment as an immanent, rather than a transcendental, truth. The open hand shows and offers, but cannot instruct – Ashbery tells us that it holds no 'chalk' (p.204). The hand is like the poem: offering itself as a gesture, the work would fail if it tried to grasp or point or explain the knowledge it has already displayed, all the truth an open hand can hold.

CHAPTER 5

The consequences of imaginative unconcealment

Previous chapters hinted at some of the problems the philosophy of *aletheia* poses for the writing of literary criticism and the practice of theory. Some of the difficulties are self-evident. How does one write about a non-propositional, non-utilitarian, nonfungible form of truth? How does one convey the colour of *a colour*? Heidegger's interpreters, while stressing the importance of his thoughts on truth, are not very helpful. Julian Young enjoins us to 'look' at artworks, instead of trying to 'solve' them, while Robert Eaglestone concludes his essay by urging literary critics to 'defend' non-instrumental truths. Yet neither of these thinkers offers any concrete guidelines beyond the imperative to consider carefully what the significance of *aletheia* for (literary) aesthetics might be. Their reluctance is understandable when Heidegger's extreme antipathy towards a theory of art or literature is taken into account. According to Timothy Clark, Heidegger saw literary theory as 'a parochial representative of the sort of thinking he was trying to challenge' (2002:98). The question facing us is whether Heidegger's challenge has (and I write this with due irony) practical implications and pragmatic applicability for literary studies.

To some extent, the question has already been answered, if somewhat obliquely, in the preceding readings of literary texts. I have tried to show that combining the idea of *aletheia* with fiction's 'imaginative impulse' can lead to a field of study in which the creative, 'originating' elements within literature are explored as a feature of their truth-telling disclosures. But the irreducible nature of the literary experience remains an

obstacle for criticism. We have seen Wittgenstein making the claim that aesthetic truth is ineffable, so it comes as no surprise to note the existence of a Wittgensteinian tradition in philosophy that simply refuses to comment on any of the terrains on which this study has touched. Wittgenstein's intellectual progeny are commonly grouped under the label 'quietism', and quietists approach philosophy as a 'kind of *therapy*' busying itself with 'dissolving philosophical problems, rather than solving them' (Leiter, 2004:2). This method, however, does not translate very well to the interpretation of literary texts, where no clear-cut difference exists between 'dissolving' literary difficulties and 'solving' them. In fact, both the Wittgensteinian silence in the face of an artwork and Heidegger's plea that we train our eyes to observe art, seem more suited to paintings than to novels, poems and plays. Yet the idea that this is necessarily problematic only occurs if an institutionalised approach to literature is considered. Heidegger, we know, would simply disallow the problem, for a major part of his philosophy was directed at exposing the deficiencies any 'formal study' of aesthetics would, invariably, encounter. *Aletheia*, in this view of things, perches uncomfortably over the university study of fiction; as is the case with post-structuralist theory, the truth-concept's applications within the academy are at once a subversive gesture (because it places a bar on what theory can say about literature) and an ironic betrayal of its potency, since 'teaching truth' obviously goes against the ethos of a non-utilitarian aesthetic.

Imaginative canons

Still, it seems possible to incorporate *aletheia* in literary criticism without converting the philosophy into a mere disclaimer for every reductive theoretical statement. The teaching

of a literary canon based on 'imaginative ideals' has, for example, been suggested by Charles Altieri, who seeks to establish a reading programme where 'we can best satisfy our personal stakes in reading by elaborating transpersonal principles of value that link desires in the present to forms of imaginative discourse preserved from the past' (1990:24). This statement warrants closer inspection. To begin with, the 'transpersonal principles of value' Altieri is committed to, are apparent references to fiction's embodiments of otherness, the 'other lives' and 'other worlds' that a creative imagination engenders. Altieri wants to shift literary studies from a preoccupation with identity, as such, to the liberalizing effect *on* identity promised by imaginative literature. We have already encountered the idea that fictional literature prompts, and often requires, a dramatic change in the self, as the reader encounters the strangeness of the fictive realm (see chapter 2). Altieri confirms Adamson's belief that reading imaginative literature *calls for* imaginative reading, when he writes that '[m]any readers see their interest in reading precisely as an opportunity to escape the empirical self, to undergo through imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy' (1990:29). Now, I have to concede that Altieri's vision of 'imaginative discourse' conveniently set to work to quicken the imagination *does* treat literature in an instrumental fashion but, since the function he ascribes to literature is to promote a sympathetic 'openness', the 'use-value' of his programme appears to resemble the characteristics of *aletheia* very closely. Teaching literature, on this model, might emphasise *how* a particular text contributes to an innovation in ideas and perspectives on the world, without trying to 'solve' its imaginative force by offering causal explanations for the disclosing contents.

Altieri's thoughts have close, albeit unintended parallels with Heidegger. If the Heideggerian artwork is a 'clearing' inhabited by true knowledge, then Altieri's attempts to clear a space for the discussion of 'imaginative discourse' locates the discussion in a 'theatre' where texts can 'enter' and show 'their power to interpret their own historicity [and] their deep grasp of perennial features of human experience [or] their construction of compelling ideals for human work' (Ibid:46). Altieri goes on to cite Dante as an example of how ideas about exile and justice can 'come into their own', as Heidegger would say, revealing to their readers the scope and nature of these conceptions as the poetic mind perceives them. This complements my own belief in the virtue of teaching imaginative unconcealment as a narrative of creative changes in the relationship of fictional texts to the world. At the very least, such an approach to literature will sidestep the bland 'period-by-period' treatment that still holds sway over so many institutions of higher learning. We can make better sense of literature, I suggest, if we think of the history of fiction as an evolution of worldviews – truths – with and through innovations in literary form. A historiography of the imagination will focus on the transitions our making of the world through metaphor has undergone, from the earliest appearance of such ideas as 'love' or 'justice' or 'fidelity' or 'evil' in texts, through to the contemporary transformations of these ideas at the hands of a poet like John Ashbery. It should also be obvious that such a discipline will forge closer links between English studies and the imaginative trajectories pursued by other literary traditions and, importantly, other forms of art.

Thinking about literature against the backdrop of Heideggerian philosophy allows us to consider how different aesthetic canons can illuminate one another. Perhaps one can

reinforce an appreciation of the irreducibility of literature by comparing novels with paintings or poems with sculptures, not to revive an outdated preoccupation with organic form but to foster comprehension for the way in which 'truth' appears in works born from the creative imagination. If a consilience between art and science is not forthcoming (and I doubt, against scientific hopes, that it ever will), a synthesis could plausibly be attained between the 'fine arts' and the 'study of letters'. Whatever the future for such a project, it seems feasible to speculate that a greater understanding of general aesthetics will be beneficial for the sub-discipline of literary aesthetics. We might find ourselves pursuing an aesthetic intertextuality. I am thinking of something considerably more radical than the current critical practice in which (for example) a visual representation from a given cultural epoch is 'read' as a text, with the aim of exposing some ideological infrastructure putatively residing in literary texts from the same period. Rather, what I am thinking of is the possibility that a critic can convey the 'sense' he or she receives from a literary text by drawing attention to elements within a work executed in a different medium, the way tactile impressions can obliquely illuminate the sense of colour or sound.

Performative criticism

Jonathan Bate has another suggestion as to how a literary critical practice can accommodate the experiential quality of literature. First, he notes that the literary experience cannot be discovered through an analysis of its constituent parts (1997:323). From the point of view of the subjective appreciator of art, theory is necessarily belated:

> Traditional aesthetic theory – the attempt to define the true nature of the beautiful – makes it sound as if we respond to a work of art by thinking 'This is beautiful'. The theorist then asks, 'What is the essence of this beauty?' But we don't usually think, 'This is beautiful,' when we read a book, look at a painting, or watch a play. As Empson put it in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 'What is needed for literary satisfaction is not, "This is beautiful because of such and such a theory," but "This is all right; I am feeling correctly about all this; I know the kind of way in which it is meant to be affecting me"'
>
> (Ibid:320)

What is needed, then, is a specimen of critical writing that *displays* how the work has imparted its truth. This can lead to dangerous territory: I have already said that *aletheia* can easily slip into impressionistic writing and Heidegger provides the best example of the kind of excesses an overawed appreciation of an artwork will cause when the awe is translated into scholarly theorizing. In his essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger describes how Van Gogh's painting of a pair of worn shoes 'sets truth to work' and confidently states that the shoes belong to a peasant woman, whose world is powerfully disclosed through the artwork. Actually, it is almost certain that the shoes belonged to Van Gogh himself (see Payne, 1993:226). This would look like an unimportant slip on Heidegger's part, were it not for the fact that his lyrical evocation of the painting's truth is entirely constructed around the figure of the peasant woman. He even goes so far as to state that the articulations of her world in the guise of the painting is not a 'projection' or interpretation of the painting and that it would be 'self-deception'

to think that reading the peasant woman into the work is a 'subjective action' (1971:34). Julian Young, I should mention, has defended the treatise on Van Gogh as a 'prose poem' or an 'artwork inspired by an artwork' (1997:129), and not intended to be taken literally. But it obviously creates a problem for a literary criticism that does not, for better or worse, want to turn into a record of emotive responses to literary works. This is why Bate is careful to distinguish his Wittgensteinian 'performative criticism' from a simple reiteration of a literary experience. Instead, performative criticism registers the *effects* of aesthetic experiences. This mode of criticism takes its cue from Wittgenstein's observations on aesthetic responses. He notes that we would not try to discover how a completely foreign tribe described their experiences of 'goodness' through an examination of their language: rather, we would seek out 'the occasions or activities', the smiles and laughter, that correspond to a particular word, which we would then be able to categorize as the tribe's definition for goodness (see Wittgenstein, 1979, excerpted in Singer and Dunn, 2000:258).

Performative criticism, in Bate's words, 'will be a manifestation of how Shakespearean drama, in Wittgenstein's phrase, 'makes an impression' (1997:325). The subject matter of this criticism is surely not limited to Shakespeare; Bate is thinking of the massive 'effect' Shakespeare has had over the centuries. The difference between the description of an effect or an 'impression' and writing spilling from the effect itself, is that the former deals with 'observable' traces. If we want to restate this in '*aletheia*-based' terms, we might say performative criticism tries to gauge the ripples of an imaginative world-disclosure. Thus, our proposed 'historiography of the imagination' can be combined with

arguments about possible reasons why certain authors (such as Shakespeare) have continued to exercise a demonstrably great effect while other, comparable authors (such as Ben Johnson) have had undergone a diminishment in influence. In this regard, Bate develops some ingenious hypotheses to explain Shakespeare's longevity beyond Jacobean England. A performative criticism begins with the observation that readers of a text have experienced the work as somehow disclosing or telling the truth about the world, then goes on to examine the context of the disclosure, and the context of its reception. The emphasis on the disclosing properties of a work helps to avoid the objectionable thesis, proffered by theory, of an author passively 'imbibing' the dominant ideology of her day or, equally passively, fortuitously featuring as the site of an ideological 'fault-line' or 'rupture' (see Riebling, 1993:105). Theoretical studies in intertextuality have taught us that no work can be divorced from the massive cultural system sustaining the self-image of a society. Now, perhaps, the time has come to consider how individual authors modify their artistic inheritance in idiosyncratic ways. Performative criticism can play a part in helping us recognise how innovation occurs, over time, within a given aesthetic tradition.

Aletheia and Post-structuralism

From a post-structuralist 'perspective', the philosophy of *aletheia* can seem like a one-sided and casuistical account of literary significance. Although Derrida himself has insisted on his debt to Heidegger (see Payne, 1993:229), the deconstruction of metaphysics initiated by the most famous Heideggerian 'disciple' hardly bodes well for

the arguably uncritical appraisal of artworks the theory of *aletheia* enables. Yet we might be underestimating Heidegger's own proto-deconstructive tendencies if we associate his formulation of truth *solely* with a rendition of the revelatory powers of the aesthetic.

Julian Young's comments with regard to the 'duck-rabbit' drawing and its association with Heidegger will explain what I mean. Young notes that, 'while one might understand the image as a duck or as a rabbit, one cannot understand it as both simultaneously' and points out that Heideggerian philosophy functions in the same way: '[i]t is a point Heidegger himself puts by repeatedly insisting that truth, "unconcealment", is at the same time always "concealment". What is not precluded, however, is that, while perceiving the image as, say, a duck, one is simultaneously aware of the possibility of other disclosures' (1997:192-3). If we think of the reading of *King Lear* offered in chapter 2 of this study, we are better able to comprehend what it might mean to hold both 'duck' and 'rabbit' in mind: moving (or playing) between the opposing poles of determinacy and indeterminacy comes closer to offering a 'fair reading' of the play than a dogmatic insistence on a single interpretation *or* a complete abandonment of interpretive rules is capable of providing. The implication is that the interpretive system enabled by *aletheia* is like a gestalt model, in which the hermeneutic procedure moves from deconstruction to reconstruction and back again: turning to the light, one side of the fictional planet necessarily remains darkened. The 'trick' of an unconcealment-based criticism lies in its awareness of this obscurity at the heart of its own discourse.

The theory of imaginative unconcealment I have tried to describe in this study is not an exhaustive approach to literature. It certainly needs to be supplemented by many of the insights of contemporary criticism. If there are good reasons to allow an imaginative reading of a fictional work, there are also good reasons to be wary of an engagement with a text that fails to take into account its propositional content, especially where this propositional knowledge has some bearing on questions of race, gender, class, religious belief or political creed. *Aletheia* may influence how we think of the appearance of these issues in fictional texts, but how we think of imaginative unconcealment will also be changed or modified by the knowledge we have of literary theory.

But perhaps we make a mistake if we assume an irreconcilable divide between critical thinking and the imagination. Curtis White, for one, believes the two aspects complement one another. Following Adorno, he writes that the ideal conception of the imagination is as a 'social force that allows for both critique and reinvention' (2005:24). It is not only theory that has (or had) an investment in promoting social change; the human imagination has *always* provided men and women with a way to conceptualise what an alternative to the present order might be like, whatever 'present order' means in terms of a specific or determinate cultural context. White urges critics to adopt an interrogative sense of the aesthetic: 'beauty is how we learn to think change while remaining faithful to specific traditions of human creativity' (Ibid: 188). Arguably, this kind of dynamic beauty is precisely what artworks have always offered to at least some of the persons who are willing to pay attention to them. And I would add that works of literature, artworks made from words, have also always participated in both the 'critique and reinvention' of

our world(s) as constructed from the language in which we dwell. It should therefore not be impossible for us to imagine a critical practice that can aid literature in the ongoing task of performing its version of the world's truth, the truth of unconcealment. Perhaps, in imagining this way, we might even come to conceive a criticism that it is as beautiful as it is true.

CONCLUSION

> The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
>
> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.12-17.

Why should the notion of 'imaginative unconcealment' matter to literary studies? In his book, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, Jonathan Bate – who is perhaps the most influential English critic inspired by Heidegger – uses the above quote from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to argue that the early Romantics appropriated Shakespeare for his 'associative mental activity' (1997:179). This is just one reason why an account of the imagination is indispensable to a study of literature: the history of fiction is replete with comparable examples of authors attracting attention to their work through the sheer inventiveness of their poetic visions. Many readers continue to appreciate the disclosures wrought by the 'poet's eye'; many might even feel that fiction somehow brings them closer to a kind of truth that they might not be able to express in so many words but which, nonetheless, *seems* like a truthful rendition of 'life'. The philosophy of *aletheia* could open up a discursive space for such readers to air their views on fiction, without running the risk of being marginalised by a critical practice that refuses to put any stock in what it mistakenly assumes is an antiquated Romantic ideal.

The philosophy of *aletheia* reconfirms the importance of listening to what poets, playwrights, and novelists have to say about the craft of fiction. The analytical approach

to literature has often been guilty of neglecting the views of the very persons responsible for the staple of literary studies' textual diet. Arguably, it was New Criticism, with its disparagement of the 'intentional fallacy' that took the first step towards sidelining the idea that the author might have something to contribute to an evaluation of his or her work. Certainly, it would be unfair to blame 'Theory', in its post-structuralist incarnation, for the disregard the academy has often shown for writers' own explanations of, and motivations for, their desire to take up 'the poet's pen'. Before we blame the movement that was launched in 1968, we should attend to the words of the American short story writer Flannery O'Connor, who, in an essay written in 1957, characterised the university study of fiction in the following way:

> In most English classes the short story has become a kind of literary specimen to be dissected. Every time a story of mine appears in a Freshman anthology, I have a vision of it, with its little organs laid open, like a frog in a bottle. I realize that a certain amount of this what-is-the-significance has to go on, but I think something has gone wrong in the process when, for so many students, the story becomes simply a problem to be solved, something which you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment.
>
> (cited in Barnet, *et al.*, 2000:249)

O'Connor went on to describe the successful short story as an invention that 'resists paraphrase' and 'hangs on and expands in the mind' (Ibid.). To this, one might add, thinking of *aletheia*, that a work of literature not only expands *within* the mind but that,

imaginably, the mind *itself* can expand through the act of reading. Sometimes, authors are even convinced that their creations have escaped the net of words; that their characters now go about with minds of their own. So, for instance, the novelist Zadie Smith has confessed to believing in the reality of one of her fictive protagonists: 'I truly feel that Hanwell exists somehow . . . as if this story of mine has opened up a little gap in the world where Hanwell once existed and continues to exist' (2005:x). Many readers might experience King Lear in the same way, or Cordelia, or Isabel Archer, which has important implications for pedagogy, as Steven Earnshaw writes: '[w]e let theory belittle these experiences at the risk of losing students' interest in Literature' (1996:156). It follows that, if literature *does* make the world a more capacious place by projecting imaginary vistas and populating them with characters (or ovenbirds), it has to be worth our while to explore why a text is able to work this enchantment, how a turn of phrase can give 'to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name'. I hope, finally, that this study has shown why we should want to take up the challenge of observing our fictions as they name, with a multitude of names, the ever-changing truth of the world.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Imaginative unconcealment: a neuroscientific perspective

Support for the theory presented in this thesis has come, ironically, from the natural sciences. Neuroscientists have long been interested in the brain's ability to generate metaphors, speculating that it might offer clues about the development of language. Some contemporary scientists believe the ability relates to what they term 'cross-modal abstraction' (Ramachandran, 2003:87). In brief, this refers to a part of the brain, the angular gyrus' tendency to abstract 'the common denominator' from different sets of sensory input, allowing us 'to create abstract . . . representations of things around us' (ibid:86). Now, neuroscientists like V.S. Ramachandran believe the functions performed by the gyrus are tied to a cluster of genes responsible for neuronal 'hyperconnectivity', which is simply another reference to the possibility of extrapolating information from a sensory or conceptual overlap. While the adult brain has a modular character, which means that it is strongly predisposed to interpreting information in terms of categories, the foetal brain has 'many redundant connections which get pruned away' by specific genes. This has led Ramachandran to wonder if variations in the efficacy of this pruning gene can perhaps cause increased 'cross-activation between adjacent parts of the brain that are normally only loosely connected' (p.80). The result of this deficiency in pruning is 'a skill at forming metaphors, linking seeming unrelated concepts', and Ramachandran notes that Shakespeare was 'a master at doing this' (ibid.).

Another neuroscientist, Susan Greenfield, has focussed on the connections between individual neurons. She begins with a basic definition of 'thinking' from a neuronal

perspective, namely as a process in which 'networks of brain cells band . . . and disband' (2003:53). The exchanges between these neurons, within the 'restless and reactive circuits' of the brain, provide us with our sense of a continuous self, an 'I' that somehow feels connected, today, with the 'I' of yesterday. 'Yet,' as Greenfield writes, 'we are still hankering after the creative and original process of thinking' (ibid: 54). She gives the following explanation:

> hubs of connections that were previously independent [will] hook up with each other, as networks of neurons can. This coalescence results in a new and perhaps unusual juxtaposition of association. One extreme example would be the thought of . . . Australian immunologist MacFarlane Burnet, who saw a similarity between the principles of Darwinian evolution and the immune system. It is this breathtaking leap between one scenario and another, between one discipline and another, that surely is the true apotheosis of the human mind, and is A Thought at its finest.
>
> (ibid.)

I would argue that the formation of metaphor is simply a microcosmic instance of what, in its full-blown proportions, manifests as the entire creative imagination. Shakespeare may have had a tremendous innate skill at making metaphors (and by extension, making believable characters) but Jonathan Bate has convincingly argued that his career as an actor provided him with the ability to think himself into so many fictional roles (1997:235). Perhaps the tremendous influx of new words (new concepts, new ideas) into

the English language during the Elizabethan age also provided some tacit stimulants to an already prodigious young mind. But to explore these ideas would require another study.

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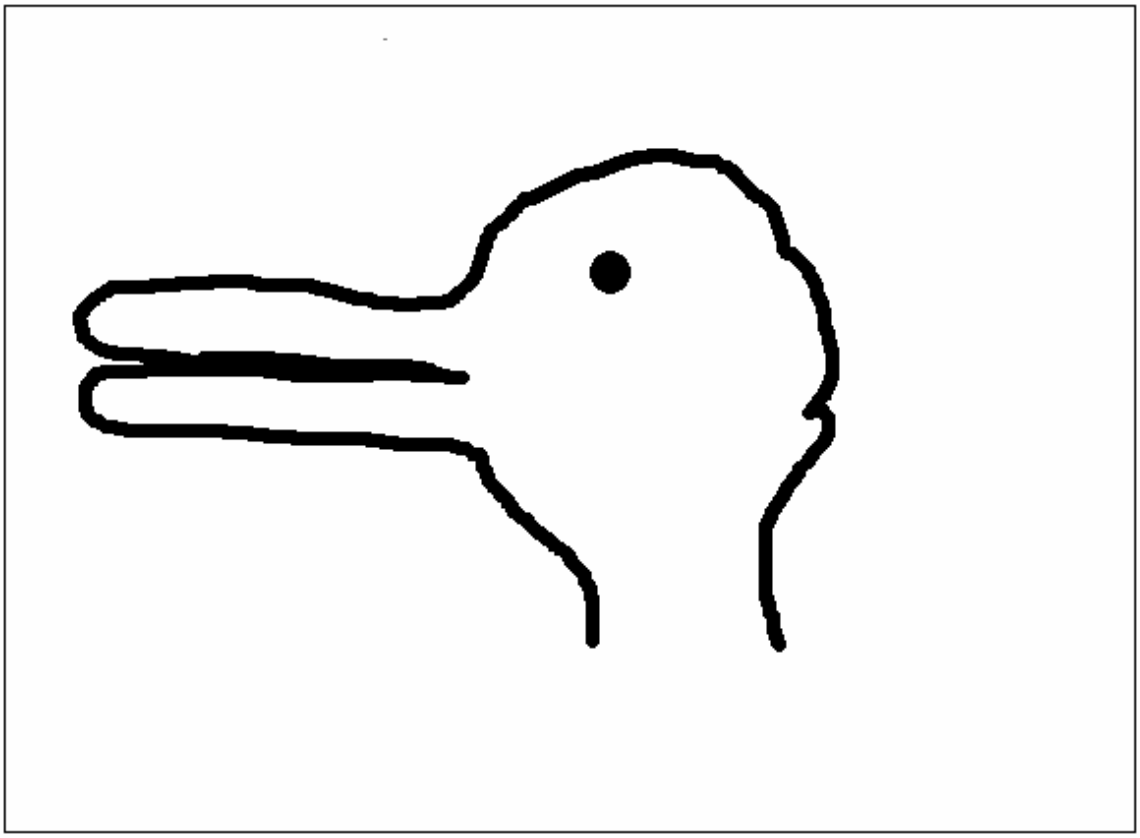
APPENDIX 2

THE DUCK-RABBIT DRAWING
(after an illustration by J. Jastrow)



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