Philosophers who put the novel to work in ethics commonly present some picture of what they think they are doing. Invariably, this consists of claims regarding the nature of philosophy, what the novel is about and how the gap between them might be bridged. The image often sought is that of the philosopher as the experienced drill sergeant, as competent in addressing the novel as the sergeant is with command. The philosopher is not the innocent civilian placed for the first time in charge of a body of troops.

Novel-using philosophers traverse what Stuart Hampshire calls ‘the middle ground’.1 Philosophers are pictured tracking between philosophy and art, working forwards and backwards across the terrain between the argument (or the clarity that philosophy seeks) and the novel (or those features in the novel that appear rewarding). This way of interrogating the novel is not literary criticism. It also falls well short of a systematic account of the relations between philosophy and art. What it does imply, however, is a method, a way of reaching the novel from philosophy and of returning that goes beyond, but does not lose touch with, the general life enhancing knowledge that attentive reading often provides.

One of the qualities essential to reading is the capacity of readers to put themselves in the position of the other. ‘Without this power of sympathy,’ Joyce Cary remarks,2 ‘there is no revelation.’ Reading asks for open-mindedness towards the text that is a form of generosity. When the reader is ungenerous, patience in the face of the novel’s deliberate ambiguities is too easily lost, as it is with meanings that are intentionally left open or are presented as incomplete. Reading with generosity means a preparedness to embrace the novel’s world, and, indeed, novel-using philosophers have needed no encouragement to
read the novel in precisely this way. Thus, waiting on the novel means not judging it in advance. It expresses the willingness to listen to the novel’s voice, but now the central question presents itself – what is it for the novel to speak to philosophy in its own voice? Is aesthetics now being asked to do the work of ethics, or should philosophy be under-demanding of the novelist’s art?

This kind of philosophical interest in the novel stems as much from concern about the aims and arguments of ethics as it does from the attractions of the novel. For Rorty, the novel is an invitation for us to think. It is a way of stirring ethics up since it is also a counter to the essentialism that Rorty finds so oppressive. Moral philosophy should learn from the novel’s distinguishing features. Grasp of detail, enthusiasm for narrative, comprehension of accident alongside purpose, surprise as well as design – all these should draw the philosopher in. And, so, for Rorty, what the philosopher should emulate is what the novelist finds most heroic, ‘not the ability to sternly reject all descriptions save one, but rather the ability to move back and forth between them’.3

If we were to accept Rorty’s picture, philosophy should entertain openness to new vocabularies, and of these the most pressing for us is the vocabulary appropriate to crossing from one genre to another. Within any particular genre we look to the criteria of judgement that are appropriate, but in passage between texts what criteria could there be? Where Hampshire sees the middle ground between philosophy and the novel as one of ‘inner conflict and uncertainty’4 Rorty visualises freedom. Where one sees the danger of misunderstanding, possibly mutual incomprehension, the other sees a desirable mutuality, a plurality of standpoints.

We are faced, in other words, with a problem in the relations between ethics and literature that is endemic. What Rorty terms ‘the ability to move back and forth’ between genres is one that requires a voice, not simply because of the need to articulate and distinguish events, but also to provide a sense of direction. Manufacturing a voice, as one critic does by describing Dylan Thomas’s The Map of Love as ‘autogeography’,5 does little to help us. What this particular manufactured voice communicates is the amalgam of autobiography and sense of place that Thomas’s stories display. But no single manufactured voice could express or, indeed, grasp the inter-textual travelling that we wish to undertake and explain.

Could metaphor illuminate the kind of understanding at work? The moral philosopher, it might be said, stands to the novel as the miner does to the quarry. Both are concerned to develop the best possible