The Novel’s Gifts

When it is free from didacticism, free from ‘the imposed surprises of literary convention and the teacher’s lesson’,¹ the novel’s ethical appeal can be made tentatively apparent. The novel invites our collaboration. It asks that we re-enact its narrative course, that we enter its fictional world. From this achieved perspective, we glean little by way of facts or techniques for living. Rather we embrace a series of images of moral possibilities that show directly, or sometimes cautiously remind us, how life’s defeats and dilemmas can be faced. The novelist’s art does not represent life, nor is it wholly captured by the understandings the novelist wishes to express. Characters in the novel are not substitutes for life, intended to take authority away from the multiple, the concrete and the real. What they offer is a source of transfiguration, of so enhancing life that its unyielding nature can be recognised and confronted. We should not be disturbed by the suggestion that we think about reading as an act of collaboration. Here there is no betrayal, no collaboration with an enemy. On the contrary, such a construction enables us to dispense with those pictures of the artist’s role that exaggerate the element of individuality in creativity. No art could sustain itself as art if its sources of inspiration were entirely private and self-enclosed. The relation between artist and audience is better conceived as mutual, common and co-operative, rather than the act of one self-contained individual seeking the most effective means to bring about changes in the consciousness of others. This is a point that R. G. Collingwood forcibly hammers home: artists become so ‘not by some process of development from within, as they grow beards; but by living in a society where these languages are current. Like other speakers, they speak to those who understand.’²

P. Johnson, Moral Philosophers and the Novel
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Collingwood’s stress on mutual understanding between artist and community is a valuable counter to romantic individualism, but it would seem to be of minimal help in explaining how one mode of discourse learns from another. How is it possible for ethics to learn in garnering its examples from the novel if what is taken depends on something unique, on something for which no exact alternative can be found? Certainly, the philosopher’s interest scarcely arises when artists are obsessed with representing themselves as philosophers, when, as Nietzsche remarks,\(^3\) they see their whole existence as one long pre-occupation with philosophy, as needing to dance attendance on it. What the philosopher looks for in art is not philosophy’s own image reflected, but something it does not expect. If Bambrough is right, philosophy’s distinctiveness comes from its being constrained by the twin requirements of reflectiveness and reflexivity. It aims neither at holding positions against all-comers nor at a defensive digging-in that protects its arguments against prolonged attack, but at showing explicitly how such positions are arrived at, by what kind of intellectual journey they are reached. Bringing a process of thought to the surface or following through a hypothesis for logical inspection are both exercises typical of philosophical reflection. The appropriate metaphor for philosophy may be the confessional, since ideas serve no purpose if they are concealed. It is different with the novel, and not just because passages in the novel can be made deliberately ambiguous or meanings artfully disguised. Occasionally, novelists (think here of Dickens) make an appearance in their novels as the author. Sometimes, they daringly remind readers that the novel’s world is not the real world, so challenging them to doubly suspend their disbelief. There is something peculiar in thinking of philosophers doing this. On the confessional model there is nothing for them to appear in. No artefact exists separate from philosophy’s self-portrait in which they can paint their presence or add their signature. Consider the extreme oddity of a philosopher interjecting a note to the reader – this is the author speaking.

For some philosophers, it is not the example in the novel that should be the focus of attention, but the philosophy in the example. Where strict concentration on the philosophical deployment of the example is seen as sufficient, there is no incentive to stray into literary regions beyond argument. From this standpoint, the novel itself is relegated to the shadows. Critics of Winch’s attack on universalisability commonly make this move, even when acknowledging, as they must, the seriousness with which Winch reads the novel. For such philosophical critics, the example’s purpose is to illustrate a philosophical claim.