Fiction and the Good

Philosophers such as Rhees who emphasise the importance of serious examples in ethics do not speak about them as moral theory does. A philosophical commentary on the novel must allow moral questions to speak for themselves. The novel is not a description of moral life, nor does it merely raise issues for debate, one reader, say, taking the side of a fictional character’s decision, another against. Indeed, the apparent oddity of this way of speaking reveals the philosophical difficulty. To abstract the issues from the characters and the characters from their lives in the novel is to look, for instance, at Vere’s dilemma in Melville’s *Billy Budd*, from the outside, not as he looks at it himself. But, if abstraction is closed to us, what language of reading is appropriate? Not one, in Rhees’ view, that permits free entry into the novel’s world by allowing endings to be changed or the lives of characters rewritten. Whatever language it is, it is not that of the devised example. The Anna Karenina to whose fate we might respond with tears cannot be altered at will, even by philosophers reflecting on the logic of such a response. For art contains a purposeful inventiveness which is lacking in life and from which we learn. Thus, it is always possible in life to be surprised by people we think we know. It is always possible to come across features in another’s life that force us to recognise that we were mistaken about them, or to see that how they live is not as we once thought. But what discovery of this kind could we make about Anna that we are not told about in the novel?

The distinction between art and life is at work here, and it arises, for Rhees, because ‘the intelligibility which the dramatist or novelist achieves is an intelligibility of construction.’¹ The story of Anna is a literary construction and, like all stories, how the human life it portrays turns out has everything to do with that form’s authorship, with

---

¹ P. Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel* © Peter Johnson 2004
the aesthetic opportunities and constraints the form implies. There are
beginnings and tragic endings in life as well as art: stories, however, are
not lived, but told. In stories as much as in life, it is only in retrospect
that hopes are fulfilled or left unrealised, but stories are shaped by a
contrived form in which, in the author’s hands, dramatic tensions are
increased or relaxed and crises manufactured or erased. Hence, Anna
cannot surprise us in the same way we might be surprised in life.
We do not, then, enter the novel by changing it, nor is there any-
thing in the novel that corresponds exactly to the discoveries that
enable us to be surprised in life. But can we put ourselves in the place
of fictional characters? Is it possible to ask what we would decide
seeing the same difficulties as they see, facing the same circumstances
that face them? Such questions seem to make realisable demands on
readers, since we are not looking for anything outside the novel, but
rather following its lead as a common reader would. Further, we should
remember that these are precisely the queries raised by Winch in his
discussion of Vere’s decision to sentence Budd to hang. So they are
central to philosophical argument, not simply features of a noticeably
sensitive reading.

When, however, we turn to Rhees’ discussion of the dilemma that
faces Sue Bridehead in Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, we find him unwilling
to concede sense to these questions. In the novel, Sue has to choose
between staying with Jude and returning to the husband she does not
love. In Rhees’ view, it is ‘nonsense’ for readers to ask what they
would do in her place. This suggests that some trespass has occurred,
that in seeking such a response we are straying beyond an imaginative
understanding of Sue’s choice into altogether more troublesome and
disturbing regions. Rhees implies a boundary between sense and non-
sense in the way the novel is read. But, then, if this is so, does empathy
for Sue have to be excluded, since empathy requires that we imagine
Sue having those feelings and that we actively share them? Could
there be an ‘imaginative understanding’ which was not expressive of
some degree of empathy? Or is it rather that her decision cannot be
hypothesised?

One possible answer has to do with the gap Rhees draws between art
and life. Art offers a space for reflection, from the horrors portrayed in
*King Lear*, for instance, from which, as Rhees writes, ‘I must have
turned away if I were there.’ A different answer, again, reflects his
view that it is ‘generally idle’ to ask what one might do in the position
of another, since in moral life there is simply no standard position for
all to be in. The decision that Sue faces is not one that can be