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# Artículos

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## Redemption from egotism: James and Proust as spiritual exercises

### La Redención del Egotismo: James y Proust como Ejercicios Espirituales

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#### Resumen

Partiendo de la recomendaciones de Harold Bloom sobre qué leer y por qué, se plantea que la literatura imaginativa, más que la argumentativa, es la manera más eficiente de alcanzar una autonomía intelectual. Una clase de autonomía que lo libera a uno de formas de pensamiento estereotipadas sobre los seres humanos. Luego estos planteamiento se extrapolan a los escritores James y Proust como ejemplos de creadores de obras liberadoras del egotismo.

**Palabras clave:** Egotismo, James, Proust, novelas literarias.

#### Abstract

Based on the recommendations of Harold Bloom regarding what one should read and why, the article proposes that imaginative literature, more than argumentative literature, is the most efficient way to reach intellectual autonomy, a kind of autonomy that liberates one from stereotyped forms of thought regarding human beings. After stating these positions, the writers James and Proust are extrapolated as examples of creators of works that free one from egotism.

**Key words:** Egotismo, James, Proust, literary novels.

#### 1. Bloomian autonomy and the avoidance of cant

Harold Bloom is America's wisest, most learned, and most helpful student of literature. He has recently published a book called *How to read and why*. In it he says that "The ultimate answer to the question 'Why read?' is that only deep, constant reading fully establishes and augments an autonomous self." (p. 195).

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Recibido: Septiembre 2001 • Aceptado: Octubre 2001

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By “reading” Bloom means “reading novels, plays, short stories and poems”. The dozens of books that he tells us how to read in his new book do not include any philosophical works. It is an implicit premise of his work that imaginative, rather than argumentative, literature is the most efficient way to achieve autonomy. The philosophers and religious writers he discusses in his other books are people like Emerson and Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism—writers who make as little use of argument as do Pindar or Nabokov. By using “reading” to mean reading books which do not argue, Bloom is falling in with the practice of what I have been calling, in these lectures, “the literary culture”.

Much of Bloom’s advice about how to read concerns the need to avoid what he calls “ideology”. When he uses this term, he is thinking primarily of attempts to use Heideggerian-Derridean critiques of metaphysics, or Marxist-Foucauldian critiques of capitalism or of “power”, to tell you what to look for when reading imaginative literature. He believes—rightly, in my opinion—that the dominance in US departments of literature first of “theory” and then of “cultural studies” has made it more difficult for students to read well. For such attempts to give politics or philosophy hegemony over literature diminish the redemptive power of works of the imagination.

Bloom’s criticism of transitory and local academic fashions is not terribly important in itself. But it underlines his conviction that it is imaginative novelty, rather than argumentation, that does most for the autonomy of the entranced reader. Bloom need not deny that works of political economy such as Marx’s, or of philosophy such as Derrida’s, can offer such novelty, nor that exposure to such novelties can transform a reader’s life. But the kind of autonomy he is thinking of is primarily the sort that liberates one from one’s own previous ways of thinking about the lives and fortunes of individual human beings.

It is by causing us to rethink our judgments of particular people that imaginative literature does most to help us break with our own pasts. The resulting liberation may, of course, lead one to try to change the political or economic or religious or philosophical status quo. Such an attempt may begin a lifetime of effort to break through the received ideas that serve to justify present-day institutions. But it also may result merely in one’s becoming a more sensitive, more knowledgeable, wiser person. The latter is the sort of change that comes over Lambert Strether (the hero of James’ novel *The Ambassadors*). This sort of change—increase of sympathy rather than change of ideas—contrasts with the sort of change that comes over Tom Joad (the hero of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*), and also with the sort described in novels that focus on loss or acquisition of religious faith.

Bloom’s thesis about how to attain this sort of autonomy chimes with my claim that the replacement of religion and philosophy by literature is a change for the better. We are both saying that the best way to achieve Heideggerian authenticity—the best way, as Nietzsche said, to “become who you are”—is not to ask “what is the truth?” but rather to ask “what sorts of people are there in the world, and how do they fare?”

Answers to this question are provided by novels like Steinbeck's, Zola's and Stowe's—novels that tell you about the wretchedly poor. They are also provided by novels like James' and Proust's that tell you about rich people expanding their horizons. Reading either sort of novel may help the reader to transcend the parents, teachers, customs, and institutions that have blinkered her imagination, and thereby permit her to achieve greater individuality and greater self-reliance.

Bloom regards ideology—in the sense of a set of general ideas which provide a context in which the reader places every book she reads—as an enemy of autonomy. Insofar as he is suspicious of treatises by theologians and philosophers it is because he fears they may give rise to bad reading habits. His ideal reader hopes that the next book she reads will recontextualize *all* the books she has previously read—that she will encounter an authorial imagination so strong as to sweep her off her feet, transport her into a world she has never known existed. In this new world, all the authors and characters with whom she has previously been acquainted will look different—as Milton looks different when one encounters him in Blake, Hegel when one encounters him in Marx, or Hamlet when one encounters him in Eliot. The reader's real-life friends, relations and neighbors will also look different, as will their motives and choices.

In my first lecture I said that what Heidegger called authenticity and what Bloom calls autonomy are pretty much the same thing. The attempt to achieve either is epitomized in the maxim that Bloom quotes from Dr. Johnson “Clear your mind of cant”. “Cant”, in this sense, means something like “what people usually say without thinking, the standard thing to say, what one normally says.” In Heideggerian terms it is what ‘das Man’ says.

Cant can be anything from the untutored common sense (the so-called “folk wisdom”) of a peasant village, through the unthinking reiteration of quotations from sacred scripture, to the equally unthinking reiteration of the best-known sentences in the works of Heidegger or of Bloom himself. What makes cant cant is not its content but its easy accessibility and intelligibility—its ready-made character. Cant is what imaginative attempts at redescription become when they lose their freshness, and thus their ability to make us suspicious of received ideas. Every piece of cant was once a poetic achievement—a fresh and novel way of thinking about things. Every poetic achievement runs the danger of being turned into cant. Such a transformation is almost inevitable for argumentative works that have become staples of the educational process. It is less easily achieved, fortunately in the case of non-argumentative works, and particular works of fiction.

To sum up what I have been saying: all writing that is not merely a matter of conveying information offers, explicitly or implicitly, a context in which to put many propositions we have previously believed, many of the people we have known, many parts of our own life-stories, and many of the books we have previously read. Poems, novels, and works of literary criticism such as Johnson's and Eliot's and Bloom's do this, just as do systems of philosophy, or compendia of folk-wisdom. But the former sort of writing is less easily turned into cant. This is because it hints rather than proclaims, suggests rather than argues, and offers implicit rather than explicit advice.

The more poetic and the less argumentative a piece of writing is, the less easy it is to make it bear an unambiguous interpretation, and so the less easy to turn into “what we would normally say”. Clarity and rigor are virtues in argumentative writing, but they are not relevant to plays or poems.

If there were such a thing as redemptive truth, the sort of truth that philosophy has traditionally hoped to offer, it would redeem by virtue of its explicit *content*, not because of its non-cognitive relation to a particular audience. Grasping the content of what one hears or reads is a matter of fitting what is said into a coherent set of inferential relationships to other utterances. Clarity and rigor are measures of ease of fit. So redemptive truth, if it existed, would be recognized as such because it would produce maximal clarity and maximal coherence.

By contrast, making the acquaintance of Dostoevsky or Iago, Emma Bovary or Marcel Proust, Milton’s Satan or St. Luke’s Christ, may well change one’s behavior toward oneself or toward others, and perhaps even toward things in general. But the change is not a matter of everything falling nicely into place, fitting together beautifully. It is instead a matter of finding oneself transported, moved to a place from which a different prospect is available.

The contrast between imaginative and argumentative writing is parallel to the one that Kierkegaard draws between “what is said” and “how it is said”. *What* is said is content—that is to say, the result of placing the utterance within a familiar inferential pattern. *How* it is said is a matter of the effect produced on a particular reader at a particular moment by the utterance. Kierkegaard drew this distinction between the how and the what in terms of the difference between “truth as subjectivity” and “objective” truth. But the term “subjective truth” is an oxymoron that produces more confusion than enlightenment. A better way to capture the distinction Kierkegaard wanted to draw is to invoke the difference between causes and reasons.

A turn of phrase in a conversation or a novel or a poem—a new way of putting things, a novel metaphor or simile—can make all the difference to the way we look at a whole range of phenomena. So can an encounter with a new and strange person, in real life or in a novel or a play. But we are usually at a loss when asked to spell out what new proposition we came to believe as a result of exposure to the phrase or the person. The difference to the way we think is not a matter of adding a new belief to our repertoire. Kierkegaard’s paradigm case of what he called ‘truth as subjectivity’ was the Christian’s relation to Christ—a relation that cannot be reduced to belief in the articles of a creed. Our relation to Iago or Dostoevsky, to our parents, or to our first love, is equally irreducible. These people cause us to act differently without necessarily having given us reasons for doing so.

The distinction between causes and reasons ties in with the difference between Bloom’s desire for openness and the philosopher’s desire for completeness. Bloom quotes Rabbi Tarphon as saying “It is not necessary for you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it”. He glosses this as “If it were

necessary for any among us to complete the work, then we might break off in despair, because the work can never be completed.” (p. 280)

The work in question is that of enlarging oneself. That requires being ready to be bowled over by tomorrow’s experiences—to remain open to the possibility that the next book you read, or the next person you meet, will change your life. Increased rationality—increased coherence of belief and desire—cannot close itself off from this possibility of disruption without falling victim to cant. You are such a victim insofar as you believe that you already possess criteria for judging the value of any books or people you may encounter—criteria that will provide you with good and sufficient reasons for tucking each of them into some familiar pigeonhole. To avoid such victimization, you must give up one of the dreams of philosophy—the dream of completeness, of the imperturbability attributed by the wise, of the mastery supposedly possessed by those who have, once and for all, achieved completion by achieving enlightenment.

There is, Bloom could easily grant, no such thing as complete autonomy—a mind entirely free of cant, entirely its own. (Though perhaps Shakespeare came close). But there does not have to be such a thing. For Bloom’s point, like Rabbi Tarphon’s, is that the journey that matters. The fantasy of a resting-place prepared for us at the end of the journey is one that we should see as both impossible and undesirable, even though such fantasies are perhaps inevitable. When literature replaces religion and philosophy, it becomes clear that nobody and no thing could have prepared such a place. Instead, each generation of imaginative writers offers new suggestions about what such a place might look like, only to have this suggestion mocked by the next generation. This mockery will begin to be heard as soon as the earlier suggestion has begun to sound like cant.

## 2. The Novel

I want now to narrow my focus from imaginative literature in general to the novel—the genre that Henry James rightly called “the most independent, the most elastic, most prodigious of literary forms”. (*The Ambassadors*, Everyman edition, p. 19) The novel is the best illustration of Bloom’s claim about the results of constant and intense reading. It played the central role in the moral education of young intellectuals in the West during the century that has just ended.

Given the immense influence that the novel has come to have in recent times, it is hard for us to remember that such writers as Milton and Spinoza, Dr. Johnson and Hume, Burke and Kant, were familiar with only a few, rather primitive, examples of this genre. The burgeoning of the novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has altered the map of the Western intellectual world. It has done so in ways that the philosophers and literary critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth century could never have foreseen.

The emergence of the novel has contributed to a growing conviction among the intellectuals that when we think about the effects of our actions on other human beings we can simply ignore a lot of questions that our ancestors

traditionally thought relevant. These include Euthyphro's question about whether our actions are pleasing to the gods, Plato's question about whether they are dictated by a clear vision of the Good, and Kant's question about whether their maxims can be universalized. Instead, a decision about what to do should be determined by as rich and full a knowledge of other people as possible—in particular, knowledge of their own descriptions of their actions and of themselves. Our actions can be justified only when we are able to see how these actions look from the points of view of all those affected by them.

Seen in this light, what novels do for us is to let us know how people quite unlike ourselves think of themselves, how they contrive to put actions that appall us in a good light, how they give their lives meaning. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes a problem of how to balance our needs against theirs, and their self-descriptions against ours. To have a more educated, developed and sophisticated moral outlook is to be able to grasp more of these needs, and to understand more of these self-descriptions.

I have said previously that religion, in its unphilosophized form, resembles the novel in that it attempts to put us in relations to persons which are not mediated by questions of truth. The relation between a pious but uneducated Athenian of the fifth century and one of the Olympian deities, like that between an illiterate Christian and Christ, is an attempt to find redemption by getting in touch with a special, very powerful, immortal, sort of person. As Nietzsche said in *The birth of tragedy*, that sort of search for redemption becomes tinted with questions of truth only when Socrates, "with his belief in the explicability of the nature of things", suggests that "the mechanism of making concepts, judgments and inferences [is to be] prized above all other human activities" (section 15). The search becomes philosophical only after people like Socrates and Euripides have taken a skeptical stance toward the gods, a stance that Homer, and perhaps even Aeschylus, would have been incapable of adopting.

The big difference, however, between religious worship and novel-reading is that immortals are the object of adoration or self-abnegating love or fearful obedience, rather than people in whose shoes we are trying to put ourselves. As soon as we begin to want to *understand* the gods, or to make Christianity or Buddhism *reasonable*, religion begins to fade away and be replaced by philosophy. That is why Martin Luther described such attempts at reasonableness as diabolical temptations, and why Kierkegaard described them as occasions of sin.

Novels rarely offer us god-like heroes and heroines, to whom our reaction resembles that of religious believers toward deities. (Though some, of course, do—Superman comic books and the fantasies of Ayn Rand, for example.) Most novels tell us how other erring mortals think of themselves, how they contrive to put the actions that appall us in a good light, how they give meaning to their miserable or tragic or banal lives. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes the problem of how to balance our needs against those of people like them. That, in turn, is a problem of how to balance their surprising descriptions of



themselves and of us against our own previous descriptions of both. Moral sophistication is the ability to achieve such balance.

Obviously, the novel is not the only literary genre which helps us achieve such sophistication. Homer's epics, Herodotus' travelogues, Thucydides' history, Theophrastus' characterology, and Plutarch's biographies did this sort of work in the ancient world, supplemented by such primitive fictions as those of Petronius and Apuleius. In our own time, ethnography, historiography, and journalism continue to broaden our sense of the possibilities open to human lives. But the novel is the genre which gives us most help in grasping the variety of human life and the contingency of our own moral vocabulary. Novels are the principal means which help us imagine what it is like to be a cradle Catholic losing his faith, a redneck fundamentalist taking Jesus into her heart, a victim of Pinochet coping with the disappearance of her children, a kamikaze pilot of the Second World War living with the fact of Japan's defeat, a bomber pilot who dropped fire-bombs on Tokyo coping with the moral price of America's victory, or an idealistic politician coping with the pressures that multinational corporations bring to bear on the political process.

Novel-reading often increases tolerance for strange, and initially repellent, sorts of people. But the motto of the novel is not "to understand all is to forgive all." Rather, it is "Before you decide that an action was unforgivable, make sure that you know how it looked to the agent." You may well conclude that it was indeed unforgivable, but the knowledge of why it was done may help you avoid committing actions that you yourself will later find unforgivable. That is why reading a great many novels is the process by which young intellectuals of our time hope to become wise. This hope is the same that drove young intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to read a great many religious and philosophical treatises.

These earlier readers were enmeshed in what Heidegger called the "onto-theological tradition". They sought truth as something distinct from either human or divine persons. By contrast, reading novels is a way of getting in touch with persons, just as reading Hesiod and the *Old Testament* were, for their original readers, ways of getting in touch with persons. To say that the way to get in better touch with the truth is to get in touch with an increased variety of persons is a natural consequence of the view that the propositions we are entitled to call true are those that we think can be justified to all those whose opinion matters.

The latter view, best represented by Habermas' theory of communicative reason, is a humanistic view of truth that breaks sharply with the onto-theological tradition. If one both takes this view of truth and is unable to believe in the existence of non-human persons, then the search for objective truth becomes an attempt to find intersubjective agreement among the children of one's own time rather than correspondence to non-human, ahistorical, reality. Once this transformation in one's conception of truth occurs, the next question is: To what sorts of people do we have to justify our beliefs and actions? This, in turn, raises the question: What sort of people are there, and which ones matter? That last question is the one that novels help us answer.

Philosophers and theologians who are dubious about the idea that novels are important for moral education think that one can answer the sort of question I have just raised by saying, for example, “all children of God matter” or “all rational agents matter” or “all those affected by our actions matter”. But questions always arise about whether infidels count as children of God, or the densely ignorant and stupid as rational agents, or whether we are justified in being paternalistic toward those who do not grasp their own best interests. An increasing sense of the vacuity of general formulae for deciding hard cases leads us away from philosophy and toward literary forms that tell us more about what these recalcitrant sort of people look like to themselves.

I can sum up much of what I have been saying as follows: people read religious scriptures and philosophical treatises to escape from ignorance of how non-human things are, but they read novels to escape from egotism. “Egotism”, in the sense in which I am using the term, does not mean “selfishness”. It means something more like “self-satisfaction.” It is a willingness to assume that one already has all the knowledge necessary for deliberation, all the understanding of the consequences of a contemplated action that could be needed. It is the idea that one is now fully informed, and thus in the best possible position to make correct choices.

Egotists who are inclined to philosophize hope to short-circuit the need to find out what is on the mind of other people. They would like to go straight to the way things are (to the will of God, or the moral law, or the nature of human beings) without passing through other peoples’ self-descriptions. Religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance because they suggest that this sort of short-circuiting has actually been accomplished. Novel-readers, by contrast, are seeking redemption from insensitivity rather than from impiety or irrationality. They may not know or care whether there is a way things really are, but they worry about whether they are sufficiently aware of the needs of others. Viewed from this angle, the hegemony of the novel can be viewed as an attempt to carry through on Christ’s suggestion that love is the only law.

To be egotistic in the relevant sense is to be satisfied that the vocabulary one uses when deciding how to act is all right just as it is, and that there is no need to figure out what vocabularies others are using which justify them, in their own eyes, from doing things one regards as wrong. Euthyphro was egoistic, and so was Mr. Gradgrind. Euthyphro thought he had religious justification for his egoism, and Mr. Gradgrind philosophical justification. Socrates reminded Euthyphro that the gods differ among themselves about what is morally important. Dickens reminded his Gradgrind-minded readers that there are other ways of describing the results of their actions than the one provided by the vocabulary of utilitarianism.

The relevant difference between Socrates and Dickens is that Socrates, with his taste for what Nietzsche called “the mechanism of making concepts, judgments and inferences”, was hoping for certainty: for the ability to make unquestionably correct decisions once he had found the right definition of the term “pious”. Dickens, on the other hand, was interested neither in defining terms nor

in correct inferences, but rather in making us aware of forms of suffering that we might have overlooked. The contrast I have been drawing between seeking redemption from ignorance and seeking redemption from egotism runs parallel to the distinction between seeking greater self-confidence and seeking greater awareness of what hurts other people.

This contrast also runs parallel to the distinctions between knowing that and knowing how, and between the skills of the axiomatizing mathematician and those of the artisan. The person who hopes to render more confident moral judgments as a result of the study of religious or philosophical treatises is usually hoping to find a principle that will permit of application to concrete cases, for an algorithm that will resolve moral dilemmas. But the person who hopes for greater sensitivity just wants to develop the know-how that will let him make the best of what is always likely to be a pretty bad job—a situation in which people are likely to get hurt, no matter what decision is taken.

### **3. James and Proust as paradigms of the novel**

I shall take up this contrast between principles and sensitivity again below, when I discuss Martha Nussbaum's attempt to treat Henry James' novels as contributions to moral philosophy. But first I want to narrow my focus still more, and to turn from generalizations about the novel as a genre to some remarks about two novelists, James and Marcel Proust. The works of these two men typically play a special role in the lives of their admirers.

For a large number of people in the world today, their sense of who they are is bound up with their memories of certain novels they read when they were young. When they reflect on their idea of a perfect human life, they remember the worlds into which those novels introduced them, and the people who inhabited those worlds. When they try to recall what experiences have made the most difference to the ways in which they deal with other human beings, they remember the effects of the first reading of those novels. In the West, Proust is probably the novelist most frequently cited by people of this sort. In anglophone countries, James is mentioned with comparable frequency.

Literary tradition and influence are of course largely national affairs. Most of the novels which made a big difference to their readers were written in those readers' native languages, and dealt with local conditions—particularly the familial and social problems which troubled them in our youth, and the cultural changes which were going on while they were growing up. But certain novelists have become objects of adoration by cults whose membership is not restricted to nations or regions. Members of these cults are bound to one another, despite differences in ethnicity and nationality, in somewhat the same way that Christians from Japan and from Denmark, or Muslims from Morocco and Indonesia, are bound to one another. When they are thrown together in foreign parts, they rejoice to find a fellow-worshipper, someone who cherishes the same images and

the same texts that they do themselves. Proust and James are novelists around whom such cults have grown up.

For cultists like myself, remembering our first reading of these authors is central to the story we tell about our own growing up. They helped make us the people we are, and our gratitude remains intense. Insofar as we consider any books sacred, their novels count as such. So we find it irritating and misleading to find them brought under the category of "the aesthetic", as opposed to "the moral" or "the spiritual". We can of course acknowledge that there are beautiful passages in these novels, and that they are triumphs of literary craftsmanship. But these facts are no more essential to our relation to these books than the prose of the King James Version is to the Christian's relation to Christ, or the architecture of Nara and Kyoto is to the religious life of the Japanese Buddhist.

James and Proust do a lot for the plausibility of Bloom's suggestion that the spiritual education of the young might better be entrusted to imaginative literature than to religious tradition or to the study of moral philosophy. For anybody who has been caught up in the work of either man is likely to be exceptionally sensitive to the dangers of egotism. Such people are more aware than most of how easy it is to describe other people in ways tailored to our own needs rather than to theirs. Readers of James and Proust are not only more aware to the needs of others, but are also more likely to aspire to the sort of experience which is vaguely and roughly called "a higher state of consciousness". The moments of understanding and revelation which occur more and more frequently as novels like *The Ambassador* and *The guermentes way* reach their climaxes are the analogue, in these readers' lives, of the life-changing events that Henry James' brother William described in his book *The varieties of religious experience*.

This analogy with religious experience helps differentiate James and Proust from such novelists as Dickens and Balzac. All four have been made into cult figures, but the Dickensians form a different sort of cult from the Proustians. Both are made of people who love to revisit their favorite characters and scenes from the novels, to allude to their favorite passages, and to discuss the relative merits and demerits of the various characters. But most Dickensians would not say that Dickens had *changed* their lives, as opposed to *enriching* their lives. Dickens (like Trollope and Wodehouse) confirms our intuitions, whereas Proust unsettles them.

Proust and James are often thought of as *educating* us in the way that Socrates and Shakespeare educated us. For they do not just give us vivid portraits of previously unfamiliar people, they also force us to experience vivid doubts about ourselves. Such doubts may of course arise in reading any novel, as when we encounter a character in whom we recognize some of our own most unpleasant traits. But the sorts of doubts aroused by reading James and Proust go deeper than that. Their books raise the same kinds of doubts as books like *The pilgrim's progress* raise for Christians. These are doubts about whether there is any health in us, whether our egotism may not go much deeper than we have realized.

Just as those who have had what they describe as religious experiences are rarely able to spell out what new truths they learned by having them, so worshippers of Proust and James are usually baffled when asked what truths they picked up from these men's novels that they might otherwise have missed. It is the experience of reading the novel that makes one into a rather different sort of person, not the utility of a belief one might have acquired by various other means, even if one had never picked up that particular book. Just as Christians will say that their relationship to Jesus is not exactly to the author of the Sermon on the Mount, but rather to someone with whom they live on terms of intimacy, so many readers of James and Proust will insist that what matters is their relation to the novels themselves, or perhaps to the novelist himself, rather than to any set of beliefs for which the novels might be cited as justification.

John Bayley, in his introduction to James' *The wings of the dove*, says that "[James'] later mode of artistic inquiry is a way of overcoming loneliness, of extending an almost tactile intimacy to the potential reader through the mode of words... Consciousness seems shared between author, characters and reader, and the participation of the last has its own special rewards and fascinations, which can arise out of bafflement itself. Intimacy is never a matter of being told what to think. It is like the secret converse of lovers, whose understanding is not dependent on a single authority". The sense of having engaged in such secret converse with James or with Proust is what binds members of their cults together.

Just as religious readers find them caught up in something larger than themselves, something that occasionally resembles orgasmic ecstasy, so readers of James and Proust find themselves caught up in the sort of suddenly shared enlargement of the imagination and suddenly shared intensity of appreciation of the passing moment that occurs when two lovers find their loves reciprocated. Proust and James offer their readers redemption, but not redemptive truth, just as his or her love redeems the lover, but does not add to his or her knowledge.

#### **4. Martha Nussbaum on James**

Many recent writers have done their best to say why James and Proust have the power they do—why they have become paradigms of novel-writing in the way that Galileo and Newton became paradigms of scientific explanation, or Locke and Kant paradigms of philosophical reflection. One of the most influential of these writers is Martha Nussbaum, whose reading of James in her pathbreaking and liberating book *Love's knowledge*, published in 1992, began a widespread discussion of the relation between moral philosophy and literature.

Nussbaum tries to bring James together with Aristotle, and specifically with Aristotle's moral philosophy. Her work is part of a trend that has emerged in recent decades within anglophone philosophy: a turn away from Kant, and more generally away from the idea that morality is a matter of applying general principles. Philosophers have grown tired of the pendulum swing between Kant's categorical imperative and the greatest-happiness principle of Mill and Bentham. They have begun to

adopt a pox-on-both-your-houses attitude, and to look around for a way of philosophizing about right and wrong that is not an attempt to establish universal moral truths. So Aristotle's anti-Platonic insistence that moral virtue cannot be reduced to the application of such truths has come back into vogue.

Nussbaum treats the Aristotelian approach to moral philosophy as helping us make sense of the change in patterns of moral education that has taken place since the days when Kant and Mill wrote—a change that I have been emphasizing in these lectures, and which Nussbaum was one of the first philosophers to take seriously. This change has made the reading of fiction central to the attempt of young intellectuals to find themselves. As Nussbaum points out, Aristotle's way of thinking about moral education softens the dichotomy between literature and philosophy created by Plato's and Kant's preferences for explicit definition and for deductive moral reasoning.

Nussbaum defines "perception" as "the ability to discern, acutely and responsibly, the salient features of one's particular situation" (p. 37). She goes on to say "It is very clear, in both Aristotle and James, that one point of the emphasis on perception is to show the ethical crudeness of moralities based exclusively on general rules, and to demand for ethics a much finer responsiveness to the concrete—including features that have not been seen before and could not therefore have been housed in any antecedently built system of rules."

Nussbaum insists, however, that perception by itself will not do. Perceptiveness can be displayed simply by acting well, whereas moral knowledge—an answer to the question "How should a human being live?" is a matter of matter of discovering and stating truths. Inarticulate skill is not enough. Although many readers of Aristotle have interpreted his claim that ethical virtue is a matter of *phronesis* rather than *episteme* as saying that the discovery of truths is irrelevant to the acquisition of moral virtue, Nussbaum does not read him in this way. For she thinks of moral philosophy as aiming at a "true and accurate depiction of various elements of life" (p. 6).

On her view poetry and philosophy are both truth-seeking activities, and the truths they find help us answer some of the same questions. She says that the Greeks viewed "dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics" as "ways of pursuing a single and general question, namely, how human beings should live" (p. 15). Nussbaum attempts to reconcile this roughly "cognitivist" approach to moral philosophy, and this very un-Nietzschean approach to Greek dramatic poetry, with the claim that Proust and James would be right to deny that any morally relevant truths communicated by literature could "in principle be adequately stated without literature and grasped in that form by a mature mind" (p. 7).

She argues that "for an interesting family of [views about the nature of the relevant portions of human life] a literary narrative of a certain sort is the only type of text that can state them fully and fittingly, without contradiction" (p. 7). Nussbaum puts the same point in other words when she says that "only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist can adequately state certain important truths

about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them.”(p. 6).

Unlike Nussbaum, I do not find the notion of “stating truths about the world” a felicitous way of describing what James and Proust do for members of their cults. Nor do I think that it would happily describe what St. Teresa of Avila and Thomas a Kempis do for those who read these authors over and over again. Nevertheless, I heartily agree with Nussbaum that “there are valuable aspects of human moral experience that are not tapped by traditional books of moral philosophy”(p. 143). She and I agree that “a philosophical book would have a hard time mounting a direct argument” for the claim that “infidelity and failure of response are more or less inevitable features even of the best examples of loving”. (pp. 139-140) But when she asks us to see the novel and the philosophical treatise as such, and Henry James and Aristotle in particular, as collaborating in a common task—namely specifying “the good life for a human being”—I think that she understates both the difference between our intellectual world and Aristotle’s, and the superiority of ours over his.

Aristotle tells us that the hope for an explicit decision procedure for resolving moral dilemmas, a hope which he attributes to Plato, is vain. That critique of Plato seems to me a sensible way of debunking a misguided attempt to transform moral deliberation into something more like mathematical demonstration. But the Aristotle who tells us that there is a natural kind called “human being” and a good appropriate to that natural kind, is too much of a Platonic essentialist for my pragmatist taste. Though able to give up the idea of a moral *episteme*, Aristotle was not able to give up the idea that human beings share a common nature, and that philosophy can list truths about what that nature consists of—not just truths of the sort that we relegate to physiology, but truths of the sort that provide moral counsel. Many commentators have asked whether Aristotle managed to find a satisfactory middle ground between Plato and the poets. Nussbaum seems sure that he did so, but I remain unconvinced.

As I see it, James is good at showing us what it is like to notice things about other people—their needs, their fears, their self-descriptions, their descriptions of other people—which we are usually too egotistic to take account of. This seems to me what he had in mind when, in a sentence Nussbaum quotes from the Preface to *The golden bowl*, James says that reading the novel is “the very record and mirror of the general adventure of one’s intelligence”(p. 143). But I do not find it helpful to describe this noticing sort of intelligence as part of the process of discovering the good life for human beings. That seems like treating the skill of the tea taster—the person who is aware of subtle differences between the tea made from leaves produced in different climates and seasons—as part of the process of discovering the good taste for tea.

We would usually say that the tea-taster’s ability at noticing is an example of “knowing how” rather than of knowing that certain propositions are true and some false. We can of course convert the former into the latter by saying that she

knows many truths—e.g., “These tea leaves come from half way down the hill in Gopal Mukerji’s tea garden”—that the rest of us do not. But to know many such facts is not to have a theory about the nature of tea, nor about how to arrange teas in an hierarchical order. Similarly, to notice far more things about individual human beings than most people do is not to be able to contribute to an understanding of what it is to be a human being, nor to be able to say what sort of life is best for human beings as such.

My point is not simply that “knowing how to live well” is a better description of what we get both from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and from James’ *The golden bowl* than “knowing what the good life for a human being is”. It is that *neither* phrase is of much use. Both are too general—on a level with “knowing tea”. Only if one believes in the possibility of redemptive truth—the sort of thing which, on my account, philosophy hoped to provide but religion and literature do not—will one feel comfortable with either. Nussbaum is more inclined to such belief than I am. Her writings on literature and philosophy seem to me torn between loyalty to the idea that there is a subject of study called “ethics”, defined as “the search for a specification of the good life for a human being” and the suspicion, drawn from her reading of novels, that there is, at most, the ability to become what James called “finely aware and richly responsible”.

Just as the most efficient way for a young Greek to figure out how to hit the Aristotelian mean between paired excesses was to hang around with the sort of leisure-class, politically active, males whom Aristotle admired, so the efficient way for a contemporary youth to become finely aware and richly responsible is to read a lot of novels—not just Proust and James but all those lesser novels that help us grasp the needs and self-descriptions of our fellow inhabitants of a certain time and place. But the know-how acquired by these two processes does not have much to do with specifying the good life for a human being, as opposed to helping somebody who has to deal with these particular sorts of people from thoughtlessly doing unnecessary damage.

Aristotle—half demi-Platonic metaphysician and half taxonomic biologist—found “the good life for a human being” a suitable description of his topic in *Nicomachean Ethics*. We heirs of Herder and Hegel, who see the Greeks as one culture among others, are also heirs of Darwin, who see our species not as endowed with a truth-tracking faculty called “reason” but rather as endowed with language, and thus with the ability to engage in social cooperation. These two inheritances conspire to make many of us more dubious than is Nussbaum about the attempt to revive Aristotle’s vocabulary, and to treat Aristotle as more than a competent expositor of the common sense of his peers.

To recur to a point I made earlier, whereas Nussbaum thinks of herself as paying James a compliment by describing him as contributing to moral philosophy, I find this description not exactly derogatory, but certainly malapropos. I would reserve that compliment for people like Kant, Mill or Rawls. Rawls, as I read him, made a contribution to moral philosophy by formulating what he calls



the “Difference Principle”—a principle that nicely sums up many of the moral intuitions shared by contemporary social democrats, just as Kant’s categorical imperative nicely summed up many of those shared by eighteenth-century friends of the French Revolution. It makes sense to say that Rawls, by putting forward the Difference Principle, offers us a truth—one we recognize in the same way that we recognize all other truths, by seeing that it coheres nicely with most of our previous beliefs.

By contrast, I see Henry James as writing for a much smaller audience than Rawls’. His audience—the kind of people who are likely to become members of the Jacobite cult—are not in search of knowledge, but rather are trying (or find themselves tempted by James into trying) for a kind of moral virtuosity. This moral virtuosity is the secular analogue of the kind of religious virtuosity facilitated by reading *The imitation of Christ*. To try to squeeze James into the same box as Aristotle and Rawls seems to me like trying to squeeze Thomas a Kempis into the same box as Aquinas and Bishop Butler. The similarities seem to me much less important than the differences.

To bring Aristotle and James together ignores the fact that James’ main contribution to his reader’s lives is a sense of the possibility of a new level of consciousness—what Nabokov called “a sense of another world where beauty, kindness, generosity...are the norm”. The lives of the Jacobites are not enriched in the way that acquiring new true beliefs enriches, but in the way that a glimpse of a new form of life does. To follow the changes in the ways in which Maggie Verver, Charlotte Stant, Prince Amerigo and Fanny Assingham think of and treat one another as *The golden Bowl* goes along is gradually to enter a world as different from the one we usually inhabit as the third level of Plato’s divided line is from the second, or as different as the lives of the mystics are from those of the ordinary religious believer.

Like Plato, however, Nussbaum wants to assimilate all such ascent to a better grasp on what is really there. That is why she thinks it important to note that James is in no danger of “relativism” because he is “committed to the real” (p. 163), and why she proposes an analogy between the “moral knowledge” James gives us and greater sensory acuity (and therefore greater objectivity) (p. 164). I resist this assimilation because I think it preserves a notion of redemptive truth that is appropriate to philosophy but not for pre-philosophical religion or post-philosophical novels.

I turn now Nussbaum’s claim, cited earlier, that some truths cannot be expressed except in narrative form. I see this as as tempting, but as misguided, as the claim that metaphors should be read as having unparaphrasable meanings. I agree with Davidson’s criticism of this latter claim, and with his alternative view that, though metaphors may change people’s lives, but they do not do so by communicating meanings. I would say that narratives may change people’s lives, but they do not do so by communicating truths. Metaphors, Davidson argues, are causes but not reasons. So, I should argue, are narratives.

Reading Rawls or Kant or Mill gives you a reason for doing something—a moral principle from which you can try to deduce the need to act in a certain way. Reading James or Proust gives you practice in doing something that may lead you to act in a certain way. The urge to attribute meanings to metaphors and truth-candidacy to narratives seems to me to originate in the rationalist, Platonic, conviction that the only thing that should be allowed to change our lives is learning that how something *really* is. No meaning means no intentional content, which in turn means no possibility of correspondence to reality. As a result of such inferences, rationalists conclude that the power of metaphor must consist in making truth-candidates available that cannot be made available by other means. To say that novels do not offer truth would be, for rationalists, to say that novels should be viewed with the same suspicion as that with which Plato viewed the poets. So rationalists who think that they should not be so viewed have to find a way of construing them as purveying truth.

Nussbaum, to be sure, resists the suggestion that she is a rationalist in the narrow sense in which Plato, but not Aristotle, deserves this pejorative epithet. In her essay “An Aristotelian conception of rationality”, Nussbaum broadens the notion of rationality until it becomes coextensive with practically every mental activity except blindly and stubbornly resisting suggestions about alternative ways to describe what is going on. The trouble with flattening out the concept of “reason” in this way, however, is that the pursuit of truth gets flattened out into any and every attempt to render one’s beliefs and desires coherent with one another, or at least with every such attempt that is accompanied by conversability, by a willingness to hear the other side.

The distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how is blurred by this flattening process. I want to keep that distinction sharp because I want to emphasize the distinction between a philosophical culture—one dominated by the quest for redemptive knowledge about how things really are—and a literary culture. Whereas Nussbaum wants to emphasize the similarities between Aristotle and James, I want to emphasize the differences.

One way of highlighting these differences is to remark that the area of culture we call “moral philosophy” would never have existed had people not started agreeing with Socrates that reflective equilibrium is not good enough—if he had not insisted that the universal is prior to the particular, and that we therefore need universal rules and fixed definitions. So when Nussbaum says that Aristotle and James are moral philosophers who hold that the particular is prior to the universal she seems to me to be stretching the use of the term “moral philosophy” too far. For in this stretched sense any conversation about what to do—including the sort of conversations that Cephalus, Pericles, Lysis, and Phaedrus might have had with each other before they ever met Socrates—counts as moral philosophizing.

A further reason why my cultural politics, and therefore my account of the relation between philosophy and the novel, differ from Nussbaum’s is that I do not share her view that “...this is a rich and wonderful time in moral theory.” She says that “One cannot find for generations, since the time of John Stuart Mill, if not ear-

lier—an ear in which there has been so much excellent, adventurous, and varied work on the central ethical and political questions of human life” (p. 159) I would argue that most of the work on these questions that is being done today is not done in philosophy departments, and that the relevant work done in those departments in the days of Dewey was on a par with that done in the days of Rawls.

As I see it, moral and political principles of the sort put forward by Kant, Mill and Rawls summarize the intuitions that have been developed in the course of a certain stretch of historical experience. Moral philosophy of the principle-formulating sort, the sort that is often done these days in philosophy departments, is parasitic on the larger moral and political experience of the species. This is the sort of experience that is gained from living through such events as the Wars of Religion, the French Revolution, the rise of industrial capitalism, the Holocaust, the American Civil Rights Movement of the middle of the twentieth century, the end of the colonial empires, and the successive waves of feminist activism.

The intuitions which are generated by reflection on such events, and therefore the principles that summarize these intuitions, can, to be sure, be viewed in a representationalist way, as glimpses of an enduring moral reality. Seeing them this way, as Nussbaum does, leads one to view historical change as telling us more about what human beings were always like, and what their moral duties always were, rather than as telling us how human beings have changed in the course of time. Seeing them in the way Nussbaum prefers leads one to view historical change as leading to a grasp of the eternal truth of propositions rather than simply to a decrease in social and individual egotism, and to increased flexibility and sympathy in the making of moral decisions.

But if, as I do, one sees these changes not as cognitive gains but as enlargements of the imagination, one will think of moral theory of the sort Nussbaum admires as a matter of playing catch-up. Whereas Nussbaum shares what Nietzsche called Socrates’ “theoretical optimism”, and so views the philosophy professors of the day whom she most admires as forming an avant-garde, I follow Hegel in thinking that when moral philosophy paints its gray on gray, that is a sign that a certain set of moral intuitions have become familiar and banal.

This difference between us leads Nussbaum to say that novelists such as James are under an obligation “to render reality, precisely and faithfully” and to add that “in this task they are very much assisted by general principles, and by the habits and attachments that are their internalizations” (p. 155). By contrast, I think “rendering reality” the wrong compliment to pay to James (although admittedly, it is one he was inclined to pay to himself). Whenever a novelist creates a character with a set of self-descriptions and a moral outlook that we had never before imagined, we can of course say, if we like, that an aspect of reality has been captured that had not previously been so well rendered. But it is the novelty of the character and the utility of our acquaintance with her that justifies our praise, rather than the fidelity of representation. We did not know that aspect was there to be represented before we met Dimitri Karamazov or Hyacinth Robinson, nor that a

moral dilemma could be regarded as Fanny Assingham does before we overheard her talking about it with her husband.

Analogously, we are on the lookout for scientific theories or political proposals that combine novelty and utility. If we then praise them for getting something (physical nature, the relation between the states and its citizens) right, it is not because we are can compare the theory or proposal with the thing gotten right and see that they match. In short, the intertwined compliments of “successful truth-seeking,” “cognitive achievement” and “faithful representation of reality” seem to me the vestiges of an outdated philosophical tradition, whereas to Nussbaum they seem the obvious and natural way to appreciate a novelist’s achievement. So Nussbaum’s claim that “habits and attachments” are internalizations of general principles seems to me, once again, to put the cart before the horse. I see the habits and attachments as doing the work, and the principles as attempts by theorists to find a handy way of summarizing those habits and attachments.

Nussbaum’s cognitivist approach to morality leads naturally to the thought that knowing-that (knowledge of general principles) leads to the sort of superior moral know-how that James and his characters exhibit. My insistence on keeping the distinction between these two ways of knowing sharp leads me to think of the formulation of principles as of only pedagogic importance, and of moral theory as a way of packaging the past for the use of the future rather than as a way of getting closer to the way things really are. So I cannot see the force of Nussbaum’s claim that James safeguards himself against “relativism” by being “thoroughly committed to the real” (p. 163). “Relativism” seems to me a bugbear fabricated in order to frighten people into thinking that principles are more than handy summaries of intuitions.

Where Nussbaum sees moral philosophers as trying to attain reflective equilibrium between rules and perceptions, I would say that, like novelists, they help us to attain equilibrium between familiar perceptions which we have inherited from upbringing and tradition (the ones conveniently summarized by principles) and new intuitions that historical events and new acquaintances (real or fictional) have recently caused us to have. So whereas Nussbaum favors what she calls “the very simple Aristotelian idea that ethics is the search for a specification of the good life for a human being” (p. 139). I find “the good life for a human being”, like “the accurate representation of moral reality”, an empty, useless, notion. The idea of “the good life for a human being” is Aristotle’s rather weak and awkward substitute for Plato’s “Idea of the Good”. Both notions presuppose the Socratic idea that moral progress is a result of self-knowledge.

Moral philosophy can be stretched to include novels like James’ only by deploying a “realist” view, claiming that anything that contributes to moral progress does so by helping us more faithfully to describe something already dimly seen. All the reasons that have led philosophers to turn away from this view of progress, and to switch from a Platonic rhetoric of discovery to a Nietzschean rhetoric of creation, work against this view. But, of course, either rhetoric can save the phenomena. So my disagreement with Nussbaum should not be seen, at

least from my side, as a quarrel about what was or was not always already there to be discovered. It is, like the debates about “realism” presently going on within in philosophy of science and epistemology, simply a quarrel about whether to emphasize continuities or discontinuities between diverse human activities.

I want to see the rise of the novel in the last two centuries as something new under the sun, something that may help initiate a new form of cultural life by helping to create a self-image for human beings as different from the one Aristotle proposed as his cosmology is from our own. That is why Nussbaum’s attempt to describe James’ novels as contributions to moral philosophy strikes me as analogous to a grand old firm—one whose wares are no longer much in demand—buying up a younger and more flourishing enterprise, and then sticking its own corporate logo on that firm’s more saleable products.

## **5. Novel-reading as a spiritual exercise**

At various points in this lecture I have offered an analogy between the use by Christian believers of authors such as St. Bonaventure, Thomas a Kempis, St. Ignatius Loyola, and John Bunyan and secularists’ use of Proust and James. I shall close by developing this analogy a little further.

The term “spiritual development” is usually used only in reference to the attempt to get in touch with the divine. But it is occasionally used in a broader sense, one in which it covers any attempt to transform oneself into a better sort of person by changing one’s sense of what matters most. In this broader sense of the term, I would urge that the novels of Proust and James help us achieve spiritual growth, and thereby help many of us do what devotional reading helped our ancestors to do.

Using the term “spiritual” in this sense has the advantage of avoiding both “aesthetic” and “moral” when explaining why Proust and James seem so important to so many. As I said earlier, the question of whether these men’s novels are “beautiful” does not strike members of their cults as having much point. But to say that the novels are morally rather than, or as well as, aesthetically important seems to leave something out. What it leaves out, I have suggested, is the sense of exaltation that readers of these novels share with religious people who come away from reading devotional literature with a sense of having visited a better world.

This sense of exaltation is not the same thing as being bowled over by the sheer rhetorical or poetic power of one’s favorite passages. Such passages play the role that their favorite passages in sacred scripture play for the religious. They become mantras, and reciting them brings very present help in time of trouble. Thus secular Russian intellectuals, en route to the Gulag, exchanged quotations from Pushkin and Byron, or sang Mozart arias, in order to remind themselves that cold and hunger and wretchedness were not all there was to human life. The religious intellectuals at the other end of the same freight car were fulfilling the same need by reciting their favorite psalms.

The sense of exaltation I am trying to describe is, instead, a result of reading books as wholes, of following plots through to the end, rather than with being ren-

dered momentarily delirious by a startling poetic figure, a perfectly crafted couplet, or a splendidly balanced antithesis. It may result from following the career of a figure such as Lambert Strether or Isabel Archer, in the same way that one might follow the career of Christian in *A pilgrim's progress*, or the attempts at ever greater purity of heart described by Loyola. Following such careers lifts up the heart by letting the reader hope that she herself might eventually overcome the immaturity, the confusion, and the incoherence of her days.

For the religious intellectual, this hope is for union with God, with something sublime, mysterious, unconditioned, belonging to another world. For the intellectual who finds James and Proust exalting, it is the hope that she will be able someday to see her life in this world as a work of art—that she will someday be able to look back and bring everything together into some sort of pattern—her loves and her rivalries, her fantasies and her defeats, herself in youth and in old age. It is the hope that all the people and events that have been important to her can be brought together into a coherent story of maturation. It is the hope for rounded completion and self-recognition, and is more like a longing for shapeliness than like the ambition of transcendence.

There principal character whose career is followed by the reader of *Remembrance of things past* is Marcel the narrator. He is the person whom all of Proust's readers take to be identical with the novelist, and with whose hopes and guilts and hesitations they themselves identify. So when the narrator, in the last volume, realizes that he is now in a position to write his novel, it is their triumph as well as his. They share both his confidence and his exaltation. By writing a novel about a man who keeps hoping to write the novel that the reader is reading, and who finally succeeds, Proust brings about the same sense of intimacy that Bayley describes as experienced by readers of James. By his success, Proust gives the idea that one's life can be a work of art—an idea familiar from Pater, Wilde and Nietzsche—substance and plausibility of a sort it could not have acquired otherwise.

Those who find Proust's novel pointless or offensive are likely to call Proust an egotist. But to cultists like myself he is the person who did the most to help us understand the dangers of self-centeredness. He did so precisely by paying more careful attention to himself, and to everybody he met, than most of us can manage. By portraying dozens and dozens of self-centered people, and himself as the most self-centered of all, he helped his readers understand what they needed to watch out for, what they needed to be afraid of, as well as what they might hope for. He used self-centeredness against itself, and thus accomplished the sort of creative self-overcoming that Nietzsche praised.

Not even members of the Proust cult think that this would be a better world if we all passed our lives in the way that Proust passed his. But because we do not think that there is such a thing as "the good life for man", we do not think that this universalizability test is relevant. We do not think that everybody should live their life in the way in which Socrates, or Christ, or Nietzsche lived theirs either. We want as many different creative self-overcomings as we can get, for the

more such examples we have before us the more useful advice we can pick up about how such a thing is possible.

But we do not think that creative self-overcoming is the only sort of life that it befits a human being to lead. Human happiness would certainly be greatly increased if that sort of life became an option for more people than it is now, but that does not mean that everybody should try it. Members of the Proust cult do not think everybody can profit from attempting to do so, any more than the Catholic Church thinks that everyone can profit from attempting to become a saint.

The big difference between the Proustians and the Catholics, and more generally between the religious and the literary cultures, is that devotional reading emphasizes purification rather than enlargement, getting rid of distractions rather than incorporating them in a larger unity. Novel-reading, on the other hand, aims at encompassing multitudes rather than eliminating superfluities. One reason Proust's novel is exemplary is that it is long and complex enough to take in most of what was important in the author's life.

Although not everybody should try to overcome themselves, everybody can and should hope to end their lives with some sense of what it meant, how it hung together, what form it took. This is easy to do if one's life was nothing but remorseless grinding dawn-to-dusk toil, or if it was lived within the confines of a backwoods village, or of a narrow and unquestioned faith. Yet these are just the sorts of lives that people who use novels as aids to spiritual development think of as in danger of "meaninglessness" (Think here of the novel-reading heroines of *Madame Bovary* and of Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*). The epithet is used because such people think that a life has meaning just insofar as the person living it is able to find some unity in, impose some form on, as great a variety of persons and things and events as possible.

It is often claimed that the special sort of pleasure we get from beautiful objects comes from their ability to combine unity and variety, so it may seem that taking this combination as an aim for a human life is possible only for aesthetes—leisured, spoiled, morally irresponsible flaneurs. But the hope for this sort of combination is not incompatible with moral strenuousness, nor even with moral entrepreneurship. To say that everybody can and should try to look back on their life and find form and meaning in it is not yet to say anything about the extent of one's responsibilities to others. James and Proust do not, as far as I can see, offer much advice on how to balance those responsibilities with responsibilities to oneself. Still, one will be safer in the hands of people who admired their novels than in the hands of readers who found those novels pointless.

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