

What is Living in the Philosophy of Ayn Rand

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If I had to say which part of Ayn Rand's philosophical work is most unjustly neglected, and most likely to yield pleasant surprises when it is eventually discovered and exploited, it would certainly be her writings on aesthetics. The clarity and systematic rigor of her core writings on this subject—namely, the first three essays in *The Romantic Manifesto*—suggest very powerfully that she thought her position on these issues through as thoroughly and carefully as she did her views on any other subject. It has always seemed a shame to me that these writings are so seldom discussed in the secondary literature and that they have influenced, in comparison with the rest of her output, a relatively small group of people. The single virtue of these writings that I find most valuable today is also one that strikes me as the cardinal virtue of all of her work: this is a trait that I like to think of as her "radicalism," a term that I mean in the very literal sense of a tendency to approach an issue in terms of its root (*radix*) in the issues that underlie it.

Perhaps the best way to indicate what I have in mind, both what this trait is and why it is a virtue, is to say a word or two about how her work in this area is related to a recent debate in literary theory. I have in mind the recent controversy between Judge Richard Posner and Professor Martha Nussbaum on the relation between morality and literature.¹ In it, Posner defends that view that aesthetic value, the value that is distinctive of a work of art, is not only distinct but separable from moral value, and that, where imaginative literature is concerned, moral properties of any sort are "almost sheer distraction."² Nussbaum insists, for her part, that it is a very important fact about literature that it provides us with a particular sort of moral enlightenment and character-improvement: the sort of "uplift" one gets from Charles Dickens, in which we learn to be compassionate toward the little fellow.

I would expect that many people find the general tendency of this discussion extremely unsatisfying. On the one hand, the deep sterility of

Posner's conception of literature is difficult to escape. On the other, he does score some palpable hits against Nussbaum's view. Most devastating, perhaps, is his pointing out that the books that she picks out as clearly embodying her theory—such works as Wright's *Native Son* and Forster's *Maurice*—are not the clearest examples of artistic greatness. To my way of thinking, perhaps the most telling case in point is one that Posner does not take advantage of, and that is Dickens' *Hard Times*. I find it shrilly and tediously didactic, and yet it seems to be precisely the sort of work she is must recommend to us. In fact, her presentation of her theory in *Poetic Justice* virtually takes the form of a commentary on Dickens' book.

A more deeply frustrating aspect of the debate is one about which Rand would very obviously have something to say. This is the fact that, in it, the nature of literature, and of art in general, are left unexamined. Posner is claiming that art, whatever it might be, does not need morality, and Nussbaum is claiming that art, whatever it is, is even better if one adds morality to it. The position she takes is thus actually wide open to a certain Posnerian counter-charge. Most of the argument of her *Poetic Justice* consist of attempts to show how literature can have good moral effects on us. Such a case, even if it is made out, is perfectly consistent with the view that literature is an intrinsically amoral object which becomes good for us when it is turned toward moral purposes. Judge Posner can simply point out—as, in effect, he does—that these arguments do not show that the addition of morality to literature makes it better *as literature*. On the other hand, his own positive argument consists mainly in examples which tend to indicate that morally good works can be inferior literature while works expressing unsound moral and political theories can be great. These arguments are almost entirely intuitionist, in that they merely appeal to presumptive judgments of literary merit that we already have, and stop there. Neither side of this debate, however, presents an account of what art and literature are. In effect, the debate is carried on as if art were, as Rand would put it, an "irreducible primary," something that can explain other things but cannot itself be explained.

On this point Rand departs radically from the approaches of both Posner and Nussbaum. Just as, in her ethics, she begins by asking, not which values are right but why there are any values at all, so in her aesthetics she does not begin by asking what makes art better or not so good, but why there is any art at all.

With her distinctive drive toward the most radical, the most fundamental concepts, she poses an answer based on the nature of consciousness and the requirements of human survival. In order to plan

their lives and give them unity, she maintains, human beings need to have a view of the nature of the world in which they live and of the value of broad categories of concerns that depend on human action. They need to have serviceable answers to questions like these:

Can man find happiness on earth, or is he doomed to frustration and despair? Does man have the power of *choice*, the power to choose his goals and to achieve them, the power to direct the course of his life—or is he the helpless plaything of forces beyond his control, which determine his fate? Is man, by nature, to be valued as good or despised as evil? These are *metaphysical* questions, but the answers to them determine the kind of *ethics* men will accept and practice; the answers are the link between metaphysics and ethics.³

Rand calls the abstractions that answer such questions "metaphysical value judgments." They are so broad, and the entities subsumed under them are so various, that no human mind could adequately apply the principles involved directly to reality. An intermediary is needed, something that can bridge the crevasse that yawns between the abstract and the concrete. This intermediary, according to Rand, is art, though art conceived in a sense much wider than high art as we usually conceive of it. It is wide enough to include myth, legend, religious icons, and popular television shows. Art is a selective recreation of reality projecting fundamental abstractions into the only medium in which they can be readily grasped: that of perceptual concretes. Without such projections, the human mind would not be able to fully carry out its function as part of a living organism.

Thus conceived, the role that judgments of value play in literature, and in art in general, is much more profound than that put forward by Nussbaum in her exchanges with Posner. If Rand is right, then art will be particularly apt to be turned to the ends to which Nussbaum suggests it be turned, those of instructing us in previously unknown moral truths and molding our character. But the judgments which are essential to art, and make it a necessity of life itself, concern matters that are anterior to the comparatively petty issues with which Nussbaum is concerned. The function of art is not to express moral, political, or economic theories, but to embody ideas about the nature and possibility of human life, and its value.

If we assume that Rand is right about this, we can readily explain why works that vividly exemplify Nussbaum's theory can be artistically mediocre. She chooses the wrong sorts of issues for art to be about. Though art can deal with such issues and should, this is not the sort of function that makes it art, nor is it the sort of function that gives art value that it has by its very nature. More particularly, the sort of moral enlightenment Nussbaum recommends can easily degenerate into didacticism, and the egalitarian sympathy-based ethic she believes in can produce sentimentality, and often does.

From Rand's point of view, Posner would be seen as making the very same mistake, that of misidentifying the way in which literature would be linked with morality if there were such a connection, though he takes the error and draws the opposite conclusion from it: that no connection exists. The Posner-Nussbaum controversy illustrates several of the sorts of damage that follow from a failure to be sufficiently radical. These would include the trivialization of deep issues, the creation of false dichotomies in which entire alternative theories become invisible, and the creation of unsatisfying discussions, in which all participants seem to be both right and wrong—right in what they deny, but wrong in what they assert.

1. Posner's original contribution, at least in print, was "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 21 no. 1 (April, 1997), pp. 1-27. This was a criticism of Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press). This exchange of views recently took the form of a lively symposium, which featured not only Posner and Nussbaum but an extremely helpful presentation by Wayne Booth, at a May 9th, 1998 session of the Central Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

3. *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1971), p. 19.