

Seumas Miller

Sociopolitical action, ethics and the power of literature

One of the striking features of contemporary literary theory, and indeed cultural studies more generally, is what might be termed its sociopoliticization of the ethical. Literary texts traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight tend now to be seen as ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social forces of various kinds. Individuals and individual actions are treated as wholly explicable in terms of impersonal social forces locked in political struggles. We are urged to see ourselves as 'docile bodies', and to view 'creative' literary output as simply evidential of impersonal social power struggles.

In the more recent work by followers of Foucault and erstwhile Althusserian Marxists, such as Terry Eagleton, there is some evidence of the beginnings of an awareness that these reductionist sociopolitical accounts of the self, of the ethical and of the ethical dimensions of literature, might actually be problematic. For example, Eagleton now counsels against too strong a notion of ideology: 'The critique of ideology, then, presumes that nobody is ever wholly mystified – that those subject to oppression experience *even now* hopes and desires which could only be realistically fulfilled by a transformation of their material conditions. If it rejects the external standpoint of Enlightenment rationality, it shares with the Enlightenment this fundamental trust in the moderately rational nature of human beings'¹ and 'Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over to the political enemy'.²

In these recent writings, it must be said, Eagleton seems to have undergone a profound memory loss. He shows no signs of remembering his earlier hardline Althusserian position which very contemptuously handed over truth, morality and beauty to his political enemy,

humanism. According to Eagleton's earlier 'self', morality was simply a pre-Marxist ideology which 'awaits its historical resolution at the hands of revolutionary politics'.³ Concerning truth and reality, the Eagleton of old had trumpeted that ideology 'produces and constructs the real'.⁴

For their part, followers of Foucault, such as Stephen Greenblatt, have begun to extract what they describe as ethical content from the later works of Foucault.⁵ Thus 'technologies for living' and 'self-fashioning' have entered into the discourse of literary theory. The fundamental problem here is that the self-determining subjecthood so presented is still one wholly derivative from the historically and sociopolitically given technologies, and hence its alleged ethical perspectives are entirely imposed and beyond the individual's capacity to assess or shape. These training techniques are so divorced from ethical principles as to be literally unprincipled, and the resulting, attenuated and helpless self, trained, constructed and disciplined by technologies, has no genuine ethical options, and no capacity for genuine interpersonal, as distinct from social, relations. This Foucauldian self is no more than the flimsy plaything of what happen to be the prevailing sociopolitical forces.

An important response to these various sociopolitical programmes is to argue that individual selves, interpersonal relations and the ethical content of literature resist reduction to social and political forms, processes and relations.⁶ While it is no doubt instructive to focus on the sociopolitical dimension of literary texts and, indeed, of individual behaviour, it is simplistic and dangerous to think that the self and so much about literature can simply be explained away by recourse to notions of social conditioning and political manoeuvring. This response amounts to a defence of, what has been termed, the substantive moral agent.⁷ That this response is making some impact in literary theory is evidenced in part by the about-face in the writings of Eagleton and others noted above. But there is a need for a strategy that goes beyond defending literature, and its ethical dimension, from sociopolitical encroachments. What is now required of literary theory is a persuasive positive account of the powers of literature. Such an account would construe literature as a social device which enables communications of a distinctive kind. Moreover it would reveal how the communicative content of literature could enrich, rather than simply repress, individual and collective life. Crucially, it would accommodate the power of literature to communicate ethical insights as well as to evidence social attitudes and conflicts. My intention in this article is to contribute to the development of such a positive theoretical account of the powers of literature.

In the first section of this article, I provide a theoretical framework of sociopolitical action within which literary communication can be located.⁸ I do not dispute that individual agents are powerfully shaped by their social environment or that much social action is politically motivated. However, I put forward a more complex view than that typically taken for granted in the writings of contemporary literary theorists. According to my conception social action involves interdependence and cooperation between individuals and groups as well as dominance and conflict; and it involves autonomous and rationally motivated action as well as socially conditioned responses. In the following section I take up the issue of the ethical and put forward the notion of a substantive moral agent. I do so with a view to supplanting the anti-individualist conception favoured by those anti-humanist Marxists, Derrideans, Foucauldians and others, who currently dominate literary theory. Note that I will not be propounding the simplistic atomistic conception these theorists never tire of attacking. In the final section I argue that literature, and in particular fictional literature, is essentially a social device (or set of devices) which enables communications of a distinctive kind. Of central importance here is my view that fictional literature enables the communication of ethical truths through the construction of imaginary worlds.

Sociopolitical action: a theoretical framework

Much of the theoretical – as opposed to political – impetus for the above-described process of the sociopoliticization of the ethical, derives from two tendencies in the writings of literary and cultural theorists. First, there is the tendency to operate with an insufficiently differentiated notion of social action. All action is seen as social, indeed, all action tends to be viewed as constituted by social realities. This tendency derives from the abandonment of substantive notions of the self; the self is conceived simply as a social construction. Thus Roger Fowler asserts that ‘a real person can be seen, as the social psychologist sees him, as a construction of roles acquired through the process of socialisation’.⁹

Second, there is the tendency to become fixated with the power dimension of social action; social action is taken to be principally action driven by sociopolitical forces. Again this tendency derives from the rejection of the substantive self. Thus Foucault: ‘The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.’¹⁰

The net result of these two tendencies is that human action is

understood only in terms of sociopolitical power struggles. Sociopolitical power turns out to be not simply one dimension of human action, but rather wholly constitutive of it.

This result ought to be rejected, and the twin tendencies that lead to it strongly resisted. I have argued against these tendencies elsewhere.¹¹ Here I will present a replacement conception. By contrast with the tendency to conceive of all action as social, there is a need for (1) distinctions to be made between social action and other sorts of action of a non-social sort, and (2) clarification of the concept of social action itself.

Regarding (1), I will briefly characterize non-social – in the sense of not necessarily social – action types under the following headings: (a) individual; (b) natural; and (c) interpersonal. I do not pretend to offer adequate accounts of each of these action types. My concern is merely to draw attention to distinctions which will serve my purposes in this article. Moreover an action may fall under more than one heading.

An individual action is one performed by an individual and such that it involves no essential reference to other persons, and is therefore non-social. Thus going for a walk for exercise, and taking a shower to cool down on a hot day, are instances of non-social individual actions.

A natural action is one that is performed by virtue simply of needs and dispositions that the actor has through being a member of the human species as distinct from, say, some social group. Obvious examples of such actions are eating and drinking.

An interpersonal action is an action directed to some other person qua particular person – as opposed to qua member of some social group or qua physical obstruction. Typically acts of friendship would be interpersonal acts in this sense, but institutional acts of conferring degrees, or conforming to conventions of dress, would not be.

None of the above categories – individual, natural, or interpersonal – is reducible to social action.¹² Accordingly, and contra much contemporary literary theorizing, human action is not necessarily social action. This claim is entirely consistent with the fact that there are very few actions which are not *in some sense* social.

There is a distinction to be made between actions which are *constitutively* social, and actions which are social in some other sense. Roughly speaking, the notion of a constitutively social action is the notion of an action the social dimension of which makes it the action that it is; its social property or properties wholly define it. It is a matter of controversy whether there are in fact any actions which are constitutively social in this sense.¹³ Candidates for being constitutively social, would be actions performed in highly formalized settings such

as wedding ceremonies, debutante balls, lawcourts and trophy presentations.¹⁴ My point here is simply that even if there is a category of constitutively social action it is not nearly as important a category as the writings of postmodernist theorists (including Foucault) make out.

First, not all actions are social. Second, of those that are social, most are not constitutively social. Obviously the above-mentioned non-social action types are not constitutively social. However, most concrete actions of these types are social in some other way. What other way might this be? For example, most actions of eating, drinking and having sex are in fact social in some sense, although eating, drinking and having sex are natural actions.

The most important sense in which an action might be social is that it is permeated by the social. An action which is social in this sense is not (wholly) constituted by its social dimension. Rather in the case of an action permeated by the social, a non-social action takes on a social dimension. Thus eating with one's mouth closed because of the convention to keep one's mouth closed is a case of social permeation. The basic and prior action of eating is not social. However, the action of eating with one's mouth closed is social in the sense that the way of performing it is governed by a convention. Again, two members of a particular society having sex is a case of social permeation. The basic instinctual action of having sex is not in itself social; rather it is natural. (It is also interpersonal rather than individual. It is interpersonal by virtue of the fact that it is directed at another person.) However, when two members of a particular society have sex their action is typically regulated and structured in various ways by the conventions and taboos in force in that particular society. Most actions are social, and of the actions that are social, most are social in the sense that they are permeated by the social dimension.

On this conception, first, most actions are in fact social but individual, natural and interpersonal actions are logically prior to social actions. The social dimension principally consists in the *regulation*, but not the *constitution*, of prior individual, natural and interpersonal actions.

Second, the social regulation, adjustment and structuring of prior non-social individual, natural and interpersonal actions, enable the possibility of higher-level individual, natural and interpersonal actions. Individual humans have a prior capacity to think and act in rudimentary ways in accordance with natural inclinations, and on the basis of their interpersonal contact with other individuals. However, it is their induction into the social world of conventions and institutions that enables the possibility of any higher level thought or activity, including, in particular, literary activity.

Social phenomena, such as language and literary genres, are conventional enabling mechanisms. Language is a conventional system which enables high-level communication. The genres of fictional literature, for example, are conventional mechanisms which enable, among other things, the communication of ethical content by the construction of imaginary worlds. Crucially, in the case of language and literature, the conventions do not fully determine the content of the communicative actions performed in accordance with them. New sentences expressing new thoughts are uttered every day yet without violating any conventions. Again, entirely original novels are written largely in conformity to, rather than in contravention of, existing conventions; though it is important to remember that it is also a significant feature of artistic performance that conventions may be changed, modified, or abandoned by creative writers and performers.

The second above-mentioned tendency in contemporary literary theory is to become fixated with the power dimension of social action. My strategy here is not to deny the power dimension of social action – its importance is a matter of common knowledge – but rather to *reaffirm* a different and contrasting, but nevertheless very fundamental, feature of social action, namely social cooperation. This dimension is ignored, and in effect denied, in the writings of most contemporary literary theorists.

Having, as it were, resurrected the cooperative dimension of *social* action, I will go on to locate the power dimension, and thereby arrive at a general model of *sociopolitical* action. This model will provide the theoretical framework that will enable key elements of the *ethical* dimension of sociopolitical action to be disclosed, and the socially facilitative character of literary forms to be revealed.¹⁵

A number of basic types of individual social actions exist. There are certain kinds of joint action, such as playing in an orchestra or building a house.¹⁶ There are institutional actions of various types, e.g. governmental action, getting married, and so on. There are actions performed qua members of social groups other than institutions, such as professions. There are actions performed in accordance with social rules such as conventions and norms. And there is at least one other fundamental category of social action which I will term 'socially directed' action. I will explain this term in due course.

In respect of joint action it is easy to detect interdependence of action and cooperation to secure collective ends. Moreover joint action is ubiquitous. Consider economic activity such as building houses. The completion of the house is dependent on the work of the carpenter as well as the bricklayer, the roof-tiler and the architect. The completed house is the collective end of all these activities. Moreover the activities

of one tradesman are dependent on the activities of another. The roof must be placed where the walls have been built, and the walls built where the roof is to be placed. If the house is to be built, and many, many houses are built, there will have to be cooperation, interdependence of action and collective ends.

Consideration of another pervasive form of social action, namely, the following of convention, also reveals the existence of interdependence of action, cooperation and collective ends.¹⁷ Take the conventions of language. Without conventional connections between sounds and meanings, there could hardly be communication. Language is primarily an enabling mechanism; it enables individuals to secure the collective end of communication. Individual members of a linguistic community use a particular set of words on condition that others deploy those words; they cooperate to secure the collective end of communication.

Now consider institutions and institutional roles. Take the education system. This system has as a collective end the provision of a range of intellectual skills and the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge. People learn to read, write and count, and they acquire a body of knowledge. So an education system serves the collective end of education. Moreover the education system relies on interdependence of action and hence cooperation. The pupils work at learning on condition the teachers work at teaching, and vice versa.

Finally, let us consider a literary phenomenon such as a novel. As I said above, literature is a conventional enabling mechanism. As such it requires the cooperation of author and reader; both must know and conform to the linguistic and literary conventions in force if communication is to be achieved. This remains true notwithstanding the fact that (1) what is communicated is often propagandist in character, either overtly or implicitly, and (2) particular conventions can be, and sometimes ought to be, scrutinized, and even rejected, by the author and the reader.

Enough has been said by way of demonstrating what is in fact rather obvious, namely that social action involves a great deal of interdependence of action and cooperation in the service of collective ends. But my recourse to joint actions, conventions and institutions is designed to underpin a much stronger claim, namely, that interdependence of action and cooperation in the service of collective ends is fundamental to social action, and, therefore, to most human action, and certainly to human action at any level beyond the very rudimentary. Cooperation in the service of collective ends is not necessarily, or even typically, the cooption and coercion of individuals in the course of sociopolitical power struggles. Rather interdependence of action, and

cooperation in the service of collective ends, are the defining features of joint enterprises, conventions and institutions, and joint enterprises, conventions and institutions provide the framework within which most human action takes place.

On this conception an individual entering the social world finds himself or herself in a complex web of cooperative action none of which in the first instance is of his or her making. Since this complex web of interaction – this network of conventions and structure of institutions – constitutes the background and medium in which he or she acts, it makes no sense to speak of the individual rejecting or transforming the web in its entirety. This is really a logical point; change or rejection of any particular convention or institution is possible at any one time, but not the social fabric in its entirety.

The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant provides the image of a bird to make this kind of point. 'The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space.'¹⁸ In their preoccupation, indeed obsession, with the repressive nature of conventions and other social forms, many contemporary literary theorists make the mistake of Kant's dove. They fail to understand that without, for example, the conventions of language and literature, there would be no communication and no literature. Just as air is necessary for flight, so conventions are necessary for poetry.

Notwithstanding appearances, this cooperation model of social action accommodates the contrasting dimension of social action, namely conflict and power. The social world thus modelled is a sociopolitical world. Individuals, classes and factions spend a great deal of time and energy in competition and conflict. In the course of these power struggles some individuals and groups amass considerable power, wealth and status. Moreover, they often do so at the expense of other individuals and groups, and in part by ideological manipulation. However, the fact remains that these power struggles take place within a framework of cooperation between individuals and groups, exploited and exploiters, at many different levels, including the communicative level of language and literature. Nor is this framework simply a device by means of which the powerful can rule the weak. Without this framework of conventions and institutions there is no longer a society, and no longer the possibility of other than very rudimentary forms of life.

The fact that a framework of conventions and institutions constitutes a set of enabling mechanisms for communication, education and so on, is entirely consistent with the sometimes widespread use, or rather abuse, of such conventions and institutions to repress or

coerce – though in fact repression of particular groups is achieved more by excluding them from participation in educational and communicative institutions than by coercing them once they have gained entry to such institutions. The systematic exclusion of Black South Africans from educational institutions is a well-known case in point. At any rate my claim that language and literature are fundamentally conventional mechanisms for enabling communication, is not undermined by the fact that these same mechanisms are also deployed in order to propagandize and manipulate.

Nor is this model inimical to fundamental social change. Rather the point is that fundamental change cannot be brought about by one agent acting alone; it can only be brought about by agents acting collectively. A single agent cannot change conventions by himself, cannot transform institutions all by herself. Not even a very powerful political figure can transform the system of linguistic conventions overnight, and even if able to do so over time, can do so only in cooperation with her or his political supporters.

Finally, from the fact that individual persons are inducted into a particular framework of conventions and other social forms, and therefore exhibit the characteristic features and orientations of members of the social group in question, it does not follow that those individuals are not autonomous agents, or that they are to any significant extent coerced.

In participating in such a network of cooperative action, the individual adopts the ends that in part define those conventions, norms and roles. Indeed it is inevitable that at least some of these socially given ends will end up being in part constitutive of the selfhood of the participating agents. However, the conventions and institutions definitive of some social group may function chiefly as mechanisms that enable individuals to achieve high levels of individual autonomy, and enable interpersonal relationships to flourish in ways that far outrun the dictates of conventions, norms, or roles.

Naturally many of the conventions and institutions in some society may be profoundly coercive and repressive. Whether or not there are high levels of coercion or conflict in some social group, or whether or not some particular convention or institution is fundamentally repressive, is something that has to be looked at on a case-by-case basis. It is an empirical question to be settled on the basis of the evidence, not an *a priori* truth to be assumed by investigators and interpreters, whether they be literary theorists or others.

Having provided a model of sociopolitical action, we are now positioned to explore the ethical dimension of sociopolitical action, and thereafter the power of literature to illuminate that dimension.

The ethical dimension of sociopolitical action

Before turning explicitly to the ethical dimension of sociopolitical action, I must make a couple of deflationary points concerning ethics in the sociopolitical context.

First, there is a tendency to believe that the existence of co-operation of itself signals the presence of ethical value, and, conversely, the existence of conflict the absence of it. This no doubt in part explains the tendency to jettison the ethical upon embracing the ubiquity of political struggle. But from the fact that social action is fundamentally cooperative action, it does not follow that social action is good. An enterprise, for example, bringing the Third Reich into existence, may be a joint enterprise yet essentially evil. The value of, for example, a convention, is to be determined principally not by the fact that it involves cooperation and realizes a collective end, but rather by the value of the particular collective end that it realizes. Perhaps the convention of opening doors for women serves an evil end, viz. the suppression of women.

Second, agents participating in an array of collective enterprises and practices will not only have at least some shared interests and beliefs, they will also have some shared values, in the sense of things they all believe to be good. But a believed value is not necessarily a value worth having. Female circumcision may be a shared 'value' in some societies, but nevertheless it is an evil practice.

Cooperating agents will have to have some genuine values such as trust and honesty, but they can probably maintain these at relatively low levels. If everyone lies all the time no one will believe anyone, and the system of communication will collapse. But, as the world of advertising demonstrates, a fairly high level of deceit can be maintained without the system of communication collapsing.

Notwithstanding these deflationary points, it remains true that the ethical dimension of any given form of sociopolitical action is pervasive and multi-faceted. Take institutions. It can be asked whether the collective end of an institution is a good end. It also depends on whether its collective end has been subverted – perhaps the end of a particular education system is no longer education but propaganda. There are also questions concerning the justice of the distribution of benefits and burdens within an institution. Does our current economic system reward shareholders at the expense of workers? There are questions about powers attaching to the constitutive roles of an institution, and about the exercise of those powers. Perhaps an institution has too hierarchical a structure of roles. For example, perhaps university administrators have too much power.

It is an important feature of sociopolitical action that it is both consistent with, and partially explanatory of, individual autonomy. If conventions and institutions are enabling mechanisms, then far from being inconsistent with individual autonomy, they are preconditions for its existence. Thus, to take one example, it is only the possessors of a language – beings who can reflect on their circumstances and provide reasons for their actions – who could possibly have individual autonomy.

The point is important here, because our concern is with ethics, and ethical problems exist only for autonomous agents. If human beings are simply the playthings of sociopolitical forces then there is simply no point or substance to ethical deliberation. The rejection of individual autonomy has been a persistent tendency in contemporary literary theory, and the issue of individual autonomy has been to the forefront in discussions such as those concerning the alleged death of the author, the ideological constructedness of texts, and so on. My model of sociopolitical action re-establishes the possibility of individual autonomy, and thereby makes room for the ethical dimension of sociopolitical action.

Having argued for the possibility of individual autonomy, what is now required is further specification of the bearer of that autonomy, the substantive moral agent.

The set of properties that a substantive moral agent would necessarily possess include the following.¹⁹ One, he or she possesses a capacity for rational and imaginative thought. This involves, among other things, a capacity to envisage hitherto unencountered situations and ways of behaving. It also involves the capacity for consistency in the making of ethical judgements. Two, the agent possesses freedom in the sense that he or she can make decisions on the basis of his or her rational thought processes and implement these even in the face of external resistance. Three, the agent experiences emotions such as sympathy for other people, compassion, love and so on. Four, the agent possesses an awareness of him- or herself, and this, together with his or her powers of rational thought and volition, enables the agent to conceive of his or her life as a totality, and to develop that life in particular ways. Five, the agent possesses a sense of ethical value. This includes the sense that certain things are worth doing and others not; and that certain actions are morally right and others not. Importantly, this sense exists and can be acted on despite contrary personal inclinations and various forms of external social prohibition and pressure. Six, by virtue of the above properties, and especially the capacity for sympathy and a sense of justice, the agent is able to establish intrinsically valuable relations with other agents. Seven, the

agent's values and standards must cohere with one another and persist over some significant period of time. Otherwise his or her ethical dimension will become conflict-ridden and eventually disintegrate. Eight, the structure of ethical values internalized by the agent will be to some extent a response to, and a result of, the particular historically given sociopolitical circumstances in which the agent finds him- or herself.

This last point is in need of further elaboration, since it is the source of persistent confusion. Given that the structure of ethical values internalized by an individual agent is to some extent a response to, and a result of, particular historical, sociopolitical circumstances, we would expect to find the following. First, we would expect to find that agents who belong to the same social group share a core set of ethical values. It does not follow from this that each member agent is the passive recipient of the values of the group. The existence of shared values follows from the fact that groups of individuals do not confront the world wholly as atoms but rather in concert with their fellows. People who live together have to work out a coherent system of shared values. Now in some cases these values might be imposed on the individual members of the group by the coercive action of the group as a whole or by some controlling subelement. But this is not necessarily the case, and it is a matter for empirical investigation whether some value has been imposed on (a) particular individual(s) or not.

The second thing we would expect to find, given that the structure of ethical values of an individual and/or a group is partly a response to and a result of particular historical sociopolitical circumstances, is some differences in ethical values from one historical society to another. In some instances this might be due to moral development. Presumably, contemporary attitudes to women in the workforce, while by no means exemplary, constitute moral progress over attitudes prevailing in the 19th century. In other instances it is simply due to the different requirements of the material and social circumstances of the day. Physical courage is a great virtue in war but not nearly so important in times of peace. Physical strength is rightly valued in a society at a low level of technological development. And so it goes on. But it is important to stress that the inevitability, and, indeed, the desirability, of such differences in no way support cultural relativism or an ethics as ideology conception. Here I do not have in mind the claim that these differences between cultures, and over time, typically take place against a background of a commonality of ethical values across cultures and times, though this claim is in fact true. Rather my point is that the objectivity of ethical values and judgements is not called into question by the obvious fact that different circumstances

call for, and cause, different ethical responses. Allowing weak and sickly infants to die might be morally right for a community living on the very edge of survival and morally wrong for us. But this might simply mean: as a matter of *objective truth*, to allow infants to die *under certain circumstances* is morally right and *under other circumstances* is morally wrong. It is morally right, for example, if the infants are weak and sickly and would be a burden of such a kind as to threaten the survival of the community.

Moral truth and the power of literature

Literature constitutes at one and the same time a form of social action, namely, socially directed action, and an activity with an ethical dimension.

Socially directed action is essentially a form of communicative social action, and is perhaps best captured by somewhat exaggerated examples such as the following.²⁰ Suppose a Black man and a white woman going out together to a large social function in a racially segregated society. The function is organized and attended by white people only, and the couple know that what they are doing is socially unacceptable. The white woman is intentionally resisting the social pressure of the social group to which she belongs. She is doing so by a social action which constitutes a public rejection of the attitudes of the group to which she belongs.

Now the above example is somewhat exceptional; no doubt most cases of what I am calling socially directed action are a good deal more mundane. However, my hope is that this example will serve to highlight the kind of action that I have in mind.

The first point to be noted is that these actions are in a certain sense individualistic actions. They are not actions that are performed in accordance with a convention or a norm, or with a social or institutional role. Indeed they fly in the face of convention.

But on the other hand they are not individual or interpersonal actions. To see this, consider the following fairly typical case of an interpersonal action. I am communicating with my friend. In order to convey my communicative intentions I make use of various linguistic conventions. Nevertheless my utterance, though conventionally governed, may well express an entirely new thought. Here the conventions simply function as a means by which I perform my interpersonal action. In such cases conventions function as enabling mechanisms. They enable, but do not fully determine, certain kinds of interpersonal and individual action.

The social, as opposed to the individual or interpersonal, dimension to the actions illustrated in my example involving the white woman, lies in the object of their directedness. The actions of the woman are directed at social groups, or, at least, at individuals qua members of some social group, as opposed to being directed at individuals qua individuals or individuals qua friends.

Now I suggest that the communicative content of literature is a species of socially directed action. In fact the social character of literature is twofold. First, literature relies on social forms such as conventions; they enable its very possibility, but do not determine its specific content. Second, it is social in that it is socially directed. It seeks to communicate to individuals qua members of a social group, whether that social group consists of those people who speak a certain language, or those that belong to the so-called educated public, or those that read neo-formalist poetry.

So literature is socially directed action, and we saw earlier that the accounts of the ethical and of the moral agent prevalent in contemporary theorizing of cultural forms need to be replaced by a conception based on the notion of a substantive moral agent. I will now argue that literary texts, and other representational cultural forms, can simulate and embody salient aspects of the ethical realm, and indeed are centrally concerned to do so. In short, the genre of fictional literature is a conventional enabling mechanism, it enables the communication of ethical truth through the construction of imaginary worlds. Needless to say it does not follow from this that literary texts do not have ideological content, or even that some texts are not principally ideological in character. Some texts are principally ideological, just as some agents are bereft of moral qualities. Perhaps all texts are to some extent ideological and all agents in possession of some ideological beliefs. But the point is that the ethical is not reducible to the ideological, and texts can offer, and are often concerned to offer, genuine ethical illumination.

The communicative acts which constitute, for example, a literary text are not themselves either true or false, and typically they do not have explicit ethical content. So how is it that I am able to claim that fictional discourse represents the ethical realm?

I suggest, following the philosopher John Searle,²¹ that fictional discourse consists of, what he calls, pretend speech acts. A 'speech' act is simply a communicative act such as asserting or commanding or asking a question. Such acts are either written or spoken. A pretended speech act is simply an act of pretending to perform a speech act without actually doing so. So according to Searle, in writing, for example, 'Holmes turned into Baker St.', the author pretends to be speaking about a real person, and pretends to assert of that person that he turned into Baker Street.

Ordinary speech acts (whether written or spoken) are able to be performed by virtue of the conventions of language. But fictional literature is governed by an additional set of conventions which suspend the operation of the ordinary conventions of language, so as to enable pretend assertions to be performed. These pretend speech acts are not acts of linguistic deception. The audience knows, and is intended to know, that they are pretend acts. The point about such convention-determined pretend speech acts is that they construct an *imaginary world*. This imaginary world consists of those persons and events which the author, in performing these pretend speech acts, pretends exist. But where in all this could there be ethical truth?

Truth in fictional literature consists of some relation between this imaginary world and the ordinary world that we inhabit.²² It is obvious that some of the elements of this imagined variety of cultural forms deploy fictional discourse for the conventionally determined purpose of conveying ethical truths. Now it does not follow from this that novels, plays, films and so on do in fact provide genuine illumination of the ethical. But the point is that there is an ethical realm to be illuminated, and these cultural forms provide a communicative mechanism by means of which such illumination *could* be provided. There can be no a priori objection to the claim that such cultural forms deliver ethical insights. Whether or not in any given case there is ethical insight will depend on the particularities of the novel or play or film in question. It will be a matter of the rational judgement of morally, politically and aesthetically sensitive readers, whether or not any given 'text' is ethically insightful or merely evidential of social attitudes. Or at least, it will be a matter of the judgement of such readers, as to what extent it is insightful, and to what extent merely evidential.

The view that literature and other cultural forms have the power to represent the ethical has been dismissed in many quarters. But the rational backing for this dismissal is very weak. Moreover the arguments against prevalent forms of ethics as ideology and the ideological constructedness of texts are powerful and longstanding. There is in fact within much contemporary theorizing of culture a deep aversion to notions of truth and of morality, and also to the possibility that social forms could facilitate, rather than repress, individual and collective life; and there is an accompanying resistance to rational debate on these issues. This resistance to rational debate marks the existence of ideological commitments.

Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW, Australia

Notes

- 1 Eagleton (1991a: 14).
- 2 Eagleton (1991b: 372).
- 3 Eagleton (1976: 182). For detailed criticism of Eagleton see Miller (1990b).
- 4 *ibid.*: 69.
- 5 Greenblatt (1988), Hunter et al. (1991) and During (1992). For detailed criticism of Greenblatt see Freadman and Miller (1992: 179–92). For general criticisms of Foucault see Miller (1990a).
- 6 Freadman and Miller (1988; 1989; 1992).
- 7 Freadman and Miller (1992: 232 f.).
- 8 This framework has close affinities with that put forward by Anthony Giddens (1984). However, from my perspective Giddens collapses the distinction between action and power, and is insufficiently attentive to teleological considerations in social action.
- 9 Fowler (1977: 128).
- 10 Foucault (1980: 98).
- 11 Miller (1990a; 1990b; forthcoming); Freadman and Miller (1992).
- 12 Miller (forthcoming).
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 The best-known philosophical discussion of these kinds of case is probably J. L. Austin (1962). See also Jacques Derrida (1977) and Seumas Miller (1984).
- 15 Note that my concern in what follows is with the social actions of individual persons, as opposed to the actions of corporate entities, such as nations or universities.
- 16 For a detailed account of joint actions see Seumas Miller (1992a).
- 17 For a detailed account of conventions see Seumas Miller (1992b).
- 18 Kant (1943: 6).
- 19 This set of properties was first elaborated in Seumas Miller (1991). See also Freadman and Miller (1992: Ch. 7) and Miller (1993).
- 20 A more detailed account of this notion is provided in Miller (forthcoming). See also Miller (1994).
- 21 Searle (1974).
- 22 This account of truth in literary discourse was first elaborated in greater detail in Seumas Miller (1992c). See also Freadman and Miller (1992: Ch. 7).

References

- Austin, J. L. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Derrida, J. (1977) 'Limited Inc', *Glyph* 2: 162–254.
- During, S. (1992) *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing*. London: Routledge.
- Eagleton, T. (1976) *Criticism and Ideology*. London: New Left Books.
- Eagleton, T. (1991a) *Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Eagleton, T. (1991b) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77*, ed. C. Gordon. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press.
- Fowler, R. (1977) *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen.
- Freadman, R. and Miller, S. (1988) 'Three Views of Literary Theory', *Poetics* 17: 9–24.
- Freadman, R. and Miller, S. (1989) 'Constructivist Anti-humanism', *Critical Review* 29: 110–27.
- Freadman, R. and Miller, S. (1992) *Rethinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984) *Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Greenblatt, S. (1988) *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hunter, I. et al. (1991) *Accounting for the Humanities*. Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies.
- Kant, I. (1943) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. Meiklejohn. New York: Wiley.
- Miller, S. (1984) 'Performatives', *Philosophical Studies* 45(2): 247–59.
- Miller, S. (1990a) 'Foucault on Discourse and Power', *Theoria* 76: 115–25.
- Miller, S. (1990b) 'Marxist Literary Aesthetics', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 16(4): 1–26.
- Miller, S. (1991) 'Ethics and Literature', *Redoubt* 14: 1–5.
- Miller, S. (1992a) 'Joint Action', *Philosophical Papers* XXI(3): 275–97.
- Miller, S. (1992b) 'On Conventions', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70(4): 435–45.
- Miller, S. (1992c) 'Truth and Reference in Fictional Discourse', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 11(1): 1–6.
- Miller, S. (1993) 'Moral Truth and the Power of Literature', *Theoria* 81(2): 119–28.
- Miller, S. (1994) 'Social Action', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 13(1): 9–16.

Miller, S. (forthcoming) 'Social Action: A Teleological Theory'.

Searle, J. (1974) 'Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', *New Literacy History* 1: 301–22.