

Abominable Scripts: Hal Porter's Plays

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As the first act of *Eden House* screeches towards its curtain, Hal Porter's grande dame, Maxine Charlesworth, is declaiming that she will never sell Eden House. Her stepson, Victor, has been trying to persuade her to sell to the Peterson-Armstrong Corporation who will replace her Eden with a supermarket. Maxine thinks supermarkets more immoral than sexual exploitation. She will close her scene by revealing that she came into possession of Eden House by protecting an older, paedophilic husband. In a neat sophistry that is itself a reversal of the Eden story, she concludes that, since she committed an immoral act to get the house, she is not going to commit another to lose it. Just before this, she does an elocution lesson on the lines from which I take my title. In a scene full of self-conscious theatricality, Maxine scorns Victor's fair and happy script with the words: "What a crummy, abominable script! It's either by some professional amateur in the A.B.C., or you've written it to suit yourself" (35).

My title is, like Maxine herself, a little bit over-the-top. It is, nevertheless, suitable for a paper on Hal Porter's plays: not only because it is hyperdramatic, but also because it is something of a decoy. I am probably happy to defend the proposition that Porter's plays are crummy, abominable scripts, despite the fact that Mary Lord recalls a Porter who thought himself rather good at writing "dramas with crisp, witty dialogue, meaty parts for actors, and suspenseful first and second act curtains" (187). Reading them, I kept thinking of an ageing drag queen with a reputation for Bette Davis imitations. They are fake melodrama. Their characters are interchangeable exercises in speechifying. While Porter displays some skill in melodramatic structuring, most audiences would be well ahead of the surprises that bring down his curtains—anyone familiar with Tennessee Williams

and films such as *Rebecca*, *All About Eve* and *Imitation of Life* knows what is coming. There is also a problem in that the plays are insufficiently individuated—each is yet another instrument in a Porter performance about sex and its secrets. Given that *The Professor* uses the play-within-the-play convention and *Eden House* deploys strategic allusions to performers such as Gertrude Lawrence, Noël Coward, Tennessee Williams, Judith Anderson and Bette Davis, someone else might be inclined to argue that they are plays aware of their theatricality, thus redeeming them for postmodernism, but I doubt that argument will make it any easier for an actor to make the lines credible, and it will only become interesting if it engages with the secrets hidden by that theatricality—for performance in Porter is intimately linked to deception.

What interests me is how Porter's plays script the abominable. In order to pursue this, I will attempt what I would like to call an "ethographic" reading, paying equal attention to ethical and textual qualities in order to show how they engage each other. I will begin with the plays because I want to avoid any suggestion that the relationship between literature and ethics is one in which ethics occupies a prior and privileged position. Too often ethics is imagined in first place, outside and above writing, coming into writing as content, as moral ideas. I want, as it were, to find ethics in writing. Using a narrative model of ethics to encourage a more equal relationship between literature and ethics, I will search for that reciprocated activity by which ethics-as-narrative turns to narrative-as-ethics. Imagery, structure and perspective incorporate acts of power that have ethical as well as textual value. Questions of truth and freedom in regard to representation and voice are questions that cannot be sufficiently addressed without some recognition of the analogical process by which ethics and narrative take account of and responsibility for each other. I will also reflect on the ethics of my reading, asking whether I am taking unfair advantage of biographical information about Porter's paedophilia. At the same time, I will argue against reducing the "ethographic" to moral positions on paedophilia. In the context of this paper, what I find abominable about Hal Porter's scripts is not that they depict paedophilia, but that they do so within narratives that say, as Bernie says in *Eden House*:

But no one sees me sleeping with anyone so what does it matter who
I sleep with? Who's to know if it's a man or a woman or a Saint
Bernard? Whose business is it? (72)

What at first appears to be no more than an appealing credo for consenting adults is doing things that might be meant to go unnoticed: the "no one sees me" argument is dangerously close to an argument that something becomes wrong only when it is found out, while the Saint Bernard, posing as an extravagant joke, inserts an alternative between "a man or a woman," which is also an alternative to consent.

Porter's commitment to the climactic curtain is a clear and simple indication of how much his plays depend for their drama on the exposure of secrets, just as his failure to hide those secrets till the curtain positions his audience on the side of those who know something they perhaps should not. Porter's poor imitation of Coward is another indication that there is something dark beneath his surfaces. Whereas Coward's brittle-bright surfaces disguise a world-weary romanticism, Porter's attempt at mannered, society dialogue is dragged down by a metaphysics of cynicism. It is also significant that all his sets feature a main room that opens to further rooms, rooms that are not used except for exits and entrances, though they are clearly part of the plays' visual symbolism. In the stage directions for *Eden House*, Porter describes how layers of "the past's wayward barbarity and charm" remain in a house, "layer behind layer behind layer," and how "there is a dimension still exhaling the odours of hatreds and pieties, hypocrisies and menaces, martyrdoms and cynicisms, all long gone stale but never quite to evaporate" (1). Porter's empty rooms convey a sense of spaces off, hollow spaces that might well represent some unspoken or unspeakable knowledge.

At first sight these plays appear to be an attack on social and moral hypocrisies, exposing the usual sexual secrets: affairs, infidelities, unwedded pregnancies and unconventional desires. In *The Tower*, Amy Armstrong, resenting the new wife brought to the penal settlement of Hobart by her stepfather, Sir Rodney Haviland, presents herself as someone intolerant of pretence. Amy, however, has her secret: she is engaged in a forbidden and fecund affair with the convict Marcus Knight. When Sir Rodney, trying to arrange for her a marriage that will advance his prospects in London, learns of this and finds her obstinate, he throws her off his tower, the very tower Amy earlier denounced as "a tower of lies" (278). Sir Rodney has another reason for tossing her over: she has learned that his adopted son, Edwin, is really the son of her convict lover. Although she is a sacrifice to Sir Rodney's god, Amy does not have moral authority. Her Aunt Hester may describe Amy as "not old enough to dissemble" (279) but, in Porter's moral scheme, this makes her ethically unstable, more dangerous than honest: one of the preoccupations of Porter's writing is that dishonesty is an etiquette, necessary if society is to maintain its civilised surface. Sir Rodney sums it up when Amy declares her intention to leave her reputation in the gutters:

the gutters of Hobart Town can flow uphill. Through back-doors.
 Into parlours. Into inkwells. To London! You are both only too well
 aware that I have every hope of further advancement. . . . This is
 exactly the moment not to have a scandal, least of all one of this
 nature—a young woman of education and breeding, a visitor to
 Government House, who has had . . . or pretends to have had . . .
 immoral relations with an amorous felon. You have lived long

enough in Van Diemen's Land to have learned what tongues can do.
(282)

What tongues can do is seen in *The Professor*.

Toda-san, the ideal student, decides to buy a special gift for his idolised teacher, Gilbert Medlin, who prides himself on the purity of his principles. In order to obtain the necessary finance, Toda-san encourages another student, Fusehime-san, to earn money by having sex with the Europeans living at the Medlin boarding house. Medlin learns of this and, as he receives the gift, asks Toda-san how he got the money. Toda-san lies and Medlin exposes and humiliates him:

Liar! . . . You have smashed my design. Until I met you, I believed that there was a limit to morality. I looked on morality as a kind of joke. . . . I knew that men were not immaculate lords of creation, but the dirty servants of destruction. But you I perceived as hope—the one untainted man, the one beyond corruption, the only truthful human being. . . . Your mask has slipped! Your tongue has touched poison. Oh, Toda Inagaki, if you eat poison you must lick the plate clean. Better if you had not touched that worldly dish; better if you had torn out your tongue! (118–19)

Toda-san takes his cue: he cuts out his tongue, sacrificing it to his god-professor (who has, nevertheless, held on to the gift).

Eden House, one of those birthday party melodramas where all the secrets come out to play, is a night for safety belts. Maxine Charlesworth, a ravaged beauty and ex-actress who has done too much Tennessee Williams and too much straight gin, is having an affair with a virile young man, Mark, who is also making love to her daughter, Portia (though in *her* the quality of mercy is strained—through barbed wire). This comes out as Maxine and Mark call it quits, so that Maxine gets the chance to tell Mark, “instead of giving love you administered it” (88). Helen, Maxine’s widowed sister-in-law, fancies Canon Godfrey, and does not know the canon has given a paisley scarf to her son, Bernard, who refers to him as “Mother Godfrey.” She only pretends not to know her son is homosexual, which might be difficult for an actor to bring off as he is one of the most minced of stereotypes, but her pretence does allow Maxine to have a moment exposing son to mother, a moment in which Maxine calls him a “squalid little suburban homo” (71)—which confuses me since I cannot quite determine whether Bernie’s offence is to do with his setting, sexuality or size. As mentioned earlier, Maxine also celebrates her birthday by battling with her stepson, Victor, who is trying to persuade her to sell *Eden House*. His secret is that he is about to become bankrupt and may need to suicide if she does not agree. She does not agree, and so his wife, Honor, picks up a samurai sword and attempts to behead the one she calls a “cruel,

sadistic, wicked woman" (66). This gives Maxine the chance to say: "No wonder Methodist ministers and Church of England archbishops keep on saying this is an age of violence and unrest. Honor is as undisciplined as a university student. She tried to behead me—very Iris Murdoch!" (68). Finally, Maxine and Portia dispense with Mark and arrange a tired little truce, but not before Portia gets the chance to say: "You're such raging bores, the lot of you; like actors and actresses in unsatisfactory parts. All these tantrums and bitcheries and moments-of-truth. I'm not interested; I'm just not interested. Life's too short" (96). Surviving members of the audience will, no doubt, snatch a last scrap of comfort from this.

Truth sets no one free in Porter's plays. No one changes heart, discovers a deeper ethical impulse, or practises even the weariest act of compassion. These are works of moral cynicism, turning morality into Gilbert Medlin's kind of joke. After all the "tantrums and bitcheries and moments-of-truth" (96) that keep *Eden House* staggering through the night, no one is any the wiser. Bernie has called his "Auntie Max" a "mean, treacherous slut," though he probably hurts her more when he calls her "the oldest leading lady in captivity" (71). His mother, Helen, has been kicked out of Eden House, but not before she smashes Maxine's roses (roses that must have been left lying around somewhere after Ray Lawler decided on kewpie dolls). Victor has gone off presumably to shoot himself (the telephone that rings insistently right at play's end is meant, I think, to tell us this). Portia has told her mother that they are alike inasmuch as neither of them has any loyalty, and has left for Western Australia where she hopes to realise her potential. Mark, whom Maxine has accused of engineering a triangle "as abnormal . . . as one of those Greek plays about incest" (89), has viciously reminded her: "I was twenty-six when you picked me up, and only a learner" (91). Maxine ends the play listening to her dead son, screaming at the audience, and starting up a mad Charleston. *The Professor* ends, as I have indicated, with Toda-san cutting off his tongue, kneeling down and offering it up to Gilbert Medlin. This is the tableau on which the final curtain falls. The stage directions give no indication that the Professor is horrified by the consequences of his truth. Porter is not interested in this. This presumably is meant to leave the audience outraged, inducing sympathy for Toda-san's belief that truth can be destructive, but also making that position, visually, dramatically final and even absolute by lifting it out of played time. While an audience will feel distaste for the Professor, the amputated ending leaves open the possibility that they will also feel distaste for truth itself. *The Tower* ends when the adopted son, Edwin, revealing knowledge of Amy's murder, assumes power over Sir Rodney. It ends, that is, with yet another of Porter's child-predators.

The scene in which the child, Edwin, triumphs is a seduction scene. It comes, after all, at the end of a play that associates sexuality with secrecy and shame. The

second act climax in which Amy is murdered represents sexual shame being silenced: when Sir Rodney accuses her of “immoral relations with an amorous felon,” (282), we are probably meant to focus on his hypocritical use of “immoral,” but we ought not overlook the fact that “amorous felon” associates love and felony. That association has its variants in the relationship between the convict Knight and his son Edwin (a relationship Sir Rodney also keeps a shameful secret) as well as in the teacher-pupil bond between the corrupt Sir Rodney and the corrupting child. There are also some sly suggestions that Sir Rodney’s affection for Edwin might have criminal potential, though such suggestions are, as one might expect in 1963, tightly controlled. As the third act draws to its close, Edwin and his audience possess the knowledge of good and evil, and it is important to note that an audience eager to see Sir Rodney humiliated is an audience manipulated to accept and enjoy the child as seductive agent. Edwin first shares with Sir Rodney a toast to their tower, then, under guise of confessing his jealousy of the new wife, entices from the older man a declaration of affection:

SIR ROD [*Pouring wine into EDWIN’S glass, and ultimately handing it to him*]: And if I say . . . as I do now . . . that my feeling for you can never abate, that the . . . the . . . affection I bear towards your new mamma is a thing apart from the stronger and special affection I have towards you . . . would that make you regard her in a kindlier fashion? (302)

The hesitation before the first “affection” could simply signal Sir Rodney’s reluctance to speak of sex before a child, but it could also open a gap that permits the sexual to attach to the second “affection,” the one that is “special.” Edwin then further confesses that he has another reason for disliking the new wife: he distrusts her because she says Amy killed herself. And so he begins turning the screw, coming back repeatedly to the word “accident,” playing Sir Rodney and Marcus Knight against each other, until finally he describes watching two sailors struggling on the ship and seeing one of them throw the other over the rail. The one thus thrown was “a poor little fellow with hair quite remarkably the same colour as Amy’s” (309–10). Sir Rodney is, according to the stage directions, “near collapse.” When Lady Haviland then enters, Edwin completes his grasp on power by forcing Sir Rodney to declare he does not trust her. Sir Rodney is broken, Lady Haviland is “appalled,” the hammering on the tower achieves yet another crescendo, and, as the curtain falls, Edwin has his face towards what is now his tower of lies.

Just as an audience is invited to be complicit in Edwin’s revenge, they are invited to approve the justice visited on Gilbert Medlin, which is to say they are encouraged to think the cut tongue signifies punishment rather than ask whether it might signify desire. This is to assume the play uses the abomination to represent

the effect of a false morality, whereas I have already suggested the play wants to make the idea of morality itself an abomination. In Porter's writing, moral behaviour is no more than polite performance, and *The Professor* conveys this through the knowing performances that Porter's characters give. When Helen Rochester, just arrived from England, tells Gretel Medlin that Helen's Aunt Beatrice "speaks of [Gretel] often as her dearest friend," Gretel replies, "Does she? I thought she liked me" (25). Gretel, another ex-actress who knows how to take more than her fair share of stage, is continually playing Insinuation, as when she discusses her brother's relationship with Toda-san. When Helen Rochester says Toda-san is "very handsome," Gretel replies: "Too handsome. Toda-san is accounted the Professor's most perfect disciple. Apart from being recklessly good-looking, he's—so Gilbert says—a rare example of moral integrity. Naturally, he admires the Professor" (27). In performance, the play is continually having its mask tilted by the actors' use of intonation and eyebrow. When Gretel goes on to reveal that Toda-san sleeps with "sensei," she at once advances and undermines the official view that the relationship is not sexual:

Sensei means teacher, Miss Rochester. It's what his students call Gilbert. Sleep with means sharing the same room and mosquito net as the Professor. I doubt it if means sleep. They talk all night. About chastity, I gather. Chastity and its nuances. It would save electricity if they were less interested in chastity. (29)

Later, warning her brother about the danger of his ego, Gretel observes: "What your poor Japanese Adonis needs is a nice, normal, immoral woman. Or, maybe, a nice, normal, immoral queer" (108). This is a characteristic manoeuvre for Porter. One is presumably meant to focus on how the heterosexual/homosexual opposition is challenged, but the line does something else; it makes heterosexual and homosexual equally and normally immoral. This is the same strategy Porter uses in *A Handful of Pennies* when he positions the heterosexual Paula Groot and the paedophile Padre Hamilton side by side as they are being deported from Occupation Japan for sexual misconduct—and has them look at the same beautiful young man. Similarly, in *Eden House* Hubert Charlesworth's paedophilia becomes not so much abominable as normal when it emerges among—or merges in—so many sexual secrets. Hubert's narrative and Padre Hamilton's narrative are positioned so that they do not attract too much attention or censure. Porter's strategy is to make his audience so preoccupied with masks being ripped off and with morality being exposed as empty performance that they are likely not to examine the ethical implications in his positioning of these narratives.

This raises the possibility that at some level Toda-san's cut tongue may be an abomination desired by the play. One of the difficulties in producing *The Professor* is that the relationship between Medlin and Toda-san is stranded between

what the audience knows and what the play refuses to say. Most watchers, whether from the balcony or the stalls, would conclude the relationship was homosexual, even if sublimated, but the play seems to want not to say this, even though it uses the play-within-the-play to expose another undeclared love, that of Fusehime for Toda-san. Porter ignored various requests to clarify and develop the relationship between Medlin and Toda-san (Lord 194–200). What the play does, then, is to offer a relationship consistent with its own logic: one that is asexual and moral and abnormal. At the point where Toda-san tells his lie he undoes that logic, returning the relationship to the immoral, and therefore the normal, and therefore the sexual. This is one reason why the play has to silence him. Once the relationship becomes sexual, it exposes not just homosexuality, but also transgressions to do with culture and consent. It exposes an assumption that sexual relationships are fundamentally—normally—unequal and exploitative (as they are in *The Tower, Eden House* and much of Porter's fiction, particularly the stories dealing with teacher-pupil relationships). There is a second reason for having Toda-san sacrifice his tongue: he is beautiful, and beauty threatens the controlled and controlling performance that is the Professor. The cutting out of Toda-san's tongue serves much the same purpose as the cutting off of Queely Sheill's leg in *The Tilted Cross*. Both men are beautiful, innocent, and desired, and disfigurement cancels their power. It is also possible that the silencing of Toda-san is some kind of surrogate for silencing the victim of sexual exploitation or abuse, but that is probably to go too far.

If this account of Porter's plays as “abominable scripts” is to be seen as just, I need now to confront the possibility that I am taking unfair advantage of Mary Lord's biography. Am I merely using Porter's texts to do a surrogate analysis of the ethics of the actual author? To argue that Lord's biography has somehow to be excluded from critical reading of Porter's texts is to risk naïve objectivism. It is to risk reading the biography as if it refers uncomplicatedly to an external, isolable reality that can be quarantined from the exchange of life and fiction that constitutes the subject Hal Porter. Reading is itself an act within and of narrative. Anyone who reads Porter cannot help but respond from within narratives of children, since such narratives are so fundamental to and so frequent in his writing. Anyone who has read Porter's children and not been suspicious is simply failing or refusing to do justice to the textual strategies by which Porter's child is made predatory. Mary Lord's biography is in some ways simply a more conflicted instance of how reading occurs within an exchange of narratives. Although Lord herself does not propose this, her book opens up the question of narrative ethics, since it illustrates how “moral notions only take on meaning in a narrative” and “moral disagreements involve rival histories of explanation” (Hauerwas and Burrell 159). Rather than see it as too subjective or as more a memoir than a biography (and therefore

less reliable), I take it as an illustration of how different narratives of the child produce and sustain conflicting (ethical) interpretations of paedophilia. Porter's narrative is of himself as the hunted; Lord's is of him as amoral. To suggest that it should be excluded from reading is effectively to pretend that we can read any one story as if our reading is not informed by, invested with, and investigated in other narratives we have read, or told, or lived. Consequently, I do not see that *Hal Porter: Man of Many Parts* should be excluded from a reading of Porter's writing, especially since the knowledge it possesses is already in the writing.

Despite the publicity that attended the publication of Lord's biography, it is not Lord who makes Porter's paedophilia public. With a characteristically evasive candour, the narrator of *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* includes experiments with pederasty in a list of lessons he learned on the way to becoming a man. Recalling his performance as First Wombat in a school fantasia, the narrator remembers how King Bunyip's mask slid from his face, then slips his own mask:

To our dismay King Bunyip's mask slides from his face to reveal the sweating, the glistening, the suddenly wrinkled face of Dick Verco with its faint moustache.

The next time I recall seeing that face thirty years have passed. I am now a man—at least a man of sorts—too much a man, too little a man. I have travelled, been married, been divorced, have talked too much here and too little there, have taken my part in experiments with many lives and many bodies, have had dispassionate or stormy adventures in lying, in drunkenness, in adultery, in pederasty, in being charming and kindly, in being vile-tempered and arrogant, in being cruel, in being self-sacrificing, in being human and too human, in being inhuman and too inhuman. (126)

This is a cunning piece of honesty, enticing a reader to accept pederasty as merely one experiment among many, no more serious than being drunk, or charming, or too human. Nevertheless it does lodge the knowledge of paedophilia in the written and writing Porter. Such knowledge constitutes a biographic, a reciprocating interaction of textual and actual, an interaction that relates the autobiographies, biographies, plays and stories that have Porter as their subject. This gives a permission one might otherwise need to presume.

It is, nevertheless, necessary to avoid a surrogate interrogation of Porter's moral character. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that paedophilic acts are so finally and formally constituted by narrative that narrative can displace Hal Porter as the subject of and in his own exercise of freedom. In another context, I would support Paul Ricoeur's notion of "an opaque subjectivity which expresses itself through the detour of countless mediations—signs, symbols, texts, and human

praxis itself . . . as a dialectic between the self and mediated social meanings” (“Creativity” 477). I would also take up a distinction Ricoeur makes in *Oneself as Another* between self-as-identity (*ipse*) and self-as-sameness (*idem*) and resist the assumption that the self, because it is not always the same is never itself, but must always and only be decentred, destabilised and multiplied; I would point out that, if one is to account justly for the other, one must be accountable in and to oneself. In another context, I would argue that *being* need not be sacrificed and subjected to *saying* (or writing, or knowing). While *saying* helps *being* make its way into meaning, *being* helps keep *saying* open-minded. Each extends the other’s possibilities. I would argue for a subject whose real actions elicit, as much as they incorporate, a language of freedom, rights and responsibilities.

In this context, however, I am primarily interested in how to read particular texts, Hal Porter’s plays, in ways that relate their literary and ethical activities. To use Porter’s sexual biography as a reason for reading from the textual to the actual is likely to encourage the notion that the moral is outside the text, in some objective order, waiting to be read down onto the text. This will favour an approach to “literature and ethics” study that reduces ethics to value statements affirmed or denied by literary works. In such an approach, what the reader thinks of paedophilia determines how the reader sees the ethics of Porter’s texts. I think this is a limiting approach, irrespective of one’s moral position. A focus on the act as object can easily ignore the ways in which the act derives value, motivation and approval by participating in personal and social narratives. It can also overlook the role of narrative in naming (and concealing) the subject responsible for knowing and willing the good, the bad and the indifferent. Acts are not automatic events. Too much emphasis on the ethical act as object can alienate subjects from their acts, making it easier for subjects to disown their acts. It is more useful, as I have been trying to demonstrate, to examine how paedophilia functions within Porter’s narratives, how it enters stories where children are often predators and adults usually amoral, where power and knowledge are equally guarded and dishonesty is the right thing.

To develop an effective approach to “literature and ethics” study, it is necessary to articulate something of the reciprocity that occurs when ethics and narrative share the same space. In order to achieve this, it is useful to shift emphasis from ethical models that privilege rationalism and objectivism, giving some credence to a narrative model of ethics. As Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell argue, narrative can mediate between “objective” and “subjective,” “rational” and “irrational” models of ethics. Resisting the Enlightenment belief in scientific reason and the drive to “free moral behaviour from the arbitrary and contingent nature of the agent’s beliefs, dispositions, and character” (160), they deny the assumption that objec-

tivity has to be protected from the story of the agent (so often associated with the “subjective”), insisting that such an approach does not sufficiently account for the formation and activity of the moral self mediated in good stories. They assign moral truth not so much to human nature apprehended through objective reason as to human nature constituted in narrative. Narrative, for Hauerwas and Burrell, is a way of accounting for character:

We cannot account for our moral life solely by the decisions we make; we also need the narrative that forms us to have one kind of character rather than another. These narratives are not arbitrarily acquired, although they will embody many factors we might consider “contingent.” As our stories, however, they will determine what kind of moral considerations—that is, what reasons—will count at all. Hence these narratives must be included in any account of moral rationality that does not unwarrantedly exclude large aspects of our moral existence, i.e., moral character. (167)

Character, in this account, makes it possible to analyse actions, since character generates a set of expectations or “language” which embodies “a systematic set of connections between actions which offers a setting or syntax for subsequent responses” (179). Ethical discrimination then becomes less a matter of adjudicating between arguments and more a question of assessing “how adopting different stories will lead us to become different sorts of persons” (185). The stories they themselves prefer are those which expose distortions, liberate from destructive options, and “keep us from having to resort to violence” (185).

While this argument goes some way towards establishing a narrative model of ethics, its priority is still ethics. It does not sufficiently acknowledge the ways in which literary criticism might contribute to its own discussion. Convinced that the “feature common to all stories which gives them their peculiar aptitude for illuminating real-life situations is their narrative structure” (177), Hauerwas and Burrell do not quite disengage from an assumption that stories are at the service of ethics (in “real-life situations”) and, perhaps because of this, they limit what might be called the more literary aspect of their discussion to plot as the unfolding of character.

If we are to go further in discussing the relationship between literature and ethics, it is worth asking how imagery and perspective might be said to incorporate acts of power that have ethico-textual value. It is worth exploring how narrator-reader relationships, inasmuch as they cause intersections between stories, can involve confessions, evasions, collusions and resistances. Good readers need to identify a narrator’s textual activities, to see where those activities incline towards and actively model real behaviour, and so do justice to writing.

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