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CARROLL, NOËL and GIBSON, JOHN, eds. Narrative, Emotion, and Insight.

Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011, 198pp., \$64.95.

This book is a collection of nine essays inspired by a conference of the same name, held at the Free Library of Philadelphia in 2006. The focus is on narrative and how the answers to questions about fiction, particularly those related to insight and emotion, change when asked of narrative instead. The differences are most obvious and gratifying in John Gibson and Derek Matravers' respective papers, though the conclusions reached may be the result of the authors' perspicacity rather than the switch in focus. All the essays are nonetheless original and thought-provoking contributions to the philosophical literature on narrative.

Gibson's introduction defines the subject of the collection, the everyday understanding of narrative as the representation or presentation of stories, and provides a convenient summary of each paper. This is followed by the late Peter Goldie's essay, "Life, Fiction, and Narrative", which identifies narratives as stories that are coherent, meaningful, and emotionally important. His aim is to assess the value of thinking about our lives through narrative by comparing the dangers with the benefits. The former are the "*fictionalizing tendencies*" (p.8) of narrative: plotting our lives, finding agency where there is none, the desire for closure, and regarding our own character in terms of genre. Goldie's presentation of the psychological benefits is regrettably restricted to a single paragraph, where he notes that narratives help us deal with contingency and the bleakness of a scientific world without meaning. There is no explicit conclusion, but the implication is that as long as we are aware of the fictionalizing tendencies, narrative thinking serves a useful function.

The next two essays both address an issue in philosophy of film, the question of whether a work of film can be a work of philosophy. Berys Gaut's "Telling Stories" examines the complexity of the narrative structure of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and discriminates between narrative (what is presented) and narration (how it is presented) reminiscent of the content-form dichotomy. He highlights the significance of the Easter Egg on the DVD, a special feature which allows viewers to watch the film scenes in chronological order. While complex narrative structures are common to the art form, the Easter Egg is unique to *Memento*. Gaut claims that the narrative in both versions is the same (it is the same story), and that the differences in the artistic properties are thus differences in the narration. By drawing attention to this distinction, he shows how the film forces us into the situation of the protagonist, who has anterograde amnesia, and augments the viewer's imaginative identification. Gaut's main point is that the film not only asserts three claims about the world, but provides experiential or narrative confirmation of: the unreliability of memory, the tendency to fictionalize (to use Goldie's term), and the necessity of memory for understanding. This evidence demonstrates how "narration can position viewers both cognitively and emotionally, and how doing so can teach them things of some importance about the actual world" (p.42). Noël Carroll's essay, "Philosophical Insight, Emotion, and Popular Fiction" advances the case for *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) doing philosophy. He provides a compelling critique of the film and then examines three general objections to it doing philosophy: the no-argument argument, the banality argument, and the excessive elaboration argument. While Carroll sees off each in turn, his conclusion, that *Sunset Boulevard* can do *popular* philosophy, is disappointing. There seems little doubt that film can do popular philosophy and even *continental* philosophy, as Stephen Mulhall has noted of *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) with reference to Nietzsche and Heidegger (*On Film* [Routledge 2002], pp.41-49). The more interesting question is whether film can do

*analytic* philosophy, and Gaut seems to have indicated the direction future inquiry might take.

Gibson begins “Thick Narratives” by identifying literary content with ethical significance, and then re-frames the familiar moralist-automomist question of whether a moral defect can be an aesthetic defect as the puzzle of why we value morally vicious works of literature (for example, T.S. Eliot’s anti-Semitic poetry). He distinguishes between a story and a narrative, associating the former with content and the latter with form, the significance being that the story can be transformed by the way it is narrated. The term ‘thick narrative’ draws on Ryle’s conception of thick and thin descriptions, and thick narratives “have as their goal the articulation of a kind of content that is clearly ethical but that has very little to do with the specification of duties, obligations, or methods for determining the moral worth of possible courses of action” (p.76). A further distinction is made between ethical life and moral philosophy, where the latter prescribes courses of action and the former describes human cultural practices. By being ethical rather than moral, thick narratives can provide an insight into ethical values without promoting a particular morality. Gibson thus not only answers the initial question in his paper, but also shows that the question of the value of literature is more profound than the current debate suggests.

The next four essays are all concerned with meaning in human life, and the first two deal with self-narratives. In “Narrative, Emotions, and Autonomy”, Amy Mullin defines meta-affective skills as those which enable us to recognize our own emotional responses and reflect upon the guidance they provide. The paper complements Gibson’s by developing his conception of thick narratives (though Mullin does not employ the term). She argues that narratives increase our personal autonomy by refining our meta-affective skills and that the

features of narratives most likely to do this are: thick, focused on purposiveness and emotion in characters, and involving imaginings which have the potential to influence action in readers. The rest of the essay demonstrates the operation of this theory by reference to three novels. In “Narrative Rehearsal, Expression, and Goethe’s ‘Wandrer’s Nachtlied II’”, Richard Eldridge examines six options for achieving “continuing, self-determining orientation for human subjects in post-Kantian modernity” (p.116 ). He favours Hölderlin’s lyrical embodiment of modulation and explores the similarities with Goethe’s poetology before examining three theories of artistic expression in order to determine how literature can probe and resolve problematic emotions. Eldridge maintains that Wordsworth integrates all three of these and offers his own definition of art as a focus for thought, emotion, and the imagination. He then presents a detailed literary analysis of the poem in the title, which draws on Adorno’s interpretation and demonstrates how it provides a continuing, self-determining orientation by facilitating the full exercise of human attention and expression.

Aaron Smuts turns to the art form of song in “Rubber Ring”, asking why we listen to sad songs when they appear to make us feel worse. He begins by establishing a paradigm for song, describes a sad song as one intended to arouse sadness in listeners, and identifies a feature of sad songs as typically possessing thin narratives (in Gibson’s terminology). This characteristic accounts for the popularity of the genre as it facilitates the personalization of content by a very wide audience. Smuts argues convincingly that the experience of listening to these songs has constitutive value, and that we do not seek catharsis but an intensification of the painful emotion in order to better understand what is significant to us. Susan Feagin examines “Discovery Plots in Tragedy”, classifying the sub-category in terms of its two crucial features: plots with unusual circumstances, and the protagonist as the key to unlocking the mystery. These two elements allow tragedies with discovery plots to be relevant not just

to their unique time and place, but to a general audience. Feagin provides an in-depth analysis of: discovery (“enlightenment” in Arthur Miller’s terms [p.170]) in tragedy, the varieties of unusual circumstances in discovery plots, and the essential role of the protagonist. This is followed by a detailed critique of *Scorched* by Wajdi Mouawad. Feagin maintains that the play serves as confirmation of “the meaningfulness of tragic discovery” (p.171) as opposed to the absurd freedom and radical contingency proposed by Sartre and other existentialist philosophers. Unfortunately, this contrast is not developed further.

Derek Matravers offers a fresh look at an old problem in “Imagination, Fiction, and Documentary”. He begins with the familiar distinction between imagination (or imaginary belief) and belief, the sense in which I am not motivated to assist the protagonist in a fictional film or call for an ambulance when he is wounded. This is not, Matravers maintains, because I am watching fiction, but because the film is a representation. The imagination is employed in both types of representations, fictional and documentary, and I am no more motivated to assist a fictional protagonist than I am to assist a real person in distress on a televised news broadcast. This is because there is no confrontation-relation: I am neither in the presence of the protagonist nor of the people in the news. Matravers notes that representation-relations may motivate in a different way. Reading Orwell’s *1984* causes me to oppose totalitarianism rather than assist Winston Smith, and this is the result of the novel being a representation rather than a fiction. The choice is not therefore between imagination *or* belief because there are actually two questions at stake. The first is whether I have an imaginative engagement with a narrative, be it *1984* or Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Peru*; the second is whether that narrative is fictional or not. This dual distinction is highly significant and casts doubt on some of the previous work of Radford, Walton, Meskin, Weinberg, and Currie.

Like Gibson, Matravers provides a penetrating perspective on a contemporary debate in philosophy.

As a final observation, it is interesting to note the extent to which so many essays in this collection rely upon a critical analysis of a specific narrative in support of either inductive or deductive argument. The feature may, however, be a result of similarity in styles rather than the shared subject-matter. In conclusion, the book is a rewarding read which will be useful to those working in philosophy of the self, personality psychology, and ethics in addition to aesthetics and philosophy of art.

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