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# The Mead of the Giant

## *On Literature and Discourse Ethics*

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### I.

Once upon a time, the gods of Asgarth created a man they called “Kvasir”.<sup>1</sup> He was the wisest of all the sons of Mithgarth, his only problem being his lack of immortality. That particular deficiency became his undoing; he was killed by a bunch of dwarfs. The little brutes then brewed mead out of his blood. The brew later became the possession of the giant Suttungr and his daughter Gunnlöd. Ódinn the one-eyed, the god of poetry and trickster *extraordinaire*, decided to steal the mead. Of course he succeeded, as gods tend to be on the successful side. The reason for his interest in this particular drink was the fact that the mead of the giant is the mead of poetry. Whoever tastes it becomes a poet in no time, poor sod!

There is grain of truth in most myths and this one is no exception. For if the mead of poetry is brewed out of a wise man’s blood, then poetry must be a conveyor of wisdom. And the wisdom we seek in poetry and other kinds of literary works is more than often moral wisdom. My aim in this paper is to show that discourse ethics can be an interesting guide to the understanding of the ethical import of fictional narrative literature. I think that most of what I say holds for other kinds of literature, as well as non-literary fictional narratives.<sup>2</sup> At the same

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1. This paper has to be taken for what it is, a philosophical experiment where the author is groping for the truth rather than presenting it. In some ways the paper contains visions rather than full-fledged theories. Maybe I am not really aiming at truth but trying to find fruitful and exciting ways of looking at certain problems.

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2. Most novels, short stories, plays and epic poems count as “fictional, narrative, pieces of literature”. Most full-length films, operas and musicals can be called “fictional narratives”.

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time I want to show that there are hidden rhetorical and literary moments in discourse ethics.

First I will take a brief look at discourse ethics, then at the question of ethical interpretation of literary texts, and finally I will try to show how discourse ethics can be made fruitful for the “ars interpretandi”.

Discourse ethics, also called communicative ethics, is the brainchild of the German philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel (the former got most of the credit because he is much better known). The basic idea is to give Kantian ethics a linguistic turn. Thus, when Kant says “consciousness”, Habermas and Apel say “language”, when Kant says “transcendental ego”, they say “ideal community of communicators” or “ideal speech situation” (these ideal situations are also the discourse ethical counterparts to the kingdom of ends). While Kant places the Moral law in our hearts, Apel and Habermas put it on the tip of our tongue. In order to understand this we must take a look at their theory of communication, argumentation and ethics. They actually maintain that linguistic communication has a normative kernel. This idea is inspired by amongst others John Searle who said: “speaking a language is everywhere permeated with the facts of commitments undertaken, obligations assumed, cogent arguments presented, and so on”.<sup>3</sup> However, Searle never drew any ethical conclusion from statements like these, in contrast to Apel and Habermas. They maintain that we raise three implicit validity claims with prototypical speech acts, the truth-claim for the propositional content of the speech act, the claim of having the right to perform the speech act and the claim that we are sincere. As for the truth-claim, the idea seems to be that truth is logically prior to untruth<sup>4</sup> and that all speech acts contain a propositional part, if not explicitly, then implicitly. Saying “hello” can be viewed as performing an elliptic speech act with an implied proposition like “I greet you”. As for the claim to rightness, speech acts are based upon rules and I cannot claim to be performing a speech act unless I implicitly or explicitly claim to use them correctly. Further, I cannot be said to have performed the act of marrying a couple by saying “I hereby proclaim you man and wife” unless I have the right to do so. Something similar holds for a host of speech acts, and it holds for all speech acts that we can-

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3. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 197–198.

4. One of the many unclaritys in Habermas’ and Apel’s thought is that they do not say so directly. However, if their theory is to make sense, they must have something like this in mind. But could we not communicate even if the norm was that we ought to put forth the negation of propositions we think are true?

not perform them unless we in prototypical cases claim rightness for the norms involved in the mode of communication which at least partly constitutes the speech act. Telling people sincerely that you want them to go to hell is a particular way of communicating, involving certain norms, like "I have the right to tell you to go to hell". The claim to rightness pushes speech acts in the direction of moral rightness.<sup>5</sup>

Let us take a look at the last validity claim. According to Apel's follower, Wolfgang Kuhlmann, we do not really communicate with those we lie to. We do not regard them as co-subjects in communication but as objects to be manipulated. At the same time we must be able to communicate with others while we lie. We must for instance be able to tell others in a truthful manner that we intend to lie to someone or inform somebody about the existence of the objects of our manipulations. Kuhlmann says that this follows from the private language argument.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Habermas and Apel stress the fact that lying is pretending to tell the truth. So lying presupposes truthfulness and thus the concept of truthfulness is logically prior to that of lying.<sup>7</sup> Further, we cannot communicate if we explain causally everything both we and others say or think, instead of understanding and evaluating that which is being said or done. If I explain causally everything you say, I am not really talking to you but rather about you. Moreover, the speech acts used in linguistic communication are in paradigmatic cases actually or potentially reason-based. From this it follows that the evaluation of the reasons for what is being said is logically prior to causal explanations of why it has been said. Therefore, we cannot really communicate unless we assume that the communicators have at least some autonomy. By regarding them as autonomous, we deny that they are automata. So among the ground norms of communication we find N<sub>1</sub> "if you want to communicate, then you ought to make truthfulness the norm of your communicative acts"; N<sub>2</sub> "if you want to communicate then you ought to regard your-

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5. For instance Jürgen Habermas, "Was heißt Universalpragmatik?", in Habermas, *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984), 354-355.

6. Wolfgang Kuhlmann, "Reflexive Letztbegründung. Zur These von der Unhintergebarkeit der Argumentationssituation", *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 35:1 (1981), 307.

7. However, not only does the concept of lying presuppose that of truthfulness, it is also the other way round. The concepts are interdependent, just like night and day. There would not be any truthfulness in a world where people did not know that lying was a possibility. Therefore, it does not seem clear to me that the concept of truthfulness has any logical priority over the concept of lying. Further, we could follow the norm that we ought to systematically say the opposite of what we mean and at the same time communicate, cf. footnote 3.

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self and others as having at least a certain autonomy”; N<sub>3</sub> “if you want to communicate, then you must aim at putting forth true propositions”; N<sub>4</sub> “If you want to communicate then you must aim at performing speech acts in a normatively correct fashion”.

According to discourse ethics, these norms are among the *conditio sine qua non* of communication.<sup>8</sup> We will later see that the norms in question are not really hypothetical. We will also discover that they are categorically valid. Wolfgang Kuhlmann maintains that communication has four ground norms. They differ from N<sub>1</sub>–N<sub>4</sub>, but do not contradict them and can supplement them (and vice versa).

It has been said that Western philosophy is just a series of footnotes on Plato. Likewise, a substantial part of modern philosophy is a long and boring footnote on Wittgenstein. As suggested, the private language argument plays an important role for discourse ethics. There can be no such thing as a completely private thought, argument, or an inner way of communication, which cannot be understood by others. Therefore, Apel concludes that the logical validity of arguments cannot be ascertained without an actual or virtual community of thinkers who have the ability to communicate and establish a consensus. Even a thinker, who is alone, can only test his own arguments and explicate them in a virtual dialogue with himself. Thus he must internalise the dialogue of a potential community of arguers. From this Apel draws the conclusion that science actually has the validity of certain norms as preconditions: “Science presupposes ethics because truth is not only a matter of evidence for my senses, but moreover a matter of intersubjective validity to be testified to by a grounded consensus about the coherence of evidence in the community of investigators. Hence science must presuppose communicative understanding between persons as co-subjects of agreement about truth and communication between people presupposes ethical norms”.<sup>9</sup> (The role of consensus should be briefly explained: We cannot categorically and seriously main-

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8. This is my reconstruction of discourse ethics. Its originators never say explicitly that these are among the ground norms, which is one of the many examples of discourse ethics’ lack of clarity.

9. Karl-Otto Apel, “The Common Presuppositions of Hermeneutics and Ethics: Types of Rationality beyond Science and Technology”, in Jan Bärmark, ed., *Perspectives on Metascience*, Acta Regiae Societatis scientiarum et litterarum Gothoburgensis. Interdisciplinaria 2 (Gothenburg: Vetenskaps- o. vitterhets-samhället, 1980), 50. Strangely enough, Apel and Habermas tend to talk as if the norms of science are the norms of communication. This does not rhyme very well with their criticism of scientism.

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tain "that p" unless we demand that everybody agree.) The aim of scientific argumentation, to find intersubjective validity, cannot be reached if everybody lies to themselves and others, prevents people from arguing, or ignores legitimate arguments. Further, it is desirable that those who are engaged in argumentation regard one another as responsible and honest. Those who argue must accept the norms of truthfulness, respect for arguments etc. explicitly or implicitly. They cannot deny their validity in a meaningful manner, because if they argue against their validity they accept that validity in practice. And if they refuse to engage in arguments on these issues, then they cannot raise the question of whether or not ethical principles can be grounded, for the answer to that question requires actual or potential arguments. By arguing we anticipate an open, unlimited, ideal community of communicators. To put forth a proposition implies namely that one must be willing to defend the validity of the proposition against all potential partners in dialogue at any possible time. But does this hold only for those who are willing to argue? No, as Kuhlmann says, the situation of those who argue is not as special as it sounds. An attempt to ground norms rationally is only an especially rational way of finding an answer to the question "what shall we do?" a question we as moral subjects face all the time. We can only be regarded as autonomous and responsible (zurechungsfähig) if we can use arguments in favour of our views.<sup>10</sup> Further, Apel maintains that the norms of communication are preconditions for a valid self-understanding. As Plato said, thought is an internal dialogue, so the self-scrutiny of the solitary subjects also obeys the norms of communication. Inspired by Hegel and Mead, Habermas says that individualisation is socialisation.<sup>11</sup> An individual is in a way the sum of his communicative acts, his relations to the Thou. As the great Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf says: "Jag är min egen hur är det möjligt? Endast därför att du är jag."<sup>12</sup> (My English translation: "I belong to me, how can it be? Only because you are me.") Because persons are the products of communicative actions there is no escape from the rule of the norms of communication. Their validity is unconditional, just like that of the categorical imperative. So the norms we mentioned earlier can be reformulated in the following fashion: N1a "you ought to make truthfulness the norm of your com-

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10. Kuhlmann, "Reflexive Letztbegründung", 304

11. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1981).

12. Gunnar Ekelöf, *Dikter* (Stockholm: Mån-pocket, 1976), 591.

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municative acts”; N2a “you ought to regard yourself and others as having at least a certain autonomy”; N3a “aim at putting forth true propositions; N4a “aim at performing speech acts in a normatively correct fashion”.

Let us see what import this has for ethics. Apel says that even our needs can be regarded as claims and the legitimacy of these claims must be possible to discuss. Human interests are therefore subjects of argumentative discourse, because those who argue accept implicitly all possible claims of needs, as long as they are justifiable in an argumentative fashion.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the argumentative language game has a certain logical priority over other language games. It does not mean that ethical norms are argumentative ones, only that the argumentative discourse functions as a kind of a court of norms and acts. Only in an argumentative discourse can we decide whether or not a decision taken in solitude is to be regarded as a meaningful act. Only in an argumentative discourse can we decide whether the decision can be subsumed under a rule and therefore is to be regarded as an action, if to act is to follow a rule.<sup>14</sup> In the light of what I have said so far, it is easy to understand why Wolfgang Kuhlmann says that communication has four basic norms. They can be expressed in the following imperatives: a) argue in a rational fashion; b) strive towards a rational consensus; c) if your interests collide with the interests of others, strive towards a rational consensus with them; d) work towards the realisation of conditions which approximate those of an ideal speech situation.<sup>15</sup> I stipulate that a)–d), plus N1a–N4a are necessary conditions for discourse ethical communication though I do not exclude the possibility of making the list longer.

To cut a long story short, Habermas maintains that ethics has two pillars, one of which is expressible in the principle of discourse: A norm can only be regarded as justifiable if all of those who might possibly be affected by its acceptance would accept the norm in a practical discourse (in such a discourse everybody is free and equal. Practical discourse concerns our actions and ethical norms.). The basic norms of communication constrain such a discourse; an ethical norm that goes

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13. Karl-Otto Apel, “Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik”, in Apel, *Transformation der Philosophie*, Band 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 424–426.

14. Karl-Otto Apel, “Sprechakttheorie und Begründung ethischer Normen”, in Kuno Lorenz, ed., *Konstruktionen versus Positionen*, Band 2 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 94–95.

15. Wolfgang Kuhlmann, *Reflexive Letztbegründung* (Freiburg and München: Alber, 1985), esp. pp. 185–215.

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against them cannot be valid. Further, Habermas operates with a principle of universalisation, according to which a norm is justified only when the consequences and side-effects for the satisfaction of the interests of every individual, which are expected to result from a general conformance to that norm, can be accepted without compulsion by all.<sup>16</sup>

There is a lot to be said about the strength and weaknesses of discourse ethics.<sup>17</sup> But I will only try to show that there is a hidden rhetorical, literary, fictional and narrativistic moment in discourse ethics, despite discourse ethics' emphasis upon the alleged primacy of the prosaic over the poetical, the factual over the fictional and literal meaning over figurative meaning. As I suggested, one of the central moments in discourse ethics is the contention that in order to communicate, we must act as if we were members of an idealised community of communicators, which is a "*necessary fiction*", in Habermas' terminology. We must talk and act *as if* people were basically autonomous, even though their autonomy cannot be proven, and even though there might be strong evidence to the contrary. We must so to speak suspend disbelief in people's autonomy in order to understand them, just as we must suspend disbelief in order to understand fiction.<sup>18</sup>

My analysis is inspired by Mark Johnson's analysis of Kant's ethics where Johnson quite convincingly shows that the core of Kantian ethics is by necessity soaked with metaphors. A Kantian must regard moral laws metaphorically as natural laws, human nature metaphorically as an end in itself. The idea of an end in itself as a metaphor deserves a further scrutiny since "the-end-in-itself"-idea plays an important role in discourse ethics, remember what I said about its emphasis upon autonomy and of the ideal speech situation as the kingdom of ends. Johnson points out that typically, we understand ends as something producible, something that can be brought about by actions. But strictly speaking, an end in itself cannot be produced by any conceivable action. Therefore, an end-in-itself must be a meta-

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16. Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" (trans. from German), in Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr, eds., *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1990), 90.

17. I think they have a point when they say that communication has normative aspects and moral import. But from this it does not follow that the norms of communication are the foundations of morality. Maybe there are no such foundations or there are foundations but of a very different nature.

18. I admittedly just assume that this must be the case when it comes to understanding fiction. Such understanding seems to require that we take part in a game of make-believe, the *serious* game.

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phorical extension of our ordinary concept of an end.<sup>19</sup> As I said earlier, discourse ethics adopts the idea of an end-in-itself. If Johnson's analysis is correct, then it follows that by adopting the idea in question, discourse ethics acquires a hidden metaphorical element.

Looking at some of Habermas' remarks upon identities can further strengthen my case. Our identities are from one point of view narratively constituted and the fiction of the autonomy of the individual (plus the independence of culture and the transparency of communication) is built into the grammar of a narrative, he says.<sup>20</sup> In his characteristically cryptic way, he does not explain what he means by this. Actually, it would not surprise me if he were inspired by Danto's contention that a historical narrative requires the openness of the future.<sup>21</sup> Possibly, this openness can be regarded as a grammatical feature of narratives. Be it as it may, my question is whether there can be such an openness unless we assume that the protagonists have some kind of a free will.

It can be added that a follower of Apelian discourse ethics, Teresa Bartolomei Vasconcelos, maintains that narratives are a necessary supplement to discourse. In the first place, the ability to tell the story of our lives is an important part of our personal identities and thereby our communicative competence. And telling the story of others or ourselves is by no means to objectify the protagonists, even

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19. Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 72–73. A somewhat more elaborated version of this argument can be found in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 429–433.

It could be tempting to regard the “as if” of discourse ethics as a manifestation of that which Lakoff and Johnson call “conceptual metaphor”. Such a metaphor can manifest itself in behaviour, not only in a linguistic fashion and it can have the outer form of an analogy (as if). It is an instance of a conceptual metaphor if one concept is seen through the prisms of another concept.

20. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 224. By “independence of culture”, Habermas seems to mean that in our workaday world, we simply must take our culture for granted, not explain all cultural phenomena causally. Actually, we cannot perform such a total explanation of culture because even the act of explaining is itself a cultural phenomenon. “Culture” in Habermas' terminology means those aspects of our common life which have to do with mutual understanding, traditions and meaning. By “transparency of communication”, he seems to have in mind that in order to communicate we must assume that acts of communication are by and large what they seem, instead of trying to uncover their biological or social causes. As we have seen earlier, such a total explanation of communication is self-defeating, according to Habermas' scheme of things.

21. Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), e.g. p. 353. Habermas actually quotes Danto approvingly in his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*.



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though we do not communicate with them. It is rather the opposite, we cannot tell a person's story without regarding him or her as having a certain individuality and subjectivity. Secondly, in order to be able to ascertain that a consensus attained really is a consensus attained in a dialogue free from domination we must be able to tell the story of that particular dialogue. This also applies even if we have not attained consensus. This seems intuitively plausible, adding further fuel to my proposal of a narrativistic turn in discourse ethics and other types of deontological ethics.<sup>22</sup> According to deontology a moral actor must be a unified self, and narrativism shows that a self is unified in virtue of being tellable. The catechism of deontology tells us that the objects of moral judgement are acts and acts are narratively structured. (Remember that judges tell stories when they pass verdicts, and we are judges in our moral lives, if we are to believe the deontologists.) So without narratology, no deontology!<sup>23</sup>

One of my basic sources of inspiration when I call acts and selves "narratively constructed" is the very un-deontological Alasdair MacIntyre. He maintains that speech acts are not really understandable unless we can place them in a narrative context. Imagine that we are waiting for a bus and a woman next to us all of a sudden says: "The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*". To be certain, we understand the meaning of the sentence uttered. The problem is to understand the point of uttering it. Suppose that she utters sentences like this at random intervals, in which case this would possibly be a form of madness. We would render her action of utterance intelligible if for instance she has mistaken me for a person who approached her in the library some days ago and asked her for the Latin name of the wild duck. We would also understand the action if she mistakenly thought I was her co-spy and she was uttering a code sen-

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22. Teresa Bartolomei Vasconcelos, "Das narrative Sinnverstehen und die Grenzen der Hermeneutik", in K.-O. Apel and Matthias Kettner, eds., *Mythos Wertfreiheit?* (Frankfurt a.M. and New York: Campus Verlag, 1994), 133-156.

23. Actually, Apel has certain qualms about referring to discourse ethics as "deontological". One reason is that discourse ethics not only stresses duties but also consequences, cf. the principle (U). Karl-Otto Apel, "Grenzen der Diskursethik? Versuch einer Zwischenbilanz", *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 40 (1986), 6.

The need for the narrativistic transformation has already been discovered by Richard Eldridge who maintains that narrative literature can show us the possibility of freedom in a world of causality in a way that nothing else can. Richard Eldridge, "How Is the Kantian Moral Criticism of Literature Possible?", in Bjørn Tysdahl, ed., *Literature and Ethics* (Oslo: Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, 1992), 85-98.

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tence to be decoded by me. In each case the act of utterance only becomes understandable by being put in a narrative context. This, I think, is quite correct.<sup>24</sup>

Just like Habermas and Apel, MacIntyre regards conversations as central moments in human life. He says that conversation is actually the general form of human transactions. But in contrast to the German thinkers, MacIntyre stresses the literary side of conversation. Understanding conversations involves allocating them to genres, just like literary works. We can say that a certain conversation was “a tragic misunderstanding between the interlocutors” or that this or that conversation was “comical”. Conversations also have beginnings, middles, and endings just as literary works (so do mathematical treatises, I might add). “They embody reversals and recognitions, they move towards and away from climaxes”.<sup>25</sup> According to the Scottish philosopher, human life has its literary side, thanks to the central position of conversation and its literary nature.

It might be tempting to try to combine MacIntyre’s thoughts on conversation with Habermas and Apel’s theory that communication constitutes us as human beings and has the form of a weak transcendental a priori. If we could show (as MacIntyre does not) that allocating conversations to a literary genre is a necessary condition for the correct identification of an event as a conversation, then we might be on the track of a literary a priori. Admittedly, this could prove a hard task; can we not identify a scientific discussion without subsuming it under some literary genre? Did our forefathers not converse before they had literature or must we believe that the literary word was the first word? Then again, our literary categories very often come from everyday discourse, so maybe people talked about comic conversations before they had comedies.

Be it as it may, it seems that discourse ethics has a covert literary and rhetorical side.<sup>26</sup>

Much against its originators intention, it seemingly has as a hidden implication that important parts of our thinking and speaking must contain ineliminable analogical and metaphorical moments (these tropical moments make up the rhetorical side). Further, it has the implication that our identities have fictional and

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24. It also shows that Habermas and Apel are wrong in their implicit assumption that understanding linguistic acts only requires understanding the words used, the knowing of what kind of speech act is being uttered, and a more or less implicit, fuzzy horizons of taken-for-grantedness.

25. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 211.

26. It might be tempting to say that I am deconstructing discourse ethics. If that is so then it is a deconstructing with a difference, because it is without *différance* in the Derridean manner.

narrative moments. These moments (plus the aforementioned tropical ones) are indicators of what I call "literariness". As I see it, the concept of a literary work can hardly be given an essential definition in any fruitful manner.<sup>27</sup>

The more weight tropes, fictionality, narrativity and stylistic devices (for instance rhyme) have in text T, the more literariness it possesses and the better reason we have to call T "a literary work".<sup>28</sup>

Given that thought and actions are in important ways related to texts,<sup>29</sup> then thought (for instance that of discourse ethics) and action (for instance action regarded as autonomous) can have elements of literariness. The world view we find in discourse ethics certainly contains such elements.

If discourse ethics is thus closer to literature than it seems at the first glance, then it seems plausible that literature can inform the participants in a discourse

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27. In contrast to me, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen maintain that we can define literature in an essential manner. A work is a literary one if and only if it conforms to the standards of the literary institution. The intentions of an utterer and the response of an audience makes a work literary, not the semantic nature of sentences. If this is true, the alleged fictional moment in discourse ethics do not give it a literary twist. But consider a text, which consists only of narrative sentences that make up a story and do not refer to anything in our empirical world. Further, the text has the form of sonnet. Would we not be entitled to call the text in question "a literary work" without having to worry about the way an utterer and an audience use it? Does the utterer-response model imply that a mathematical treatise can be called "a literary work" if an audience takes a literary stance towards it? It seems difficult to ignore completely the internal properties of a text when we decide whether or not to subsume it under the heading of a literary work. Further, the conception of a literary institution has problem of its own. In the first place, there are those, who think that such a conception can only yield a viciously circular definition of the concept of literary work. Secondly, it does not seem fruitful to liken this alleged institution to that of the practice of using money. Even an enemy of pecuniar institutions accepts the value of money in practice, there is no such universal acceptance of literary value. The latter fact speaks against the existence of a literary institution. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

28. A philosophical text containing an imaginative fictional story, told to illustrate a philosophical point, contains more literariness than a philosophical text which does not. A text containing a host of poetical metaphors has a greater amount of literariness *ceteris paribus* than a text which contains a host of scientific metaphors. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad* would perhaps be a prototypical literary work since it is a fictional narrative in rhyme, presented as a poem.

29. Both actions and texts are meaningful, and thought cannot be clearly separated from language or other means of symbolic representation. Further, a text can usually not be understood only as a string of sentences because sentences in themselves can be any number of things for instance a collection of examples of sentences of a certain kind. As for literary works or theoretical discourses, they can only be understood as strings of utterances. Even the list of examples I mentioned must be understood as being a part of an explicit or implicit utterance of the type of "the following are examples of sentences of the kind K.....". Utterances are actions or results of actions, therefore texts and actions are interrelated.

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in a decisive manner. Further, the existence of this literary side could make discourse ethics fruitful for the moral reading of literary works. I will devote the remainder of this essay to the last question.

## II.

Those whom Noël Carroll calls “the autonomists”, maintain that we can only read literature *qua* works of art if we concentrate on the literary works’ aesthetic aspects and ignore their moral sides (literature is autonomous in the sense of not depending upon morality, politics etc.). But even if this was true, who says we have to appropriate literary works as works of arts? And can we really understand strongly moralistic literary works in a purely aesthetic fashion? Can one ignore the political and moral aspects of George Orwell’s novel *1984* and at the same time understand the book? Carroll would certainly say “no”, he maintains that there are certain works like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Catch 22* where moral assessment is in its place.<sup>30</sup> Further, he has pointed out that nobody has come up with a compelling characterisation of that which is uniquely artistic, not “infected” with morality and politics.<sup>31</sup> Actually, in most cases we have to deploy various kinds of reasoning, including moral reasoning, in order to understand literary works. Understanding narratives requires moral knowledge, emotions play an important role in the understanding of narratives and emotions are shot through with moral concepts. Indignation for injustice is obviously a moral emotion and only by understanding that emotion can we understand a book like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The English philosopher Frank Palmer expresses similar views. He says that the understanding of fictional characters involves a minimum of ethical competence, even though we do not have to pass moral verdicts upon them. If we do not see that evil can be fascinating we cannot understand Macbeth’s actions; if we do not know that love cannot be measured we cannot understand Cordelia, the daughter of King Lear in Shakespeare’s play. Besides, our ethical expectations play an important role when we interpret the actions of fictional characters. It is only in the light of such expectations that we can understand Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello* as a treacherous person or Cordelia in *King Lear* as a devoted daughter. To be sure, ethical expectations are not the same as moral beliefs. We can for instance

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30. Noël Carroll, “Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding”, in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 138.

31. *Ibid.*, 135.

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regard treachery as something good. But we cannot understand the expression "treachery" if we do not understand that it denotes a condemning moral concept.<sup>32</sup>

This, I think, is quite correct. I want to add that the willing suspension of disbelief requires that we see the characters in stories as if they have at least a grain of free will, even though that is not strictly true (I assume that the suspension in question is a prerequisite for understanding fictional narratives). I also think that moral understanding of protagonists requires seeing them as having something resembling a free will. We cannot understand Iago as evil if we do not regard him as if he were responsible for his own evil actions. Carroll says we cannot understand Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* unless we admire Robert Jordan's courage.<sup>33</sup> My question is: can we admire his courage unless we see him as somehow autonomous? A willing suspension of disbelief in the autonomy of the protagonists seems to be a prerequisite for understanding them,<sup>34</sup> witness what I said earlier about discourse ethics and autonomy.

From regarding the characters of narratives as quasi-autonomous it is only a short step towards taking their locutions and views seriously without thinking about what views their creator, the author, has. We can contemplate the moral views of Ibsen's doctor Relling in *The Wild Duck* without having to worry about Ibsen's own views (well, we would not have to do it even if we had not regarded Relling as semi-autonomous). Anyway, his is a voice to be taken seriously, as a part of the polyphony of the story and of the world itself.

Now, the obvious rejoinder to my analysis is pointing out that a host of fictional narratives portray their characters as being heteronomous, for instance by being controlled by fate. The heroes of the Greek tragedies and the Icelandic sagas would be excellent examples, and so would the characters of Kafka. My answer is that in the first place I am not quite certain whether we can regard these characters as without any grain of a free will. We must see characters like Oedipus and Gunnar of the *Saga of Burnt-Njal* as consciously planning and making decisions. Given the logical connection argument that would mean that their actions are not entirely determined causally. Now, in Natalie Sarraute's novel *Tropismes* people are described as plant-like creatures, completely controlled by mechanic forces. But

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32. Frank Palmer, *Literature and Moral Understanding: A Philosophical Essay on Ethics, Aesthetics, Education, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 199.

33. Carroll, "Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding", 139.

34. Possibly, the fiction of autonomy is built into the "grammar" of fictional narratives as well as historical ones, cf. Habermas.

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are they really characters? They have no names and identities, which seems to be among the prerequisites of being characters. Something similar might hold for the “characters” of Beckett’s books. At least we cannot maintain that Beckett’s and Sarraute’s “characters” are paradigmatic ones. Secondly, discourse ethics has always stressed the constraints that society and nature put upon our freedom. These constraints can lure us into thinking that we communicate like autonomous equals while in reality oppressive forces shape our behaviour. For discourse ethics, autonomy is something to be increased by liberation where reflection plays a prominent role.<sup>35</sup> So its followers might maintain that fictional narratives which show us characters more or less in the grip of fate tell us important things about the limitations of our autonomy. Thirdly, in order to understand the lamentation of a character, struck down by fate, we must suspend disbelief in this being his/her lamentation, not only something invented by a Sophocles. In this fashion, the lamenting voice becomes an independent voice in the polyphony. We might learn something from the voice of an Oedipus, possibly aided by the feeling of fear and pity (could we really pity the protagonist unless we regard him as somehow autonomous, not only the vehicle of the author?). So there are at least important cases where we have to regard characters as at least somehow autonomous and chances are that we must always do that.

In order to strengthen my contention that discourse ethics can throw light upon literature we have to take a glance at the interpretations of literary texts. Wayne Booth talks about “coduction”, a type of interpretation where we join hands in interpreting, comparing our interpretations in order to find the best ones.<sup>36</sup> Actually, given the private language argument, all interpretations must be coductive. There cannot be such a thing as an interpretation, which is entirely private, not understandable to anybody else. No interpreter is an island. So if there is such a thing as the norms of communication, they must hold sway over the interpretation of texts, *in casu* those of narratives. In that case interpretation has an ethical side.

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35. “Truth will make ye free”. A woman who accepts the male chauvinist definition of her as inferior to males can increase her autonomy by reflection on the true nature of this definition. Before she discovered this, she thought that her subordinate way of communicating with men was something she had freely chosen. These are of course old Hegelian themes. On these and related matters, see for instance Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1968).

36. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 72.

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Even if discourse ethics were mistaken, the interpretation of literary texts would still have moral aspects. The reason is that we cannot understand texts without applying some principle of charity, a principle not entirely beyond morality, notwithstanding Davidsonian disclaimers. Applying the principle of charity to what a person says means showing that person a minimum of respect, trying to understand him, and listening to his views, instead of just explaining what he says, ignoring it, or preventing him from expressing his thoughts (the moral import of this is clear, "respect" for instance is a moral concept.). By implication something analogous holds for the interpretation of texts. In order to understand a text we must respect what the text says, not only project our whims and fancies into it. However, we must also show ourselves the respect of allowing our own perspectives to come into play. The text, so to speak, respects our right to colour it up to a point. So we can talk in a Gadamerian fashion about a virtual dialogue of interpretation. Here discourse ethics comes into the picture once again. If Gadamer on the one hand, and Apel and Habermas on the other, are right, then we can call literary texts "honorary citizens" in the ideal speech community. We can also include the implied speakers of the narratives, and last but not least the various protagonists of narratives in this community, cf. what I said earlier about their virtual autonomy. (The implied speaker in a non-narrative poem and the poet himself can also be a member of the community in question.) However, the author and the interpreters would be full-fledged members of the community in question. We would be able to question their truthfulness and the cognitive and moral import of what they are saying. When it comes to the honorary members, matters are a bit more complicated. In some ways, the interpreters must conduct a kind of an advocacy discourse on their behalf (such a discourse in Apel's and Habermas' scheme of things is a discourse on behalf of say future generations or people in coma). True, we would not be able to discuss the truthfulness of a literary work in such a discourse, but we can ask questions about its authenticity (an artwork's authenticity seems to be a sort of a virtual truthfulness). As for the truthfulness of characters, we could not even start to understand the play *Othello* unless we regard Iago as a liar, Desdemona as honest. And we can of course evaluate the cognitive and moral import of the views expressed by characters, implied authors and fictional narratives.

Let us look at a possible example of the aforementioned virtual conversation: Hilary Putnam maintains that Céline's novel *The Journey to the End of the Night* teaches us how to see the world with the eyes of those who feel that love is an

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illusion and that human kind is cruel by nature.<sup>37</sup> So Putnam, the interpreter, relates to us what Céline or the novel's implied author or even its characters are telling us. We can then join the conversation for instance a) by accepting or rejecting Putnam's interpretation or b) by endorsing the interpretation, then either accept or reject the alleged worldview.<sup>38</sup>

So what we have here is a polyphonic conception of the fictional narrative.<sup>39</sup> Such narratives can or even must be understood partly in a moral fashion, and discourse ethics can be one of our best guides to this moral understanding. We can sum up the basic reasons for this: a) We must (at least in important cases) suspend disbelief in autonomy of characters in order to understand them. b) A moral understanding of them requires such a suspension and without moral understanding of characters, no understanding of a host of them, even all of them. c) Interpretation of literature is a communicative enterprise and if discourse ethics is right all communication is under the sway of the norms of communication.

At the same time, discourse ethics itself is too close to literature and rhetoric for its own comfort. Let us sum up the reasons for this contention: a) discourse ethics has an ineliminable fictional side: believing the autonomy of communicators is a necessary fiction; b) it has an ineliminable narrative side, our identities are from one point of view narratively structured; c) it has an ineliminable metaphorical side: the end-in-itself conception is a metaphorical extension of the ordinary use of the concept of an end; d) it has an ineliminable analogical side: we have to regard participants in communication *as if* they are autonomous; e) it has an ineliminable rhetorical side because metaphors and analogies are rhetorical devices; f) it has an ineliminable literary side: the strong presence of a–d is an indicator of “literariness”.

### III.

The creation of poetry was seemingly an immoral act. The god Ódinn broke into the abode of Gunnlöð, the keeper of the mead, and seduced her in order to steal

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37. Hilary Putnam, “Literature, Science, and Reflection”, in Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 89–90.

38. In most cases, the voices of the narratives offer us ways of seeing things rather than explicit or implicit propositions.

39. I do not hide the fact that I am alluding to Bachtin's view of the novel as polyphonic and dialogical. He emphasises the interaction or virtual dialogue between different types of languages within the novel. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).



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the brew. But actually, he did this in order to postpone the *Ragnarökkur*<sup>40</sup> and what could be more moral than countering the apocalypse? Therefore, poetry is in the last analysis the most moral of all the fruits of the human spirit.

Those, who drink the mead of the giant, will acquire a deep, moral wisdom.

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40. "Ragnarökkur" means "the twilight of the gods".

