

The Heart of What Matters. The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy, by Anthony Cunningham; x & 296 pp. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Despite Socrates's rejection of the written word as a source of insight in the *Phaedrus*, a number of theorists have in recent years sought to find a role for literature in critical thought. Anthony Cunningham's *The Heart of What Matters* joins a list of works that includes Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Richard Posner's *Law and Literature*, and Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*. Whereas a number of these previous books have sought to articulate a public role for literature, Cunningham is more concerned with private philosophical reflection, specifically with the ways in which literature might help us reflect upon Socrates's dual questions "How should I live?" and "What sort of person should I be?" (p. 9). It is, nevertheless, appropriate to mention Cunningham's work in conjunction with these other texts because *The Heart of What Matters* faces a number of similar problems arising from what it means to read literature with an eye towards generating critical thought.

The first part of the book consists of three chapters in which Cunningham sets out his conception of ethics, the role of a convincing ethical theory, and his account of what it means to "read for life." This last chapter is, by his own admission "fairly sketchy and theoretical" (p. 69), but he attempts to compensate for this in the second part where he offers—as a means, perhaps, of "showing by doing"—detailed, philosophically motivated readings of literary works by three authors: Kazuo Ishiguro, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston. Like many of those who write about literature and ethics—including Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum—Cunningham's conception of ethics is "Aristotelian in spirit" (p. 5), as such it is no surprise to find that his "primary targets" in ethical theory are "Kant and Kantian ethics" (p. 4). Kant's theory of morality and indeed its various modern formulations—formulations Cunningham critiques in some detail—are, he says, simply insufficient for capturing the nuances of our lived experience. Theories that focus on some underlying principle of morality are, he suggests, too abstract to help us answer Socrates's questions about the best way to live. By contrast, literature can, Cunningham argues, provide us with insight into the complexities of modern living. In a passage that is strongly reminiscent of *Poetic Justice*, Cunningham asserts that literature can "filter moral experience by heightening our attention to what should be morally salient and by directing us away from less crucial elements that can distract us from more important things" (p. 84). Similarly, in a passage that further echoes Nussbaum, Cunningham suggests that "literature can help us diagnose by taking us places that are difficult and even impossible to visit, much less understand in actual experience" (p. 85). Central to his overall argument is the suggestion, also common to Nussbaum and Rorty, that the

“right kind of novel” can “help us refine our moral vision by giving us a studied opportunity to practice seeing and appreciating diverse ethical lores” (pp. 84–85). It is, however, this suggestion that reading is some sort of moral exercise that proves problematic for almost all work on literature and philosophy.

If literature is indeed a way for us to practice exercising our moral powers, then it is not clear why philosophers such as Cunningham, Nussbaum, and Rorty lavish so much attention on their own reading of texts. Reading about reading is not, I wish to suggest, the best way to exercise this moral capacity: it is rather like expecting to benefit from watching somebody else exercise. Instead of offering us a theory of reading which might allow us to engage in this exercise ourselves, Cunningham simply gives an account of his own experience. In this way, the subtitle of Cunningham’s book, “The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy,” is misleading. The focus of the book is not a meditation on that role: even Cunningham regards this part of the book as less than fully developed. It is rather more an example of the use of literature to illustrate and enliven the discussion of a preexisting set of moral commitments and values. Cunningham may, of course, have come to hold the views that he espouses on love, passion and forgiveness as a result of interacting with the texts that he identifies, but this does not mean that he is telling us anything about *literature’s* special role here. He could easily have come to these views as a result of a long walk or a boring train journey alone with his own thoughts. That there is no special role for *literature* in this work is illustrated by Cunningham’s discussion of other types of narrative, including Hollywood blockbusters, television shows, oral stories, war journals, or even real-life experiences such as watching a veteran pay silent homage to his fallen comrades at a war memorial (p. 75). This is not to suggest that Cunningham’s work in the second part of the book is not useful: far from it. Cunningham provides nuanced and thought-provoking discussions about the role of love, passion, and forgiveness in a meaningful human life. He could, however, have generated such accounts without the textual examples he provides: as is illustrated by the way in which the discussion of ethics seems to get away from any mention of the literary-text for pages at a time. Such an account might not have been so interesting or compelling as the one he offers through literature, but if I choose to illustrate a point with an example, this does not mean the point is any less valid *without* the example. In order to show that literature has “a very special role to play within moral philosophy” (p. 69) Cunningham has to show that it is doing some work beyond merely illustrating preexisting claims.

The Heart of What Matters then makes a number of intuitively appealing claims about literature and its potential role in our ethical life. The intuitive appeal of those claims is, however, never really examined. Instead we are offered readings of texts that are meant to serve as evidence of the validity of the theoretical claims underpinning the readings. The circularity problem

here is clear: if I have a penchant for seeing every book I read as a commentary on class politics, then my ability to offer a class-politics reading of a given text is not sufficient to establish that I am right to do so, or even that literature tells us something about class politics that we did not know before. If particular texts are to avoid becoming simply a hook on which theorists are to hang their preexisting concerns, then any discussion of the role of literature in moral philosophy must provide “a general account of the kinds of novels that best suit the purposes of moral philosophy” (p. 91); how we are supposed to read them; and a detailed account of what literature specifically has to offer to philosophy that other types of narrative and experience do not. Cunningham does not offer any of these, and without them, his claim in *The Heart of What Matters* simply seems to be that it is more useful to think about morality in conjunction with some conception of what it is like to be human than without it: a solid point, but a truism all the same.

The Heart of What Matters is, nevertheless, a valuable addition to the literature on literature and critical thought. Cunningham’s readings of texts are interesting, and there is a measured and thoughtful tone to his work that other theorists—Nussbaum and Posner in particular—would do well to emulate. Furthermore, given that Cunningham is concerned less with literature and public life—though there is, of course a sense in which ethics is inherently public—than with literature and private philosophical reflection, the subjectivity of his readings of literary texts is much less of a problem for him than for Nussbaum and Posner. If we are looking for role models of philosophical reflection to help us in our own lives, we could do a lot worse than to follow Cunningham. Nevertheless, it may be that reading is too solipsistic an enterprise for us to universalize Cunningham’s method: it is certainly not clear that every reader is as thoughtful or as nuanced as the author of *The Heart of What Matters*, and consequently that what emerges from such readings is not simply confirmation of preexisting beliefs. In this regard, perhaps, those of us who, like Cunningham, seek “a marriage” of philosophy and literature (p. 5) might do well to remember Philip Larkin’s observation that sometimes such unions can be as much about dilution as about addition.