On Not Being Too Formalistic About Aesthetic Value

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I hope to show how we might resist a certain kind of formalism in talking about aesthetic value: in particular, given my own interests, when talking about the aesthetic value of literary works, poetry, say, or the novel. It is a sensitive topic for me because I have sometimes been charged with being a formalist in my writing about literature: a charge that seems to arise out of my rejection of truth as one of the core values of literature.[1] But I don't see myself as a formalist—in any recognizable sense of the term—but I do think that literary works exhibit aesthetic values.

I

To get underway, we do not need a very precise definition of aesthetic value, even if one could be given. But philosophers should note that they are not the only people who take an interest in aesthetic value or indeed in aesthetics itself. The very idea crops up, for example, in beauty parlours and hairdressing salons as well as in cosmetic surgery, dentistry, and landscape design. That is not to mention its significant role in academic enquiries like anthropology, sports science, politics, and sociology, as well as, more obviously, in art history, psychology, and literary criticism.

Are there any common features in these applications? Importantly most have little to do with art: indeed art comes to seem a special, rather than a paradigm, case of the aesthetic. In very broad terms we can find commonality here: most obviously, in the many manifestations of beauty, in the pleasure of how something looks or seems to be or the impression it gives, in the surfaces of things, in colour, texture, the sensuous, the immediate, the vibrant, the emotional, the expressive, in the pleasures of design. In a word, an interest in the *appearance* of things, broadly conceived, in contrast to their merely utilitarian, instrumental or reductively physical aspects, along with salient qualities of experience and feeling.

Let's call this the *focus* for aesthetic value: it is a focus, very loosely speaking, on how things appear, how they look, or feel, or sound, or catch our attention, the sense that something is right, or fitting, or working well. It

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concerns the impression we have of objects and this tends to be holistic, often in the form of a gestalt, a sense of the whole as more than its parts. Furthermore, there are different modes in which aesthetic value is manifested so as well as having a focus it also has what might be called *modality*. Aesthetic value resides not just in degrees of beauty or ugliness but also in more nuanced dimensions: elegance, gracefulness, serenity, vividness, delicacy, unity, lifelessness, rawness, sentimentality, and so on. These are, or can be, aesthetic concepts and they mark modes of value: they characterise aspects of the appearance of objects, suggesting what is especially salient in that appearance. In contrast to the thin evaluative concepts like beauty or ugliness, which express positive or negative values inherently, it is notable that these 'thick' descriptions can change their evaluative valency in certain contexts. Elegance might be prima facie positive but too much elegance or misplaced elegance could be an aesthetic fault, creating, literally, a bad impression. This is at the heart of a kind of particularism in the aesthetic realm. There are no general principles that bind non-aesthetic properties to aesthetic ones, nor thick evaluative concepts to a particular positive or negative valency in context.

We can probe aesthetic value further. Another important truth about aesthetic value is that it is a response-dependent value. This needs careful spelling out. Something only has aesthetic value to the extent that human beings respond to it in a certain way. Partly this follows from the focus on appearance. It is only in relation to how an object appears to human beings that it can be said to possess aesthetic value. So aesthetic value is an anthropocentric value, unlike, say, the value of food or oxygen, nutritional value, which is not restricted to humans. Aesthetic value is not an intrinsic value of objects, a value that objects have in themselves apart from the responses they elicit in humans. If there were no humans there would be no aesthetic values, however the objects might be constituted. Nevertheless, although aesthetic value depends on human responses it does not demand of any given aesthetically valued object that it be a constant focus of human attention. Something's being aesthetically valuable at time t does not depend on any person actually perceiving and valuing that object at t. But it does depend on there being people able to perceive the object and disposed to value it aesthetically. So a beautiful vase can remain beautiful if shut away in a cupboard. But it ceases to be beautiful if there is no longer the possibility of anyone responding to it positively, either because there is no longer anyone disposed to value it as beautiful or in a more extreme case because human beings have all vanished off the face of the earth.

What kind of responses does aesthetic value depend on? The specific nature of the responses will differ in line with the different objects under evaluation. Responses to a poem, a vase, a flowerbed, a piano sonata, or a hairstyle, all judged to be aesthetically valuable, will have their own distinctive character. But in general terms the responses will be broadly experien-

tial or affective. Aesthetic value will manifest itself in the experiences afforded by the object under consideration, in particular grounded in how the object appears, how it looks, feels, sounds, or catches someone's attention.

What kind of experience? It cannot just be a pleasant sensation. For one thing, pleasant sensations are not restricted to humans, so not anthropocentric, for another, there are pleasant sensations that are not aesthetic. One should also be wary of characterising it simply as a species of *pleasure*, for that anodyne term is usually too vague to be serviceable, and aesthetic value can be found in objects, particularly works of art but also those features of nature we call sublime, which are unsettling or disturbing, rather than blandly pleasurable. The point is that it is an experience that is valued, therefore sought after, and valued for its own sake. It is tempting, and has tempted some philosophers, to stipulate a sui generis aesthetic experience, such as an aesthetic attitude or a kind of disinterested attention. But that is not helpful, as an aesthetic experience is just an experience that grounds aesthetic value and that is what needs explaining. Also, it would be wrong, given the diversity of aesthetically valued objects, to postulate a distinctive phenomenology of aesthetic value, a distinctive feeling accompanying a positive judgment. We will return in a minute to ways of characterising the relevant kind of experience.

An important theoretical commitment emerges from these preliminary observations, a commitment I am happy to embrace, and that is to a version of aesthetic empiricism. Aesthetic empiricism is best expressed in this principle: *No aesthetic difference without a perceptual (or experiential) difference*. So no feature counts as aesthetic unless it makes a difference to our experience of the objects that possess it. Works cannot differ in aesthetic character if that difference is not accessible to the senses (or in the case of literature to a quasi-perceptual experience, in the form of imagination or reflection). This version of aesthetic empiricism goes hand in hand with the response-dependence of aesthetic value, given the experiential nature of the response on which aesthetic value is dependent.

A further claim about aesthetic value, however, is more controversial, although in fact it too arises out of some of the earlier claims. This is the idea that aesthetic value is, as I shall put it, *kind-relative*. The thought here is that when we ascribe aesthetic value to an object we do so, at least tacitly, under some conception of what the object is. The value is ascribed to the object under-a-description or as an object of a certain kind. When someone makes a judgment about the aesthetic worth of something—its beauty, its elegance, its gracefulness—the judgment is formed at least partially in the light of beliefs held about the object being judged. If not entailed by, this at least conforms to the earlier observation that the experiential responses to different kinds of objects—poem, vase, flowerbed, sonata—on which judgments of aesthetic value are based, will themselves differ. It also conforms to the anthropocentric nature of aesthetic value as only humans can value something under-a-description.

What is controversial is that by introducing kind-relativity into aesthetic value I am seemingly on a collision course with Immanuel Kant, both his notion of a pure judgement of taste and his notion of free, in contrast to dependent, beauty. I do not want to get into the minutiae of Kant's theory, but I am not in fact departing significantly from it, or at least from what I take to be the core insights about beauty. If there is a difference between us it is precisely in my wanting to resist the austere formalism that underlies at least parts of Kant's account. For example, he clearly is formalistic in characterising the pure judgment of taste as the contemplation of an object's appearance apart from any concept, indifferent to interest or desire, and without concern for what he calls the 'real existence' of the object. He himself stresses the idea of form: "it is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases by its form, that is the fundamental prerequisite of taste" (*Critique of Judgment*, §14, p.67)[2]. The trouble is it is hard to think of any actual encounter with an object that satisfies the pure judgment of taste. Disinterested contemplation is one thing but it is hard to conceive of any kind of contemplation completely devoid of any *thought* about its object. Disinterested contemplation is quite compatible with the experiential responses I have identified as underlying aesthetic value. But I believe it must be, and thus always will be, informed by a conception of the object of contemplation. This is where kind-relativity comes in. But kind-relativity is not the same as dependent beauty, nor contrasted with free beauty. It is not that free beauty, in itself, unlike the pure judgement of taste, is independent of concepts, only that, as Kant puts it, it "presupposes no concept of what the object *ought to be*" (*Critique of Judgment*, §16, my italics). In other words free beauty is independent of consideration of the function or end or, as he puts it, the 'perfection' of the object, which is a mark of dependent beauty.

Kant's cases of free beauty are instructive. Thus, flowers, for example, are free beauties. He elaborates as follows:

> Hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organs of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty. (§16)

Note that Kant does not say that to appreciate the beauty of the flower the botanist must ignore the fact that it is a flower: the botanist merely pays no attention to the functions of parts of the flower when admiring its beauty. Another example is the beauty of certain birds—Kant lists the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise—and also "a number of crustacea", all of which he describes as "self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but freely please and on their own account" (§16). In other words we can find aesthetic pleasure in these things through contemplation of their pure form regardless of any knowledge of their function or "perfection". In contrast are dependent beauties

which he exemplifies as "the beauty of man ..., the beauty of a horse, or of a building (such as a church, palace, arsenal, or summer-house)" which, he says, "presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be" (§16). Here he gives his famous example of Maori tattoos: "a figure might be beautified with all manner of flourishes and light but regular lines, as is done by the New Zealanders with their tattooing, were we dealing with anything but the figure of a human being" (§16). The suggestion seems to be that the patterns and designs in themselves might be beautiful but when adorning the body of a human being this beauty is blocked or compromised because it is incompatible with the moral ends of human nature.

Perhaps the best exemplification of what I mean by kind-relativity comes, ironically, from Kant himself. Hence his examples of the nightingale's song and the artificial flowers:

> What do poets set more store on than the nightingale's bewitching and beautiful note, in a lonely thicket on a still summer evening by the soft light of the moon? And yet we have instances of how, where no such songster was to be found, a jovial host has played a trick on the guests with him on a visit to enjoy the country air, and has done so to their huge satisfaction, by hiding in a thicket a rogue of a youth who (with a reed or rush in his mouth) knew how to produce this note so as to hit off nature to perfection. But the instant one realises that it is all a fraud no one will long endure listening to this song that before was regarded as so attractive. [*Critique of Judgment*, §42]

A similar point emerges from the other example, involving artificial flowers:

> [it is of note that] were we to play a trick on our lover of the beautiful, and plant in the ground artificial flowers (which can be made so as to look just like natural ones), and perch artfully carved birds on the branches of trees, and he were to find out how he had been taken in, the immediate interest which these things previously had for him would at once vanish. ... The fact is that our intuition and reflection must have as their concomitant the thought that the beauty in question is nature's handiwork; and this is the sole basis of the immediate interest that is taken in it. [ibid]

Kant offers the examples for his own polemical ends. They are part of an argument to show the superiority of natural beauty over art and also to help establish the claim that the interest we have in the beauty of nature is, as he puts it, "a mark of a good soul". Significantly he runs the argument through with reference to the *interest* we take rather than the judgments we make. But generalising beyond Kant the examples suggest important lessons about aesthetic value, not least the role of kind-relativity, the suggestion that judgments of beauty depend, at least partially, on what the object of the judgment is taken to be. The sounds in the bushes are judged to be beautiful when thought to emanate from a nightingale, but not judged beautiful when re-

vealed to be a trick emanating from a penny whistle. The flowers are judged beautiful when thought to be real, not beautiful when exposed as artificial.

It is not just judgments that differ under these conditions but the experiences themselves. The experience of a song believed to be by a nightingale is different from the experience of the song believed to be by a rogue of a youth (note how this follows from aesthetic empiricism). The sound itself remains constant but the experience of it is now deemed beautiful, now not beautiful, as the informing conceptions change. When we think the flowers are real we experience them one way; when we think they are artificial we experience them another way. This is curious because it implies that one and the same physical stimulus can appear beautiful under one conception, not beautiful under another. If that is right then it already seems to undermine an austere formalism that suggests that the mere form of an object, independent of any concept, is sufficient to elicit an experience of beauty.

The formalist might reply that in a pure aesthetic response attention is directed solely to the formal features of the object, not to the object itself, and no knowledge of the object is presupposed. We can find an object beautiful, so the argument goes, in complete ignorance of the kind of object it is. That might be right but it is inadequate as a challenge to kind-relativity. For in such cases there is an object of attention, only more narrowly conceived. The object is something like a pattern or design or configuration of colours or shapes. The beauty is experienced under that description. So if we don't know it is a peacock's wing we are looking at but we are experiencing the beauty of the pattern on the wing, the object of our attention—we might say the intentional object—is a pattern of lines and colours, not a peacock's wing. Kind-relativity still figures as we might quite reasonably judge that while the pattern is beautiful in itself, as a pattern, it would not be beautiful, say, as a design for a carpet or a tattoo. We might even judge that it would not be beautiful on the wing of a bird, in ignorance of the fact that that is actually the case. In the nightingale example we might agree that the pure sound is beautiful in itself, under the description, let us say, 'pure sound', while we nevertheless concur with the guests that under the description 'emanating-from-a-rogue-of-a youth', it lacks beauty, perhaps because it is infected with trickery and deceit.

Returning to the idea of the experiential response associated with aesthetic value, we can now be a bit more precise. The relevant experience is something like this: a focused attention to the appearance of an object under a conception of that object as being of a certain kind. The reference to appearance still indicates an element of formalism as how something appears will partly be determined by its sensory or surface properties. But we have seen, through the nightingale and artificial flowers examples, that how something appears—and thus how it is experienced—is partially a function of beliefs held about it. The experience of beauty, then, is not just an affective state but partially a cognitive state; and from that some quite important consequences flow.

For one thing it might help account for disagreements over beauty. Two people who disagree in their aesthetic judgments might do so because they are making the judgments under different descriptions, their experiences informed by different beliefs. We might find objectivity or at least convergence in such judgments if we seek out common beliefs about the objects attended to. Indeed, we can aspire not just to objectivity but to *truth* in our aesthetic judgments. We seek not just shared beliefs but *correct* beliefs. We need to learn not just facts about the objects—although we do need them—but also the correct way to perceive the objects. There is normativity in experience – right and wrong ways to experience things – and if the experience of beauty is experience informed by beliefs and we aspire to truth in our beliefs then we should aspire to correctness in our aesthetic experiences. After all, the guests who enjoyed the song from the bushes were actually experiencing it *incorrectly*: the song was not what they took it to be. In this case when they knew the facts and experienced the sounds correctly they ceased to think it beautiful. It might have gone the other way if the sounds had actually been by a nightingale. It is possible, then, that we are not just sometimes but frequently *mistaken* in our experiences of beauty because we are mistaken in our beliefs about the objects of beauty. Judgments of beauty are, or should be, much more grounded in facts than is often recognized.

Let us consolidate where we have got to before moving on. The focus for aesthetic value is in how things appear to human beings, how they look, or feel, or sound, or catch our attention, made valuable by the sense that things seem right, or fitting, or working well. There are different modalities through which the value can be characterised, including the full range of thick evaluative concepts. The positive or negative valency of these concepts—concepts like elegance, gracefulness, unity, or power—can vary from context to context. Aesthetic value is response-dependent and anthropocentric because it rests essentially on the experiences of human beings in giving focused attention to how an object looks, sounds, etc. Aesthetic value is the value accorded those experiences, when, following Kant, the experiences are valued for their own sake, not for any ulterior interest or desire. But the value of the experience of how something appears is also kind-relative, as I have put it, because how something appears is not an absolute quality but is relative to the kind of object it is taken to be. The very same object classified under different kind-descriptions might yield quite different qualities of experience. Something might be judged aesthetically valuable-as-an-F but not aesthetically valuable-as-a-G. Note that kind-relativity is not equivalent to Kendall Walton's conception of categories of art, the idea that what aesthetic qualities are discerned in a work of art is relative to the category in which a work is perceived, nor indeed to Allen Carlson's appropriation of this into the realm of nature. But the Walton and Carlson points can be seen as consequences of the more fundamental truth about aesthetic value.

II

With this picture in mind I want to turn finally to some observations about aesthetic value in works of literature. Here the pressure towards formalism is perhaps at its greatest. To say that a poem is beautiful or moving or striking is often taken to be a comment about the words themselves, how they sound rather than what they mean. Some poets revel in the almost physicality of words, and to great effect. Gerard Manley Hopkins is a good example. Here is one of his, not untypical, sonnets "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

> As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
> As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
> Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
> Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
> Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came*.
> I say móre: the just man justices;
> Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
> Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
> Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.

There are plenty of formal features that contribute to the effectiveness of the lines. There is alliteration: "As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame", "To the Father through the features of men's faces". There is typical Hopkins phrase making: "like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's / Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name". There are made-up words: "selves" and "justices" as verbs. Above all there is the rolling mellifluous sounds and rhythms; the luscious textures of the phrases, the striking visual images. How easy it is to call up aesthetic epithets to characterise the effect yielded: powerful, moving, expressive, poignant. This is indeed an observation about appearance, how it sounds, how it grabs out attention, the impression it makes in our thoughts and imagination, the images it conjures.

But as with our earlier examples—the nightingale song, the flowers—we must ask what it is an appearance of. What is the kind to which the aesthetic value is relative? It might be mere words and physical inscriptions. Perhaps someone who does not speak English might enjoy the sounds under this description. But if our attention is directed to the poem itself, or the poem as a poem, we cannot isolate the pure sounds or rhythms or textures. We must ask about the contribution these make to the complex thoughts embodied in this form. The poem, which in fact contains a quite challenging complexity of ideas, takes us on an imaginative and contemplative journey from both the animate (kingfisher, dragonfly) and the inanimate in nature (stones), each

with its unique essence, through to the human, the spiritual, and ultimately the divine. The human essence lies in action: "*Whát I dó is me*" and the essence of the just man can only be in the act of "justicing" (he "justices"). But these acts acquire grace only when they reflect the actions of Christ ("Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is"). Christ's acts in turn manifest themselves "in ten thousand places", throughout creation, not least in the beauty of kingfishers and dragonflies.

Although talk of "form-content unity" is often no more than a cliché, its centrality to poetry cannot be overemphasised.[3] Its importance is well illustrated in this Hopkins sonnet where the beauty and complexity of the lines are inextricably tied to the complex thoughts conveyed. And again it shows where kind-relativity can weaken the grip of formalism. If the poem—rather than just the physical words themselves— exhibits aesthetic value then it cannot be because of its formal features alone. What gives the poem its power, its poignancy, and its subtlety, is the struggle it expresses to find the divine in the human and recognise the perfection of Christ's grace as ubiquitous in nature.

I think it is quite proper to speak of the *experience* of reading and reflecting on a poem like this, or indeed any poem that suitably catches our attention, and to think of that experience as satisfying the demands of response-dependence. It is an experience valued for its own sake, a focused attention, also a sense of things seeming right, of working well. But it is not an experience of a merely perceptual kind, as it would be if the qualities of rhyme, rhythm and alliteration were the sole focus of attention. It is an experience of a distinctively literary kind, which I call appreciation, an experience of value, a coming to see how the whole emerges from the parts, how the medium of language and the conventions of poetry serve to conjure a precisely drawn vision, as in this case, of the grace of Christ throughout creation. It is hard to see that that is anything other than an aesthetic value. But it is also kind-relative. When attended to as a poem, not just as physical words or sounds, but as a work of literary art, certain norms of response kick in, features become salient that otherwise might be missed, internal connections bring out emergent themes, images fuse together. There is normativity in the experience here because there are more, and less, rewarding ways to proceed, and one needs to be trained to read poetry with discernment. I will return in a moment to the idea of literary appreciation.

It might be thought that poetry is an easy case to argue for an aesthetic value of literature. Maybe, but what I have wanted to stress is the nature of that value, notably how it does not reside, when a full poem is its object, in extractable surface or formal qualities alone. What about the novel or narrative prose? There is sometimes a reluctance to think of the novel in aesthetic terms; novels lack the obvious formal virtuosity evident in poetry. But just as it is a mistake to seek the aesthetic value of poetry in purely formal devices of language so it is wrong to suppose that if the novel has aesthetic value it too must lie only in surface forms and structures. I have sought to show that

when poetry is an object of aesthetic attention, that attention must focus on form and content in harmony or, as one might put it, the consonance of linguistic means and literary ends. So it is with narrative prose.

Language in novels can take many forms and it would be wrong to suppose there are any essential marks of fine writing which qualify prose for aesthetic attention. Take this passage from Peter Carey's Booker Prize winning novel *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000):

> Through grey early light & drizzle we come down through the sodden town 2,000 citizens was sound asleep our horses' shoes as loud as cannon in my ears. Riding down to where the railway crossed One Mile we saw the mongrel creek were running a banker so Joe Byrne begun immediately to curse Steve. You silly mutt you effing clift we should have gone to effing Bright etc. etc.
>
> Shut your gob I ordered Joe he spat but were too busy keeping the driven horses together to argue.
>
> Steve tipped his hat to Joe and grinned I'll see you in America he said then persuaded his horse down into the current. (p.255)

The narrator is Ned Kelly himself, the semi-literate Australian outlaw and fugitive. On the face of it the writing is virtually illiterate and has none of the conventional marks of polished prose. Nevertheless, the effect is powerful and moving; the surface illiteracy and naivety throughout the novel serves to build up a vivid picture of a sympathetic, un-self-pitying, protagonist, exploring his own motives and conscience, seeking self-understanding, more sinned against than sinning. To attend somehow to the formal qualities of the writing alone independently of the voice speaking or the context of the story would be both pointless and misguided. Illiteracy, lack of punctuation, and syntactical mishmash are devices for developing the character and building atmosphere. We attend to the prose under the description Ned-Kelly's-voice and therein lies its aesthetic power. Again, aesthetic value lies in the consonance of means to ends.

The reason that form and content are in harmony, even inseparable, in the novel, as well as in poetry, is that to attend to narrative prose, from a literary point of view, cannot only be to attend to the language used or to the characters and plot described. Passages in a novel invite construal which gives them significance, under an interpretation. Some features rather than others become salient, connections are made, themes emerge.

Here is an example, referring to George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*. It is a description, by a literary critic, of the hair of the main protagonist, Maggie Tulliver:

> Realism demands no reference to it … or at most a passing reference to its color. But in fact her dark, abundant hair is insisted on. When a child, Maggie is persistently pestered by her mother to brush her "reluctant black crop" into curls. The Dodsons have blond hair, respon-

> sive to grooming, pretty, always in place; Maggie's is Tulliver hair, rebellious "dark heavy locks" that fall over her "gleaming black eyes." She refuses to discipline her "mane," and Mrs Tulliver, vainly trying to curl it into Dodson compliance, reminds Mr Tulliver of its stubbornness. "'Cut it off—cut it off short,' said the father rashly." (The Tullivers are rash—Mr. Tulliver in his rashness "goes to law," thereby losing Dorlcote Mill.) Soon Maggie impetuously takes the scissors to her hair, gaining a sense of "clearness and freedom" that is, however, quickly dissipated: "'Fie, for shame!' said aunt Glegg in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. 'Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water, not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles.'" Maggie's "feeble power of defiance left her in an instant, her heart swelled, and getting up from her chair, she ran to her father, hid her face on his shoulder, and burst out into loud sobbing." The antithesis of fair-dark, Dodson-Tulliver, restraint-freedom can be matched by others: material-spiritual, mind-heart, innocence-experience, and so forth. The details, seen properly, serve to define character and action.[4]

It is not bare textual (i.e. linguistic) features that invite aesthetic appraisal but features-assigned-significance-under-a-construal. We might ask of *The Mill on the Floss*: how effective are the descriptions of the physical characteristics of Maggie, notably, in this case, her hair? The critic in the quoted passage finds thematic significance in some of the details. The scene where Maggie starts cutting her own hair might seem a trivial or passing detail but here it is taken to contribute—in a non-trivial manner—not only to the goal of "defin[ing] character and action" but through indicating wider themes in the novel such as the contrast between "Dodson-Tulliver, restraint-freedom …[or] innocence-experience". How well do the details support such themes? These value questions cannot be answered without first exploring, through interpretation, the ways the motif, in this example, of rebellious "dark heavy locks" is developed. Evaluation is thus intimately tied to interpretation. A kind of hermeneutic circle now presents itself with regard to evaluation. When we come to assess the effectiveness of a feature-under-a-construal and we find that it seems strained or weak we are often forced to ask whether the perceived weakness is in the feature itself, i.e. in the *work*, or in the way the feature is construed, i.e. in the *interpretation* of the work.

Another example might be the death of Krook by "spontaneous combustion" in a famous passage in Dickens' *Bleak House*. This passage has been criticized for being fantastical and unscientific. Dickens himself in his Preface to the novel is defensive, insisting that "before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject" and gave putative examples of the real thing. If we construe Krook's death as the hyperbolical dispatch of an unpleasant character we might criticize the scene for lacking verisimilitude. However, if we construe it symbolically it seems to have greater significance and power. The critic J. Hillis Miller sees Krook's death as fitting into a pat-

tern of physical corruption which characterises the whole world of the fiction: "Krook is transformed into the basic elements of the world of the novel, fog and mud. The heavy odor in the air … and the 'thick yellow liquor' which forms on the windowsill as Krook burns … are particularly horrible versions of these elements."[5] Here, then, I suggest, as with the *Mill on the Floss* case, we have a particularly sophisticated application of kind-relativity. Aesthetic judgments are made *under a description* but not merely a categorial description, like novel or work of art, but a description rooted in a way of construing passages through the assignment of salience and significance.

The appreciation of fictional narrative in prose is not fundamentally different from that of poetry. In both, a special kind of discernment is called for which goes beyond merely noting (and enjoying) surface qualities of the writing and acquiring a basic comprehension of textual meaning. A reader approaching a text from a *literary* point of view has expectations of richer rewards rooted in fine-grained attention to the integration of content and form. It is an expectation of a value-experience, fundamentally an aesthetic value. It involves a conception of the particularities of the subject acquiring interest and salience when construed through a broader thematic vision. A work that affords little by way of internal connectedness, thematic unity, and complexity of structure, in the service of a generalised vision that finds significance in the particulars, will not reward literary attention and will be open to at best limited aesthetic appreciation.

So, in summary conclusion, if the aesthetic resides in the experience of how things appear, relative to beliefs held about those things, its application to the literary arts shows the richness and subtlety of the forms such experiences can take in individual cases. The relevant experiences are of a subject matter imagined through a linguistic vehicle, the value of which is judged, at least partially, through the consonance of means to ends. In this picture there is little, I contend, that substantiates the charge of formalism, at least as that notion is normally understood.

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60 (2002), p. 6.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

[3] See my essay 'The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning', *Ratio*, vol. XXII, no. 4 (2009), pp. 398-420.

[4] Morton Berman, "Afterword", in George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York and Toronto, Signet Classic, 1965), pp. 553-4.

[5] J Hillis Miller, 'The World of *Bleak House*', in Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, eds George Ford & Sylvère Monod (New York: W W Norton & Co, 1977), p. 955.