

## Learning from Artistic Disagreement

### ABSTRACT

Disagreements about art are considered here for their potential to pose questions about reality beyond the artwork. The project of assessing artistic value is useful for bringing complex questions to light. The ambitiousness of the cognitive stock, in Richard Wollheim's term, that can be relevant to understanding an artwork may mean that confident evaluation will elude us. Thinking about artistic value judgment in this way shifts its centrality as the point of artistic interpretation and evaluation; the goal of judging a work's meaning and value is a useful tool for prompting us to understand a work. But if we fail to reach that goal, that does not mean we have failed to engage with the work appropriately. The artistic value judgment, and achieving consensus on that value, can be secondary in importance to grasping the problems a work poses that are not immediately resolvable. Examples drawn from literary and philosophical imagining, in the work of Grace Paley and Mary Mothersill, and from Toni Morrison's literary criticism are used to illustrate and support the fruitfulness of this approach.

When we disagree about art, what are our disagreements about? Are these disagreements tractable? Disagreements about art concern – at least, and most obviously – artworks and their meaning and value. There are many bases for disagreement: whether and how artworks are meaningful, and the grounds and nature of their value, are all potentially open to debate. Artworks are *interesting* centers of attention, able to trigger complex experience, reflection, and conflicting response. I want to consider some of the fruits of embracing and exploring such conflicts.

Clear cases of artistic disagreement involve explicit debate about works of art, perhaps between different film reviewers who respectively celebrate and pan a film, or between friends disputing whether some song lyrics are ironic. In such cases the disagreement could be fairly easily formulated in terms of conflicting propositions that each party is willing to affirm ('x is a great film' squaring off against 'x is not a great film', 'y's meaning is ironic' against 'y's meaning is non-ironic'). Or, slightly less obviously, people might share an evaluative judgment while giving differing, but not logically opposed reasons for the evaluation. Such disagreements might take the form of disagreeing about whether, for example, 'The most crucial reason why x is terrible is z'. Further, while we may rarely formulate it or confront it in this way, I think that negative response to art should be counted as a form of artistic disagreement. Negative responses are quite varied in their force and meaning: they can be manifested in fairly visceral dislike, careful analysis of flaws, boredom, indifference,

irritated bewilderment, offense, disappointment and “cringe” reactions. When we react negatively in such ways, we implicitly or explicitly attribute problems and failures to a work. In that sense we dispute assumptions and choices about what is worth doing and experiencing that were made by the artist or by those offering the work to an audience. We are in a (possibly very mild) agonistic relation with whomever made this work available for appreciation. These disagreements could be put into propositional form very broadly as conflicts about whether or to what extent ‘x was worth making/displaying/experiencing’. The fact that artworks are artifacts whose purpose and success conditions need not be overtly stated or presupposed means that to react negatively to an artwork is to initiate a debate, in a sense, without fixed rules. What is relevant to interpretation and judgment can roam widely. Within such work-mediated conflict with others’ agency, we have some freedom in how we challenge what another has done, but also a responsibility to have grounds for rejecting or criticizing others’ artistic choices and activities.

In focusing on artistic disagreement, this project aims to temper the emphasis in philosophical aesthetics on aesthetic pleasure, artistic success and optimal value, and the goal of convergent interpretation and evaluation of art. The fact that people disagree about the meaning and value of works of art is sometimes presented as a problem within aesthetic theorizing. Is the goal of art experience well-captured by the aim of experiencing universally affirmed masterpieces? Do our negative and conflicting responses count as evidence that we are in a non-ideal state? Do we fall short as a culture to the extent that we fail to identify a standard of taste or fail to form a harmonious community of taste? My view is that there are reasons for disagreement about art that reflect the delicacy and complexity of what works of art can offer and the difficulty of the questions they can pose. There *should* be disagreement about art, given what can be at stake in art, the limits of our understanding, and the diversity of resources we bring to art. Agreement in interpretation and judgement is indeed valued – it is something we seek in our discourse and practices with respect to art. But there are good reasons for agreement to elude us, deriving from the ambitiousness of art, rather than from biases and failures of taste. The conditions under which people would agree in their appreciation of every artwork (to the same degree, for the same reasons) are hard to imagine; my speculation is that in these conditions both art and people would be much simpler and more rigid, and less demanding of our attention and appreciation.

## I. Philosophical context

Philosophers have voiced some broadly ethical or ethical-aesthetic concerns about the prospect of total convergence of artistic taste. Jerrold Levinson, working with a Humean notion of an ideal critic, imagines the consequences of “modifying one’s aesthetic capacities and preferences in

the direction of optimality,” so that “one will have become indiscernible from a comprehensive ideal critic;” if everyone did so, “we would all have the same artistic taste, and thus the same aesthetic personalities” (Levinson 2010, 228, 229). In this scenario, “it seems that though we gain in accessing appreciative experiences of greater value, we lose in being led to progressively relinquish or diminish our aesthetic personalities and the individualization that they importantly ensure” (Levinson 2010, 229). Alexander Nehamas imagines the prospect in Kantian terms:

If aesthetic judgment makes a claim to universal agreement, then, ideally, everyone would accept every correct judgment ... Imagine, if you can, a world where everyone likes, or loves, the same things, where every disagreement about beauty can be resolved. That would be a desolate, desperate world. ... What is truly frightful is not *what* everyone likes but simply the fact that *everyone* likes it. (Nehamas 2007, 83-4)

Levinson and Nehamas respond to this prospect in interestingly different ways: Levinson embraces optimality and pursuit of agreement, and Nehamas embraces disagreement in celebration of distinctive artistic styles and aesthetic personalities. The view I develop here is closer to that of Nehamas, in that I take disagreement about art to be a normal and importantly revelatory phenomenon, and I do not prioritize the goal of agreeing with an ideal critic. However, my reasons for embracing disagreement also diverge from Nehamas’s concerns. My motivation is not to uphold the value of individual style and aesthetic personality. I am more interested in capturing the relatively *impersonal* demands of experience, understanding and assessment of art that nonetheless have a good chance of generating disagreement.

The claims I develop are as follows. (1) Interpretation and judgement of artworks can ask for resolution of issues that are extremely difficult to resolve and often have not been previously considered. (2) Substantial issues of this kind are in one sense tractable—they are not merely in the eye of the beholder—but few of us will already be in a position to hold and defend the relevant truth(s). We do not bring adequate grasp of the issues *to* our experience of the work. (3) What we are arguing about is often not artistic value. (4) Attempting to make a judgement of artistic value can be a kind of tool, as the attempt to assign value can expose issues that surface particularly well when trying to understand what a work achieves. And finally, (5) negative value judgement does not settle whether a work is worthy of attention. Engaging with and understanding flawed works can be as important as recognizing and enjoying successful achievement.

Various questions will be left open here. Claim (4) – that the artistic value judgement is useful as a kind of cognitive tool, to expose complex issues – should be followed through more deeply than it will be here. Does giving value judgements this role mean adopting a pragmatist or broadly anti-realist approach to their truth? I do not intend attributing this tool function to have that consequence; I want to say that assuming there is something to argue about, taking oneself to be

addressing genuine questions about what contributes positively or negatively to a work's value, is an important presupposition and driver of disagreement.<sup>1</sup> But I will not give a defense of this assumption. I like the approach of Peter Kivy, who similarly sidesteps a direct defense of artistic value realism, while taking most people to be realists about artistic value. He views a belief in this kind of realism as the best explanation for why we argue about artistic merit: "the operative motive that remains an option for explaining why such disputes occur is convincing one's opponent of the truth" (Kivy 2015, 141). I part company slightly from Kivy in seeing these disputes as often being arguments-in-information, in which each party's claim to interpretive and evaluative truth is insecure.

Also on claim (4), there is more to say about *why* issues surface particularly well when trying to understand what a work of art achieves. The specific ambitions of artists aiming to raise issues can take some credit, of course. More generally it seems due to the way the project of judging artistic value poses interlocking and expansive questions and to the above-mentioned ability for artistic purposes and success conditions to be at least partly unsettled. Mothersill, on the challenge of explaining positive aesthetic responses, speaks of feeling that the normal "explanatory props have been removed" (Mothersill 1991, 330); something similarly challenging can occur with negative response. We are asked to grasp what is made available in the work, how it is done, why it is done, and whether it is good to do this in this way for these reasons. Each of these questions can refer us to something bigger than, or outside of, the artistic object: a tradition of making such things; what allows a feature to do what it does (conventions, perceptual and cognitive abilities, cultural salience); relevant alternatives (what is not here, how this is similar or different to other things); myriad human desires and reasons (e.g., for representing x, ignoring y, fantasizing about z, celebrating or critiquing any number of things); and overall ideas about what is worth doing and experiencing in a given context. The artistic value judgement is unusual in asking us to coordinate and unpick something so complex. We can of course ask interlocking questions about human artifacts in general, but the issues raised will ordinarily not take us out of our comfort zones ("why is plastic used to make this automotive part? because it is cheaper and lighter, and car-making as a business has to prioritize cost and weight") and will not challenge our understanding. Or there will be experts who can be expected to have the relevant competence and knowledge to settle the questions. If issues remain unresolved ("but shouldn't we use less plastic?"), it is still likely that the considerations for assessing the issue, the relevant purposes and success conditions, will be plain to all concerned. I hope the examples below, in which appreciation presses us on issues that spill out beyond the artistic object, will illustrate the challenging potential of artistic judgment.

I see my emphasis on the "beyond-art" questions posed by an artwork as a descendent of views such as Richard Wollheim's on "cognitive stock" and Marcia Eaton's on "cultural fluency."

Wollheim is consistently interested in allowing the context relevant to artistic evaluation to be richer than what is available through careful scrutiny of the art object itself. Viewing criticism as “the process of coming to understand a particular work of art” (Wollheim 1980, 185), he takes the scrutiny approach to adopt “an unduly atomistic conception of criticism;” while we indeed try to understand a given work “in its particularity ... at the same time we are trying to build up an overall picture of art, and so we relate the work to other works and to art itself” (Wollheim 1980, 198-9). Here Wollheim points to the larger artistic context, both in the sense of other relevant works and the more abstract context of understanding art and its possibilities. He expands the context in other directions as well, so as not to impoverish the materials “with which cognition can come to grips:” scrutiny alone would not lead us to consider “the reasons for such judgments, the way they engage or don’t with the spectator’s other attitudes and dispositions, the authority with which he is likely to invest them and his willingness or unwillingness to revise them” (Wollheim 1980, 229). Wollheim thus gestures at delicate issues that lie behind the content of critical judgements. Perhaps appreciating art can lead us to wonder about why we use certain evaluative criteria, to ask why they have authority for us. For my purposes, what is especially interesting about Wollheim’s view is that he wants the question of relevance – what is relevant to understanding a work of art? – to remain open:

in the case of a work of art what the facts are is not something that can legitimately be demarcated. ... whole ranges of fact, previously unnoticed or dismissed as irrelevant, can suddenly be seen to pertain to the work of art. These transformations can occur in a variety of ways as a result of changes in criticism, or as the result of changes in the practice of art, or as a result of changes in the general intellectual environment (Wollheim 1980, 88).

Marcia Eaton affirms this idea in incorporating Wollheim’s notion of cognitive stock into her own view:

what matters aesthetically is what allows us to get at the meaning or content of a work. ... cognitive stock is the information that a viewer brings with himself or herself to the experience of a work. Wollheim intentionally refrains from restricting the kind of information a priori ... there is no way to characterize what may be necessary or relevant in advance. ... The information we have, or feel a need for, is an integral part of our experience of works. (Eaton 2001, 22, 24)

Eaton notes that we might “feel a need for” information in responding to an artwork, and that is the kind of experience I want to emphasize. We cannot fix the cognitive stock that is relevant in advance; the artwork can put us in a position to see that something matters to the work that we do not yet have at our fingertips. Eaton further appeals to “cultural fluency” in art experience: “One must ... know a great deal about a culture’s religion, politics, family structures, physical environment,

and other matters” to know what is “considered worthy of attention ... within that culture” (Eaton 2001, 4, 3). What this fluency demands, and how well one can be expected to incorporate it into one’s experience – especially when not in fact a member of the culture – is a difficult question, but the broad idea that I want to echo is that art is an opportunity to experience things in a quite ambitious way, trying not only to perceive the object presented but to perceive it with access to a range of resources that can affect meaning and worth. My specific concern in this discussion is to suggest that disagreements about art are important because they can press us to adjust and expand the relevant cognitive stock, and they can show the limits of our fluency.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Fictional and philosophical examples

Let me illustrate my claims first by way of a fictional example. In Grace Paley’s short story “A Conversation with My Father,” the father asks the narrator, his writer-daughter, to write a story: “The kind Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write. Just recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next.”

... I want to please him, though I don’t remember writing that way ... if he means the kind that begins: “There was a woman ...” followed by plot, the absolute line between two points which I’ve always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life. (Paley 1994, 232)

The character proceeds to write a one-paragraph story about a woman whose son becomes a heroin addict, leading the mother to do so as well to keep her son company. The father rejects the story, for leaving out too many of the humanly important elements, so she re-writes and expands it. He responds as follows to the second version.

First my father was silent, then he said, “Number One: You have a nice sense of humor. Number Two: I see you can’t tell a plain story. So don’t waste time.” Then he said sadly, “Number Three: I suppose that means she was alone, she was left like that ... Poor girl, to be born in a time of fools, to live among fools. The end. The end.” ...

I didn’t want to argue, but I had to say, “Well, it is not necessarily the end, Pa. ... [She could be] a hundred different things ... A teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie! Sometimes it’s better than having a master’s in education.”

“Jokes,” he said. “As a writer that’s your main trouble. You don’t want to recognize it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end.” (Paley 1994, 236-7)

This story is unusually explicit in taking as its theme literary evaluation. The father is unsatisfied with his daughter’s stories, and they argue about what makes for a good story. One basic point is that their disagreement is simultaneously about portraying human life in art and about human life. Neither party separates these issues. But further, they are disagreeing about a deep question: is

human life a matter of open destiny or of tragedy? The father finds his daughter's stories to have the wrong content and mood. They are humorous and neglectful of the roots of people's situations. They fail to acknowledge the constraints and forces that we do not control and do not want, and that lead to suffering. Meanwhile, the daughter thinks she would be failing in her obligation to affirm and enact freedom if she told the stories that her father wants her to tell. I like it that the Paley story itself is, as far as I can tell, not diminishing either side of the argument (though the father gets the last word). This is a real problem, a living argument, though posed within the artifice of a story. Paley's reader is given a deep question – open destiny or tragedy? – and further questions about story-telling: does a story need to take a stand on this deep question, and does doing so in one way or another affect its achievement and value as a story? The package of things the reader is asked to consider is, I hope, a clear illustration of how trying to understand and appreciate a story can take us outside the story, to substance that we are likely to grapple with throughout our lives. It does not seem reasonable to require that we have resolved the open destiny or tragedy question in order to engage well with the story, even if the achievement embodied in the story does depend on how best to understand human life. The project of evaluating the story is useful, because it triggers the interlocking questions, but I suggest that it fades in importance and can legitimately be deferred, once one is immersed in the substance.

Philosophers, of course, also offer fictional examples. I want to cite an imagined scenario from Mary Mothersill's *Beauty Restored* that also exposes the difficulty of artistic disagreement (though I think it does so for reasons in addition to those Mothersill emphasizes). Mothersill goes into interesting detail about what engaging constructively with a case of artistic disagreement could require. What might she do in talking to someone, say a jazz fan, who does not know Western classical music and does not respond to one of her favorite works, a Beethoven quartet? She imagines the jazz fan asking why she thinks "there is anything at *all* to be said for Op. 59, No. 1" (Mothersill 1991, 158). The form of such a disagreement is not straightforward, since her positive judgment ('Beethoven's Op. 59, No. 1 is beautiful') is not met directly by dispute ('No, it's not'), but by something more like indifference, an evaluative "shrug."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the imagined interlocutor would say "I do not see why you find it beautiful." Although this is not a direct logical disagreement, I would nonetheless count it as an interesting form of disagreement, a divergence in responses that can be felt as an important divide between people. Here is an excerpt of Mothersill's thinking about how she would address such a divergence:

To tell him how I arrived at my judgment would be recapitulating my musical education, going back many decades to 'Für Elise', Carl Czerny, The Boston Pops, and so forth. And although simple narrative—'The first time I remember hearing it, this is what I thought ...' — would not, just in itself, serve the purpose, I cannot ... try to have him retrace my steps and

yet if he is to understand my point, he must do something *like* retracing my steps. ... It would start with trying to find a common ground ... I could point out a melodic affinity between the opening cello theme and 'The Yellow Rose of Texas'. If that didn't work, I would try something else. Lots of listening to examples and then talking about them; a bit of history, some work at the keyboard—in short an elementary course in music appreciation with special reference to Beethoven quartets, in particular Op. 59, No. 1. (Mothersill 1991, 158)

Mothersill points to the enormously complicated, gradually built-up history that lies behind someone's experience of a given work. Mothersill's decades of musical experience have left their mark on her cultural fluency and cognitive stock, to use Eaton's and Wollheim's terms. In trying to make another person appreciate how I experience a work, the ideal process might be something as practically impossible as the retracing of experiential steps that Mothersill starts to describe. I would add that the ideal in such an encounter would in fact involve a mutual retracing of steps. How does each party to the disagreement reach, for instance, the melodic lines of *Op. 59, No. 1* and *The Yellow Rose of Texas*? Mothersill's example might thus be used as a cautionary tale with respect to the prospects for meeting across artistic disagreement – the conditions for meeting are far too demanding, if it means approximating the relevant experiential history of another.<sup>4</sup>

However, I want to make a slightly different use of her example. Mothersill says she would try to use a melodic affinity and the resources of music appreciation to build a path from 'The Yellow Rose' to the Beethoven quartet. My sense is that hearing and understanding the musical relationship would not get us very far. We could not stick with music appreciation to understand and communicate about such experiences. The two musical works that Mothersill seeks to link seem to speak to quite different human concerns and horizons and to assume different fluencies, and the relevant concerns and fluencies are not merely musical. The Beethoven quartet perhaps involves a highly abstract emotional engagement, aiming for grandeur of perspective and detachment from individual contingency and limits, while the love song/march/popular tune seems to speak to relatively local, culturally limited meanings and attachments (to individual affection, to racial status and hierarchy, to military and patriotic identity, to ordinary plights).<sup>5</sup> We would have to compare such aspirations (e.g., to speak universally or to embrace limits and attachments? to seek grandeur or familiarity?), to unpick how these works engage people. The challenge I want to highlight is not the problem of retracing experiential steps, but of making such comparisons. We do not bring competence in how to compare such aspirations to our experience – we are not fluent in relating and prioritising these concerns and horizons. However, that is not to say that the comparison is intractable. My point is that the artistic disagreement provides a small but acute opening into bigger questions about divergent ranges of human emotion and what our affectively attuned artistic choices mean. Can we get clearer about how to assign value to art that pursues such different aims



and that meets, it seems, such different needs? Discussion of those questions seems potentially fruitful, if it allows us to step back and see the aspirations and meanings embodied in different artistic choices. It might well be that someone who initially heard nothing much in the Beethoven would come to appreciate it as Mothersill does, but that change of evaluative stance would not be the only upshot of attending to the disagreement. It could bring deeper awareness of what Beethoven does not offer and of why those things his work does not hold have been valued.<sup>6</sup>

A very broad point, thinking both about Mothersill's ambitious sharing project and about difficult comparisons, is that appropriate humility in judgment is called for. Artworks can be more like companions in long projects of understanding, than objects whose value can be assessed based on that understanding. Let me cite Mothersill again, as she voices a question or qualm about Kant's account of aesthetic judgment:

It is as if no one ever made a tentative appraisal ... An opinion can be ventured, floated for discussion, modified over time, revised, abandoned, but it is not clear, nor does Kant explain how such modalities are construed on the view that makes the judgment of taste a 'command' which is 'unconditioned' ... Almost everything Kant says leads one to think that any aesthetic conviction that falls short of certainty cannot be counted ... as a judgment of taste. (Mothersill 1991, 162)

Perhaps this qualm does not apply straightforwardly to Kant on judgment of *art*, as opposed to his view of pure aesthetic judgment -- maybe his appeal to the complexities of adherent or dependent beauty in art leave more room for uncertainty in art appreciation. But Kant's views aside, Mothersill's point seems right. In experience and appraisal of art, there is huge scope for uncertainty. As Wollheim says, facts and ideas may come into view as relevant that were not recognized previously, and the issues at stake in a work or set of works may simply be difficult to be confident about, for anyone. Even the virtues of Hume's ideal judge might not be adequate to the task, if, for instance, one had to have wisdom about tragedy versus open destiny in human life, or about comparison of familiar, identity-claiming love songs with probing, universally expressive ambitions.

### III. The fruits of understanding artistic problems

Let me turn now to an example from my own history as a reader, a novel that I read as a teenager and returned to as an adult. Willa Cather's 1940 novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is hard to read, for reasons I will try to explain. It tells a story that centrally involves slave/slave-owner relations in pre-Civil War rural Virginia. One character's escape from slavery to freedom is the most dramatic

element of the plot. However, exposing the wrongness of slavery does not seem to be the point of the novel. It is not a pro-slavery novel, but it is also not comfortably anti-slavery. Narrative attention seems to be given most generously to documenting a way of life—of human interdependence, of how slaves and non-slaves shared a home, and of demanding but skilled and often satisfying work—in a soon-to-be-forgotten earlier time. The slave-owner, Sapphira, is not a likeable character, but she is not to be rejected as a villain either. She and her goals and difficulties are of focal interest in the novel, arguably more than the goals and difficulties of any of the depicted slave characters.

According to a letter Cather wrote that mentions this novel, “the hardest part of writing it was conveying the horror that lay just under the pleasant surfaces of Virginian domestic life—while still getting across the reality of those pleasant surfaces” (Romines 2005, 205).<sup>7</sup> My sense as a reader is that the novel raises difficult questions that entwine views about representation and reality: was it or is it acceptable to take on the project of capturing forms of goodness that coexisted with slavery? Can one conceive or grant that there *was* a pleasant surface reality to capture? Would that be a slave-holder’s illusion that must be exposed as such in any representation?

In *Playing in the Dark*, one of her works of literary theory and criticism, Toni Morrison speaks about her motivation in re-reading older American literature. She charges literary scholarship with “willful critical blindness” about the workings of racial ideology in literature: “I wanted to identify those moments when American literature was complicit in the fabrication of racism, but equally important, I wanted to see when literature exploded and undermined it” (Morrison 1993, 18, 16). Morrison’s first example is this Cather novel.

A case in point is Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a text that has been virtually jettisoned from the body of American literature by critical consensus. ... References to this novel in much Cather scholarship are apologetic, dismissive, even cutting in their brief documentation of its flaws—of which there are a sufficient number. What remains less acknowledged is the source of its flaws and the conceptual problems that the book both poses and represents. Simply to assert the failure of Cather’s gifts ... evades the obligation to look carefully at what might have caused the book to fail—if “failure” is an intelligent term to apply to any fiction. ... I suspect that the “problem” of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is not that it has a weaker vision or is the work of a weaker mind. The problem is trying to come to terms critically and artistically with the novel’s concerns: the power and license of a white slave mistress over her female slaves. How can that *content* be subsumed by some other meaning? (Morrison 1993, 18)

Here Morrison makes an interesting critical distinction. She is not criticizing the strength of mind and vision at work in the novel, at least not in relation to Cather’s work more generally – Cather is in full use of her powers. However, Cather has chosen content that resists her abilities to shape it as she

wishes. The reality of slavery, with its deformation of human relations, prevents certain representational assumptions and goals from working effectively in the novel. Morrison points to a number of instances in which “a breakdown in the logic and machinery of plot construction implies the powerful impact race has on narrative” (Morrison 1993, 25). The portrayal of parent-child relations amongst the slaves is implausible and not adequately emotionally gripping (21-23), Sapphira’s attempt to “ruin” Nancy (the ‘Slave Girl’ of the title) does not really make sense within the conventions of slavery (25), and Nancy as a character presents the author with narrative problems: “rendered voiceless, a cipher, a perfect victim, Nancy runs the risk of losing the reader’s interest” (24). Morrison gives special attention to the quite odd epilogue of the novel, set a decade after the end of slavery, in which the now middle-aged Nancy returns from her established life as a housekeeper in Canada, to see her mother Till for the first time since her escape. In these passages, Cather seeks

an imposed “all rightness” in untenable, outrageous circumstances. ... the author employs [the black characters] in behalf of her own desire for a *safe* participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice. ... But things go awry. ... characters make claims, impose demands of imaginative accountability over and above the author’s will to contain them. ... the slave, silenced in the narrative, has the final words of the epilogue. (Morrison 1993, 27-8)

The novel ends with the former slave Till giving a narratively unprepared-for and bold criticism of Sapphira (who is dead by this time), saying that “‘She oughtn’t never to a’ come out here ... where nobody was anybody much’”(Cather 1940, 294–5). Till’s reasons for criticizing Sapphira, as presented by Cather, are not likely to be embraced by a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, as Till is not given the words to make a trenchant condemnation of Sapphira’s form of life. Nonetheless, Till’s voice at the end of the novel is surprising and powerful and serves to make Morrison’s point. Cather’s fiction is not insulated from the real problem of how to portray a person who attempts to own another person, while preserving myriad aspects of psychological, social, and ethical reality that affect a novel’s integrity and force.

Morrison’s reading of Cather prompts, I think, what she hopes: that readers of this novel get better at reading both for literary complicity in racism and for the artistic difficulties and outcomes that can expose racist conceptions to criticism. I will conclude with one element of the novel that I take to be central to how Cather tries to reckon with the problems posed by her chosen content. Cather somewhat clearly pairs Sapphira with Jezebel, the oldest female slave in her household. Jezebel is the only character who seems to match Sapphira in terms of vitality and toughness.

Jezebel is also the only character whose backstory in Africa and in crossing over the Atlantic is told, with the latter event being marked dramatically by Jezebel biting off the finger of the ship's mate. When, many decades later, Sapphira sits at Jezebel's deathbed, Sapphira asks Jezebel if she wants anything, perhaps something to tempt her appetite: "The old woman gave a sly chuckle; one paper eyelid winked, and her eyes gave out a flash of grim humour. 'No'm, I cain't think of nothin' I could relish, lessen maybe it was a li'l pickaninny's hand'" (Cather 1940, 89). The slave traders took Jezebel's people to be cannibals; the novel does not assume or deny that this is historical fact within the fiction, but Jezebel does not shy away from the attribution. Ann Romines, commenting on this passage, says that, "Jezebel ... has not forgotten her own, African 'old story' and ... has used that story ... to maintain her own distinctive persona, self-possessed and grimly humorous, to the last" (Romines 2005, 214). Perhaps one might think there is something implausible about Jezebel's resistance – can someone be undaunted by 70-odd years as a slave? – but here the possible implausibility does not seem to harm the representation. Cather has this character insist on the barbarity that has been imposed on her, and I think the narrative shock of it works effectively to pierce the "pleasant surface." It seems that Jezebel continues to want her owner to be afraid of her, and this is a moment at which the novel shows that its content is not pleasant or safe. The ethical norms that can allow stories to offer comfortable company are not operative or secure in the world as represented in this novel. My point with Jezebel is not to say that this character effectively overrides or balances out the other aspects of the novel that leave the conditions of slavery unchallenged. Jezebel as a character is evidence of the incoherence or irresoluteness of this novel's ethical self-awareness, and in that sense she seems to be both an artistic "problem" and a valuable marker of the demands on adequate memory and story-telling in this context. What I hope is that it seems worthwhile to figure out what to make of her and her role in the novel, not only for the sake of assessing literary value, but for the broader, deeper goal of understanding what art would need to do to be adequate to this history.

I have dwelt on Morrison's criticism of Cather because it deftly integrates the problems of novel-writing with the demands of understanding the world beyond novels. To evaluate this novel you have to ask about what representations of a slave-holding history can legitimately do. With respect to this novel I do not see how to feel confident about this. It is not easy to say which aspects of the novel can be embraced (Yes to Jezebel? No to Nancy, who is *forced* to go north to seek freedom? No to a novel in which women's power struggles are treated as equal or greater in interest to racial and slave identity?). Furthermore, Morrison wants such a novel to be understood and appreciated as much for its flaws as for its achievements. The point of criticism in her hands is not simply to weed out the good from the bad and to celebrate the better works of literature.

Rather, we need to be open to the substantial burdens that can be placed on appreciators, as we try to understand the real baggage an artwork brings with it and how that baggage of reality and representation should be assessed. Although this burden can sound overwhelming, I also want to suggest that the context of art appreciation can give us *some* tractable footing (e.g., I can think in some detail about why I feel at least tentatively on board with Cather's handling of Jezebel).

I will conclude with some broad claims. What we do, and ought to do, in response to many works of art is think about aspects of non-artistic reality that are implicated in the artwork. The fluency and cognitive stock involved in understanding art are not inevitably at hand, even for the artistically well-versed judge. This can change the priority or the role of judgment of artistic value. Trying to figure out whether the artwork is good or bad, and why, can be a tool, a useful sharpener or excavator of difficult questions, such as questions about the ethical commitments at stake in a complex representation. On this approach, a negative judgment of artistic value does not settle the question of whether we should spend time trying to understand and appreciate a work of art.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Markus Lammenranta for pressing this issue; his reasoning on this is not addressed properly here.

<sup>2</sup> Let me note that I expect Wollheim would find much to disagree with in this discussion, perhaps particularly in my attention to morally focused artistic projects and criticism. But, especially on the occasion of the Wollheim Lecture, I want to acknowledge the ways in which I am in sympathy with and benefit from his work.

<sup>3</sup> Note that Kivy uses the term ‘aesthetic shrug’ for a different purpose, to refer to a situation in which parties who seem to disagree about an aesthetic matter accept that the apparent dispute is pointless and merits mutual bafflement rather than argument (Kivy 2015, 46-8).

<sup>4</sup> Though Mothersill imagines her interlocutor to be a jazz fan, it is not clear that this has a bearing on the choice of *The Yellow Rose of Texas* as possible common ground. That choice might be driven only by the melodic relation and the assumption that the song would be broadly familiar to 20<sup>th</sup> century American audiences. Mothersill also does not say that the interlocutor takes pleasure in that song; my discussion assumes the two interlocutors are fans of the respective pieces – a liking for the song’s melody being assumed to be part of the “hook” to initiate appreciation of the quartet – but this goes beyond what Mothersill stipulates.

<sup>5</sup> Without defending specific ideas about these works, I will note some of the possibilities for assigning them significance. Mark Steinberg of the Brentano Quartet writes of Beethoven’s achievement in *Op. 59, No. 1*, “He manifests a godlike ability to situate us in an alternate reality in order to lend us a sense of power and certainty in having some control over molding the world to our needs.”

<https://www.brentanoquartet.com/notes/beethoven-opus-59-1/>

Meanwhile, *The Yellow Rose of Texas* has an intricate history: as a love song sung by 19<sup>th</sup> century white performers in blackface, about love for a mixed race woman (with “yellow” skin); as a satirical military marching song for Confederate soldiers in the U.S. Civil War; and as a fully “whitened” popular hit for mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American performers like Mitch Miller and Elvis Presley.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Yellow\\_Rose\\_of\\_Texas\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Yellow_Rose_of_Texas_(song))

<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/mitch-miller/the-yellow-rose-of-texas>

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kivy gives another stimulating philosopher’s imagined example of artistic disagreement. Kivy sketches a disagreement about the 1940 film *The Philadelphia Story* that opens up the question of whether a character serves as a damaging stereotype, a legitimate critical device, or an innocuous caricature (Kivy 2015, 137-40). The disagreement, if pushed, seems to ask for larger reflection on which social problems and ideals are worth targeting, celebrating, or lampooning, and for entwining that reflection with careful interpretation of the film.

<sup>7</sup> I think this is a paraphrase of Cather’s statement, rather than a quote from the letter.

<sup>8</sup> Many people have had a positive influence on this work. I thank in particular Hanne Appelqvist, María José Alcaraz León, Guy Dammann, Frits Gåvertsson, Ted Gracyk, Wolfgang Huemer, Markus Lammenranta, Irene Martínez Marin, Jukka Mikkonen, Jeremy Page, Kalle Puolakka, Elisabeth Schellekens, Karen Simecek, Robert Stecker, and Rebecca Wallbank.