# Literary and Ethical Minimalisms?

> *"Is there no way for men to be, but women /
> Must be half-workers?"*[1]
>
> W. Shakespeare (ca. 1605–1608)

> *"It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants."*[2]
>
> Paul Horwich (1990)

In this essay I would like to reflect on what are often called literary truths. My approach will be to set out first of all an example of a complex sentence we often find in all sorts of literary works, especially in poetic works of art. Then, by reason of a comparison and contrast of a representative statement of a similar complex sentence we often find in ethical works, I take up the question of just what might, minimally, constitute the supposed truth of such sentences. These comparisons and contrasts bring me to concluding tentatively that to render a not inappropriate account of such literary and ethical truths a more than merely minimalist discussion of truth, perhaps in terms of current pragmatic theories, is required.

## 1. Cognitive Claims in *Cymbeline*

We do well to start here with a specific example, namely a Shakespearean sonnet taken not from his formal collection which he called "Sonnets," but from Act II of his play, *Cymbeline*. Here is the text.

> Is there no way for men to be, but women
> Must be half-workers? We are all bastards; all,
> And that most venerable man which I
> Did call my father was I know not where
> When I was stamp'd; some coiner with his tools
> Made me a counterfeit; yet my mother seem'd
> The Dian of that time; so doth my wife
> The nonpareil of this. O! vengeance, vengeance;
> Me of my lawful pleasure she restrain'd
> And pray'd me oft forbearance; did it with
> A pudency so rosy the sweet view on't
> Might well have warm'd old Saturn; that I thought her
> As chaste as unsunn'd snow. O! all the devils!

This poem, among the very many other important matters it puts on exhibit for our understanding and appreciation, seems to make several cognitive claims. One of these apparent claims comes to the complex assertion (or perhaps we may say "quasi-assertion" since we are in a fictional context), that just as the poet's mother, despite appearances, was unfaithful to his father, so the poet's own wife, despite appearances, has been unfaithful to him. This quasi-assertion is at least complex. But, at least for now, if we are going to get a bit farther, we surely will need to simplify. Let me take the liberty then of simplifying this apparent literary claim to something more manageable for our present purposes.

Perhaps we might then say that, among the several things this poem appears to be claiming is that the poet's wife is unfaithful – more fully expressed, that she has wilfully and hypocritically deceived him seriously; more barely put, that she has been sleeping with someone else. Let us say that, when the poem reads, ". . . that I thought her / As chaste as unsunn'd snow," the poet (a figure in the poem as well as the author of the poem), is making the literary claim that the poet's wife (another figure in the poem, that may or may not correspond to the author's actual spouse) is guilty of adultery. In short, the poem seems to include the literary claim that the poet's wife is an adulteress.

## 2. Literary Truths: An Analytic View

In a first reading, we may note that the central interest for an analytic reader is usually the occurrences of declarative sentences in the work, for these are the utterances that are the main bearers of the author's or the represented figure's claims. These sentences also lend themselves to reflection on the contents of statements, propositions, assertions, and so on, where truth values are most often to be found. A particular example of such declarative sentences occurs in the sonnet's second line: "We are all bastards, all . . ."

We may first try to capture this main interest by raising a question about the contexts of claims like these, and we may then go on to call these claims "literary claims." This enables us to distinguish their contexts from other contexts in which similar but non-identical claims that occur, sometimes in the very same words, in other, non-literary contexts.

But when we reread this literary work carefully several more times, we may come to notice a related but different feature than the occurrence of literary claims. This feature may be seen not so much

in connection with the declarations or assertions of simple declarative sentences that this literary work includes – for, after all, these declarative sentences are few and far between. Rather, we can note the occurrence of more complex types of declarative sentences with what seem to be unusual kinds of assertions. One example occurs in lines six and seven of the sonnet:

> " . . . my mother seem'd
> The Dian of that time; so doth my wife
> The nonpareil of this. O! vengeance, vengeance;
> . . . "

This citation evidently comprises something more than just a simple declarative sentence. For, unlike the single verb or verb phrase that makes up a simple declarative sentence, the sentence here that precedes the exclamatory utterance consists of two verbs – "seem'd" and "doth [seem]." So we are indeed dealing with a complex sentence.[3]

But exactly what are the declarations or assertions that this complex declarative sentence includes? In order to answer this question satisfactorily, we need first to notice the major difficulties in parsing this sentence correctly.

One major difficulty arises from fact that this sentence assumes the form of a simile, which the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* glosses as "a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another of a different kind." Here the poet apparently is comparing his wife with his mother. But if indeed that is the case here, then are we dealing with the comparison of one thing with another of the same, and not of a different, kind, since both the poet's wife and his mother are women? We thus need to specify the comparison more sharply. What exactly then are some of the differing kinds at issue here in the comparison between wife and mother?

One issue might be quite simply the different kinds of relation the poet has to the woman who is his wife by comparison with the woman who is his mother. But this idea would leave other features in the complex sentence out of consideration as if they had no importance. Since the poet has included these features within the highly selective constraints of a sonnet, any satisfactory understanding of the different kinds at issue must surely take these other features into account. But what additional features are we talking about?

I would emphasize two such features. The first is the different kinds of lexical descriptions the poet provides for his wife in comparison with his mother. His wife, the poet writes, is "the nonpareil" of her times whereas his mother was "the Dian" of hers. And the second is the different kinds of temporalisations to be found in the verbal phrases the poet uses to mark the difference between the time of his mother – "seem'd," past tense – and the time of his wife – "doth [seem]," present tense.

So, we have at least three possible comparisons here: that between the poet's wife and mother, that between the poet's wife as "nonpareil" and his mother as a "Dian," and that between what his wife now seems to be at present with what his mother once seemed to be in the past. Of these three comparisons, however, I believe that only one can reasonably be taken to fill the role of a simile, that is, of a comparison between two different kinds of things.

The first comparison seems not to turn on different kinds but on different relations, namely the poet's relationship to his mother and to his wife. The third comparison seems not to turn on different kinds either, but on two aspects of the same thing, namely on two kinds of temporality. But the second comparison, the lexical one, seems rather to turn on the contrast between two different kinds of things, between a chaste goddess (a "Dian[a]") on the one hand and, on the other, a peerless instance (a "nonpareil").

Before even going on to other difficulties in this utterance, we come then to the question: just what is this complex declarative sentence that involves a simile asserting? Here we need a brief reminder of exactly how we are proceeding.

## 3. From the Literary to the Moral

So far I have proposed a reconsideration of our initial example of apparent truth claims that occur in literary, indeed poetic works. In our first consideration of such matters in the contexts of a Shakespearean sonnet from Shakespeare's play, *Cymbeline*, we adopted provisionally what we called "an analytic perspective." In this perspective we focused characteristically on the sentences of the work in order to identify those assertions or quasi-assertions that seemed to make truth claims. However, we found that the peculiar literary contexts of such apparent assertions had the major effect of raising doubts about these apparent assertions actually making any truth claims at all. Hence, it seemed to us that "literary truths" could not be 'truths' in any conventionally literal sense.

Returning to this literary work, we tried a different tack and adopted, once again in a provisional way only, what we may perhaps call "a hermeneutic perspective." From this perspective we concentrated not on those sentences of the work that seemed to be making literal assertions, but on those sentences that seemed to be exhibiting non-literal features. Our concern was to investigate whether at least some sentences not just in a literary work of art generally but in a dramatic poetic work of literary art in particular might properly be said to express truths indirectly in the various guises of non-literary (indeed, symbolic) utterances instead of reporting truths directly in the various guises of literal utterances. However, we found that the peculiar poetic force of these utterances made talk about truths as such, whether conventionally literal or not, problematic.

Hence, it seemed that, just like the apparently literal and more general literary truths, so too the apparently non-literal and more particular poetic truths could not be truths in any direct sense either. Something seems to be going not quite right.

Thus, I would like to look in more detail at just what seems to be going wrong in our attempts to identify either literary or poetic truths in some usual sense of the word, "truth." With the help of an extended new example in English translation rather than in its original language, I would like to highlight several central, and opposed, linguistic features in poetic works that systematically undermine our attempts to articulate whatever truths poetic utterances may or may not manifest. With these features on exhibit, I will then try to show how a critical re-appropriation of some searching but still somewhat flawed reflections on "quasi-truths" enables us to overcome the difficulties encountered when we view non-literal literary and poetic utterances from the characteristic standpoints of either an analytic or a hermeneutic approach. Consider then for the moment some other putative truths taken this time not exclusively from the aesthetic realm but from the ethical domain.

## 4. Moral and Ethical Truths

First, consider whether it is true that I ought to help the poverty-stricken, where the expression "stricken" in intended to denote not just persons suffering from poverty but those suffering very greatly from extreme poverty. And now consider the statement, "It is true that I ought to help the poverty-stricken."

Recall the situation of extremely poor, indeed destitute, refugees in such war-stricken areas today as northern Syria or of the destitute migrants on several of the Greek islands like Lesbos, just off the coast of Turkey. Such apparently hopeless situations today raise many questions, whether geopolitical, economic, or medical. Some

of the most insistent questions are moral and ethical ones such as whether, as a human being and as a person, I have both a moral obligation and an ethical responsibility to come to the effective assistance of such utterly stricken poor persons. In other words, "Do I have a moral obligation or an ethical responsibility to assist such poverty-stricken persons?" "Ought I to help them?" "Should I aid them?" Focus for the moment on (P), one kind of first-person response:

(P) "I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants."

And now distinguish two basic issues here – (a) what this sentence means, and (b) whether this sentence is true.

As for the meaning of the response, suppose that this sentence here means at least two things. First, "helping the poverty-stricken" means coming directly or indirectly, materially and more so, to their assistance in such a way that my help substantially increases the probabilities of normal human survival than otherwise would be the case. And, second, "ought" means here that, if I do not help, then I am morally and/or ethically blameworthy, that my not helping such utterly afflicted persons is morally and/or ethically quite seriously reprehensible.

As for the truth of the response, suppose again two things. First, suppose that we can rewrite the response without change of meaning in the form, "It is true that I ought to help the poverty-stricken." And, second, suppose that making an initial inventory of our common intuitions about what this new statement means and about whether this new statement itself is true makes good at least preliminary sense.

Now here are some initial intuitions about the meaning of the new sentence. Independently of my thinking or speaking about the situation in question, something about the way the world actually is, including both the situation itself and my relationship to that situ-

ation, appears to solicit, insist upon, require, perhaps even to entail an appropriate response to the situation from me. More figuratively expressed, perhaps we may say that there is something within the situation itself rather than within me that enjoins me to respond appropriately. More specifically, there is something within the plight of persons utterly stricken by extreme poverty, both as individuals and as members of different kinds of family groups and communities, that enjoins me to respond.

After further reflection, you may note that what seems to solicit my response seems to be the humanity and the personhood of these impoverished people. And what not just solicits but seems to enjoin my response is that the humanity and personhood I recognize in these persons is something that I most fundamentally share with them. I do so by reason of the fact that, most fundamentally, I too am a human being and a person.[4]

Several more of the initial intuitions here about the supposed truth of (P) "I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants" are the following. When I say, "It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants," I am apparently saying that the general relation I have just described between these people and myself "actually hold." And I am saying that these relations are of such a nature that they necessitate an appropriate response on pain of my actually "losing some of my own humanity and personhood."

Moreover, I am not just uttering (whether mentally or orally) such a sentence. But in affirming and assenting to what this utterance says, I am apparently claiming that certain ways the world actually is correspond to and cohere with what I am saying, in the sense that what I say is not just what I take the case to be but what in fact the case actually is.

Further, in making this claim sincerely I am also apparently claiming that the correspondence between what I am saying and the way

the world *is* involves as well a certain coherence between this specific correspondence and all the other correspondences that actually hold between the world, myself, and others. So what I am saying in saying that the sentence, "It is true that I ought to help the poverty-stricken" is true involves both correspondences between what I am saying and the ways the world is, as well as coherences among these correspondences themselves. What I would be saying in saying that (P) is false would involve either some breakdown of these correspondences or of these coherences or of both.

But, with these intuitions about both the meaning and the supposed truth of such a statement in hand, what exactly would at least some minimalist theory of truth hold about such matters?

## 5. Minimalisms

We need to note, first, that understanding talk about minimalism in the various domains of truth – including moral and ethical truths as well as literary truths – involves distinguishing both historically and thematically among three closely related but different views: "redundancy" theories of truth, such as those of Frege (1848-1925) and Ramsey (1903-1930), "deflationary" theories of truth, such as those of Ayer (1910-1989) and P. F. Strawson 1919-2006, and "minimalist" theories of truth, such as those of P. Horwich and H. Field. Our main concern here is with Horwich's classic version of minimalism.[5]

On Horwich's view, there is no substantial difference between saying:

(P) "I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants," and

(P*) "It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants."

Why? Because the phrase, "It is true that," adds nothing substantial to what follows it. Two things need noting here. First, the phrase

"It is true that" adds nothing substantial to what follows it in the sense that truth has no "peculiarity," that "there is nothing to be said not even very roughly speaking – about what it [truth] consists in." [6] So, I don't need to use this phrase (the phrase is "redundant"), and were I to use this phrase I would be inflating my sentence (the use of the word "truth" in my sentence would require "deflation").

Second, while adding nothing substantial, adding the phrase "It is true that" does add something, and indeed it adds something useful. For the two sentences do not mean exactly the same thing. The second sentence, although "trivial", allows us to construct certain generalizations that otherwise would not be possible. And the second sentence enables us to see that in some sense truth is a property because of "the inferential role of 'true' as a logical predicate" (244). Thus, even though the phrase is redundant and the statement requires deflation, the redundancy is not useless and the deflation must be of the right sort.

In his slightly revised "Postscript" in 1999 to the 1998 second edition of his 1990 book *Truth*, Horwich summarizes his particular variant of a deflationary theory of truth, which he calls "minimalism." Then, at the conclusion of his "Postscript," he looks back on both his summary and his replies to objections in order to offer a critical overview of minimalism. Horwich thinks that minimalism involves not just a description of "how the word 'true' comes to mean what it does" but the substantiation of a further claim. That claim is twofold. The double claim goes: "truth has no underlying nature and. . . the basic theory of that property consists in instances of the equivalence schema" (244).

Compare then the moral and ethical sentence, "It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants" with the aesthetic and literary sentence, "It is true that 'there is no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers.'" In light of the reflections

above, I think we now do well to hold with Horwich that, at least here, the second sentence, though redundant and requiring "deflation," adds something useful. For the two sentences are not trivial. They allow us to construct certain generalizations that otherwise would not be possible. Further, the two sentences enable us to see that in some sense truth is a property. So, even though the two sentences are indeed redundant and require "deflation," the redundancy is not useless and the deflation must be of the right sort.

What these reflections come down to is the need for a close scrutiny of what we seem to be doing when we claim that two related but quite different kinds of sentences are "true." The first sentence we took from the aesthetic domain, specifically from one of Shakespeare's dramatic monologues in his play, *Cymbeline*. That unsettling sentence ran:

"Is there no way for men to be, but women
Must be half-workers? We are all bastards; . . ."

What would it mean to ask: is this sentence true? And, among many other remarks that seemed called for, we noted in particular that answering such a question would require emphasizing very strongly the direct and indirect roles of figurative and even symbolic uses of language in making assertions. And the second sentence we took from the ethical domain. That sentence ran:

"It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants."

And again we asked, 'what would it mean to ask: is this sentence true?' In trying to answer this question we noted here that we needed to emphasize very strongly the distinction between literal and nonliteral uses of language and the roles of redundant and syncategorematic-like expressions.

More generally, in the case of sentences taken from various aesthetic domains such as those taken from literary works like Shakespeare's plays, determining the sense of whether such sentences may properly be called "true" or "false" involves recognizing the more than merely literal uses of language in making assertions. In the case of sentences taken from various ethical domains such as those taken from talk about moral obligation and ethical responsibilities, determining the sense of whether such sentences may properly be called "true" or "false" involved recognizing the often redundant uses of truth-functional terms in making assertions.

So, when we returned to questions about supposed moral truths as opposed to supposed literary truths, we seemed to have on hand at least two basic insights that needed closer attention. The first was that minimalist accounts of truth provided a healthy antidote to investing apparent moral truths with a surfeit of substance. The second was that considerations about literary truths inoculated us against taking apparent moral truths in overly literal terms.

In short, dealing with supposed literary and moral truths critically enough seemed to require something more substantial than any deflationist minimalist account of truth might offer, whether a general redundancy theory or a specific minimalist theory, but something less substantial than what a typical correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic account of truth might offer. What would what we might call a non-deflationary but restricted account of truth (the "astringency theory"?) finally look like?

## 6. A Pragmatic Alternative?

So far as an alternative standpoint might go, my suggestion would be to look more carefully away from the remaining difficulties with minimalist conceptions of truth, whether those of a Paul Horwich or of others, and to look towards more substantive accounts of truth.

One instructive example is the mixed correspondence-coherence theory we find in the later work of Hilary Putnam.

By themselves, such mixed theories will not fully do the job we expect from them, namely, to account satisfactorily for both our shared and studied intuitions about the existence and nature of both putative literary and moral truths. But the elements of some mixed theories of truth might be modified and augmented in such a way as to provide us with a less unsatisfactory approach to moral truths than minimalist theories are able to do so far.

Now, even in our own thoroughly sceptical times, truth theories abound. Depending on our interests and our choices of cognitive frameworks, each is seen to have its particular strengths and weaknesses, though we need not attempt any wearisome inventory of such work here. Instead, we do better simply to recall the main elements of what a mixed coherence theory of truth looks like.[7] Such a theory, I believe, can account quite nicely for the putative truth of any number of claims, including perhaps some of what we suspect are moral truths about the need to relieve human suffering.

The kind of mixed coherence theory I have in mind here, and very briefly, is a theory of the nature of truth like Putnam's. It is not a theory of a criterion for truth or a theory of the justification of truth. Characteristically, the theory mixes coherence with correspondence. Here "correspondence" refers, roughly, to the idea that truth consists in some specifiable relation between the contents of propositions and some situation that obtains independently of any beliefs we may entertain about it. "Coherence" refers, again roughly, to the idea that some specifiable relationship holds between an individual belief and a system of beliefs.[8]

When orchestrated for the rational appraisal of representative claims such as "It is true that I ought to help extremely poor refugees and migrants," a mixed coherence theory of truth comprises more

than one major element. First, such a theory includes the idea that some correspondences do hold between beliefs and apparent facts and values. The theory also includes the idea that the propositional contents of these correspondences cohere with the propositional contents of some critical version of present standards of rational acceptability.

Further, the theory construes the apparent facts and values to which certain beliefs are said to correspond as objective, non-arbitrary realities, and yet as not completely independent of everything that may be believed about them. Fourth, the theory takes such objective yet not completely independent realities as human constructs. Still more, these constructs arise historically within different cultures from the play of different interests and practices that determine the choice of cognitive roles, critical terms, and conceptual frameworks.

Now with some such more fully developed of this kind of a mixed theory of the nature of truth in place, the putative truth of representative literary and ethical claims can be said to consist in the contents of the relevant propositions standing in a relation of coherence with some larger system of beliefs. Moreover, this larger system of beliefs is not identical with that of any one ethical theorist and therefore is intrinsically corrigible in the light of further eco-ethical reflection.

Further, the larger belief system is organized in terms of mind-dependent and not world-dependent classifications. These classifications include, among other elements, logical laws and principles of inference that follow not from any intuitive direct awareness but from beliefs properly supported by other beliefs.

Finally, the putative truth of literary and ethical claims like those above is both immanent and transcendent. Such truth is immanent because it is embodied in the historically contingent and correlative relations among a particular culture's practices and standards.

But such truth is also transcendent, because the putative truth of such claims, while embodying implicit norms within a particular culture, interprets these implicit norms with a broad non-criterial rather than with a narrow criterial conception of rationality. And this non-criterial conception is what allows of consistency in dealing with intercultural cognitive practices.

## Envoi: Something More

Given the extraordinary richness of literary and especially poetic works of art in all of the world's civilisations and in all of the eras of world history, it is not surprising that questions of truth arise concerning many representative examples of what look like plain assertions occurring in such artworks. Moreover, many such assertions also appear in moral and ethical works. But when we begin to examine such matters more closely, we come rather quickly onto the realisation that supposed truths in both literary and moral matters require something more than minimalist accounts. They appear to require accounts of truth that are substantial enough to account for the many different kinds of truths appearing in many different kinds of ways in our dealings with other persons, with history, and with culture. Closer attention to detailed pragmatic theories of truth that would pay particular attention to symbolic and not just to literal conceptions of truth.

# Endnotes for Essay Five

[1]   *Cymbeline,* Act II.
[2]   P. Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
[3]   In referring to parts of English-language expressions such as "utterances," "sentences," "verb phrases," and so on, I make use of the standard linguistic terminology to be found in such works as R. L. Trask, *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics* (London: Routledge, 1999); A. Akmajian et al., *Linguistics*, 7th ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); and R. Quirk et al., *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (London: Longman, 1972),
[4]   See P. McCormick, *Relationals: On the Grounds and Nature of Person* (Kracow: Copernicus Centre Press, 2020).
[5]   P. Horwich, *Truth,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1998).
[6]   "Horwich," in: S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 240, emphases omitted.
[7]   "Eco-Ethical Truths: Coherence, Pragmatic Realism, and Fictionality," *Revue internationale de philosophie moderne* 8 (Tokyo, 1990), 155-85, esp. pp. 177-81.
[8]   We need the qualification, "roughly," because these descriptions are informal and because correspondence and coherence theories may be theories not just of truth, as here, but of belief or of justification or, more generally, of knowledge.