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Journal Item

How to cite:

Matravers, Derek (2020). Comments on Rafe McGregor's Narrative Criminology. The Journal of Aesthetic Education, 54(4) pp. 19–25.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.5406/jaesteduc.54.4.0019>

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Comments on Rafe McGregor's *Narrative Criminology*

Derek Matravers

To write this book one would need to be expert in the philosophy of fiction (and that considered quite broadly), in criminology, in crime, and in military history. Hence, possibly only someone with exactly Rafe McGregor's background could have done it. Aside from the truly interdisciplinary nature of the book, several other virtues stand out. I will mention in particular the rigorous argumentation (with some possible exceptions which I will discuss below) and the clarity of the writing. McGregor does not shelter behind obfuscation; everything is there in plain sight. Indeed, his occasional glosses of some of the rather more self-indulgent writing of his interlocutors is most welcome.

There is much in the book that is thoroughly commendable; both in the criticisms of others and in the positive proposals. I enjoyed the historical grounding in Shaftesbury and Schiller; there are some excellent discussions of the contemporary literature (particularly Berys Gaut and Sarah Worth); the worked examples are not only essential contributions to the argument but are also interesting in their own right. As he only goes as far as his arguments will allow, McGregor's conclusions are nicely circumscribed. He seeks only to show that 'criminal inhumanity *can* be reduced by the cultivation of narrative sensibility' (106, italics mine). That is, he does not argue that reading books *will inevitably* improve us; indeed, he countenances the thought that it could have the opposite effect. Readers should be alert to the fact that McGregor uses the words 'knowledge' and 'justification' in what is, to me at least, a non-standard manner. According to McGregor we can gain knowledge even if what we gain is false and justifications can be provided even if those justifications are specious; knowledge is not necessarily accurate knowledge, and a justification is not necessarily a correct justification (104). Failure to realise this might lead an incautious reader to attribute to McGregor stronger claims than those he is in fact making.

In short, there is much to agree with and much to applaud. However, as is traditional in these formats I shall focus on the points of disagreement. I shall discuss three. The first is perhaps not even a disagreement but I just need to get it off my chest; the second merely points up issues that McGregor may well have dealt with elsewhere; the third, I think, might be more substantial.

The reason the first might not even be a disagreement is that McGregor and I share a degree of scepticism about psychological studies that investigate the nature of reading. To do justice to this topic would require a detailed look at particular experiments (and it is a commendable aspect of the book that McGregor does this). My scepticism about at least some of these experiments is that they do not take seriously enough the fact that reading literature is a skill. Having the appropriate experience when reading a work of literature takes (just for starters) focus, concentration, an awareness of issues concerning structure, style, and technique, a sensitivity to language, and awareness of history, possibly the oeuvre of the writer, and the conventions of genre. Of course, whether or not this matters in an experiment depends on the hypothesis that is being considered; experiments run with non-expert readers and shallow texts might, for example, provide insight into some basic questions of some basic issues in the psychology of text-processing. However, to think one can learn much about the appreciation of literature with experiments on non-expert readers reading shallow texts would be to exhibit the same degree of optimism as someone who thought we could learn much about the appreciation of Renaissance paintings by running experiments on non-expert viewers using holiday snaps. Having said that, such a scepticism should not be used as an excuse for ignoring empirical work altogether. If the argument that is being put forward has empirical ramifications one ought to ensure this is not refuted by

any well-established findings. This is the line that McGregor takes and I am in full agreement.

The second disagreement again might not amount to much. McGregor makes a helpful distinction which he marks by using the words 'ethical' and 'moral'. A consideration is ethical if it is within the realms of moral assessment. A consideration is moral if it has some positive ethical evaluation. Hence, the contrast with the ethical is the amoral, and the contrast with the moral is the immoral. McGregor thinks that our usual sorts of narrative ('exemplary narratives') (a) are representations constructed by agents and (b) represent the doings and undergoings of agents. As such, they are subject to a dual ethical assessment. We can (a) criticise the writer for constructing a narrative of that sort or (b) criticise the doings and undergoings of the represented agents.

This raises the question of the relation between these two set of judgements (which I will call '(a)-judgements' and '(b)-judgements'); that is, the question as to whether we bring the same moral standards to bear in making both. McGregor claims that 'the combination of agency and events places narratives in the ethical sphere, as all action (and inaction) is subject to ethical appraisal, even if that appraisal is that the action is permissible rather than prohibited or obligatory (and therefore raises no ethical concerns)' (53). This seem to refer equally to (a)-judgements and (b)-judgements, as he nowhere considers the view that our moral standards might differ between the two. (I might add, parenthetically, that there are those who dispute McGregor's claim as to the ubiquity of morality with respect to human action (Wollheim 1986: ch. 7)). It seems legitimate to ask, however, whether we are committed to the actions of *represented* agents being subject to the same standards of ethical assessment as we would apply to the actions of those in the actual world – whether to the author who has constructed the narrative or to each other more generally.

The claim that represented agents are not open to the same standards of ethical assessment has two sources (although these are linked and might, ultimately, be the same). The first is the general commitment to the position known as 'autonomism': the claim that the aesthetic/artistic and the ethical represent two different domains of value that do not overlap. One might draw from this that the appropriate engagement with the content of representations is shorn of the ethical commitments we would have were the content not a representation (there are many papers on this topic – a useful starting point is (Carroll 1996)). The second is more blunt; ethics belongs (if at all) in the domain of actual actions – our thoughts, dreams, and representations are simply not the kinds of thing that are appropriate objects for ethical assessment (Wollheim 1986: p.202).

There are well-known replies to both of these positions. McGregor could draw attention to his discussion of de Sade (who features in the reply to Berys Gaut (62)). It is surely plausible to claim that what happens to the women in de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* should be subject to ethical assessment. Indeed, it could be argued that suspending ethical assessment would deprive the work of any appeal it might have. That is, the work's erotic appeal lies, at least in part, in the experience of the women being wronged. That can be granted, however, and it still be the case that such assessments are wholly internal to the representation. An argument would have to be given to show that there was something incoherent in holding that it could be *merely fictional* that the actions depicted therein are wrong. The problem for McGregor is that if such an argument is not forthcoming, and it is merely fictional that the depicted actions are wrong, it is not clear why we should apply the same standards to morality to those actions as we do to the same kinds of action in the actual world. Why should a fictionalised morality have the same standards of assessment at actual-world morality? We have arrived (unsurprisingly) at what Brian Weatherson calls 'the alethic puzzle' and Kendall Walton calls 'the fictionality puzzle' (Weatherson 2004; Walton 2006:

138). Such a problem is not to be sorted out here (I attempt to do so in (Matravers 2014: 135-45)). My complaint is only that treating all human actions, whether actual world actions or represented actions, as on a par ethically covers over a multitude of potential issues – something of which, quite possibly, McGregor is only too well aware.

The third disagreement concerns one of the main tenets of McGregor's view: that the vehicle of our cognitive gain from narratives is the form of the narrative rather than the content. Abstracting form from content and treating it as something that can be evaluated independently is, I think, a risky philosophical practice. I shall illustrate this by looking at the third of his worked examples, given in the final chapter of the book. McGregor attempts to show that a sensitivity to narrative properties can reduce criminal inhumanity by considering how it might be used to mitigate recruitment into extremist groups. He takes as his example two essays: one from a white supremacist website and one from a Muslim fundamentalist website. Drawing on work by Ajit Maan and others, McGregor identifies a narrative structure that underpins both; this he calls the 'victim master narrative'. The structure is as follows:

- (i) In the beginning our people lived in a utopia.
- (ii) The others arrived and took over.
- (iii) This brings us to the present, where we have two choices.
- (iv) We can either do nothing, in which case the situation will remain the same as it is now, or we can expel the others and restore the utopia in such a way that it is never threatened again. (171)

McGregor identifies the 'core conception' of this narrative.

There is not only a single victim master narrative at work in white supremacism and Muslim fundamentalism, but a single conception of victimhood which combines the desirability of the survival of the in-group (with its various superior qualities) and the likelihood of destruction by the out-group (with its vastly superior numbers) to justify resistance, defence, and attack. I shall call this core conception *deliverance*, employed in the sense in which the word combines the meaning of both salvation and liberation. (186)

Drawing on these qualities of the narrative, McGregor attempts to show how 'narrative sensibility' can reduce criminal inhumanity. The argument he gives is this:

- (i) White supremacists and Muslim fundamentalists follow contradictory ideologies.
- (ii) The ideologies of White supremacists and Muslim fundamentalists are based on the victim master narrative, which is in turn based on the concept of deliverance.
- (iii) If ideologies are contradictory, they cannot both be true.
- (iv) Therefore, either white supremacism and Muslim fundamentalism are not contradictory, or the victim master narrative and the concept of deliverance on which it is based are false.
- (v) Therefore, the victim master narrative and the concept of deliverance on which it is based are false. (186-87)

From this, McGregor draws the following conclusion: 'narrative sensibility reveals the identity of the white supremacist and Muslim fundamentalist recruitment narratives and, as such, calls their truth or basis in fact into question, which in turn reduces the potential influence of the course of action they prescribe' (187).

It is not clear what McGregor's strategy is here. It is not generally true that the truth of an argument (if applying that predicate to an argument makes sense) is called into question by the fact that there exists another argument which has the same form (that would spell the

end of the syllogism). It is surely possible for there to be a justified employment of the victim master narrative and the concept of deliverance; it may well have been a sensible thing for any small society, aggressively colonised by a bigger society, to employ. The fact that there are others who employ the argument with less justification would not make it inappropriate or wrong for the colonised society to do so. Hence, it is just not clear what McGregor means by the claim that ‘the victim master narrative and the concept of deliverance on which it is based are false’.

The key to this appears to lie in (ii): ‘The ideologies of White supremacists and Muslim fundamentalists are based on the victim master narrative, which is in turn based on the concept of deliverance.’ What does ‘based on’ mean in this context? In his gloss on (ii), McGregor holds that Mann has established the first part of the claim and the second part he takes himself to have established. But what is it that they have established? The story must go something like this. The white supremacists and the Muslim fundamentalists take their grievance to be based on the claim that the master narrative is sound; that the argument is valid and the premises are true. However, the premises are not true. Nonetheless, their grievance remains. As it is not the truth of the premises that sustains their grievance, it must be something else. That something else is the form of the narrative and the concept of deliverance on which it is based.

However, if that is the way that the story goes it involves an unhelpful mix of an internal and an external perspective. Consider the internal perspective: that of the white supremacist or the Muslim fundamentalist. As far as they are concerned, the master narrative describes the way the world is, to which extreme political action is the appropriate response. If they ceased to think the narrative describes the way the world is, they would lose at least *that* motivation to take extreme political action. Attention to the form of the narrative is not part of the internal perspective. It may well be (it probably is) that white supremacists believe that Muslim fundamentalists believe the fundamentalist version of the argument, and Muslim fundamentalists believe that white supremacists hold the supremacist version of the argument; that is part of what enrages each group about the other.

The external perspective is quite different: it is the one held by Mann, McGregor, and others who have studied the problem (for ease, I will simply refer to them as ‘sociologists’). Sociologists, we can assume, do not believe either version of the argument. For them the question is, given the arguments are false, why does each group persist in carrying out extreme political action? Their answer is, of course, that each group is in the grip of the same form of argument; the victim master narrative and the concept of deliverance.

McGregor’s hope is that realisation that both groups are motivated by the same form of argument ‘reduces the potential influence of the course of action they prescribe’. However, if my reconstruction above is correct, that is exactly not the case. The reduction of the influence of the argument needs to happen to those who occupy the internal perspective; they are the ones committed to extreme political action. However, realising that some other group is motivated by the same form of argument is more likely, from the internal perspective, to make things worse. Those who occupy the external perspective are aware of the common causes and patterns of motivation. However, as the sociologists do not have any motivation to commit extreme political action, there is nothing that needs to be reduced.

It is difficult to know how much of a problem this is. There is a narrow question and a broad question. The narrow question is whether the problem just identified generalises. That is, it is a structural question. In instances in which narratives underpin criminal inhumanity will it be in virtue of the content of the narrative or in virtue of the narrative properties? Furthermore, if it is in virtue of the content, will that serve to block readers from (weakly)

being acted on by the narrative properties or (more strongly) being aware of the narrative properties? If so, then in these cases, it does not look as if the narrative properties can do any work. The broader question concerns the readers of the kinds of narrative McGregor is discussing. Are the people likely to read these narratives the ones who need educating? That is, are those who willing or able to refine their narrative sensibilities likely to be the people to commit acts of criminal inhumanity? None of us should be complacent about our capacities for doing harm, but are the remedies that McGregor suggests aimed at the right kind of people?

I do not want to end on a sceptical note, as I share McGregor's belief in the ethical power of narratives. It is good to find work that takes what would otherwise be merely an intuition, prey to the sceptical taunts of others, put on such a philosophically robust footing. I shall finish with a brief anecdote from the history of my own university. During 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland, it was an IRA policy that those serving sentences at the notorious Maze Prison should study degrees with The Open University. There was, on one of the anniversaries of closing of the Maze, an official re-union of prisoners, staff, and politicians involved in the peace process. The ex-prisoners requested representation from The Open University, and our Vice Chancellor attended. I spoke to him afterwards, and he said that the ex-prisoners left him in no doubt that reading Open University course material had contributed to the change in atmosphere that made the Good Friday agreement possible. The situation was, undoubtedly, complicated but in a world unfriendly to the Humanities it is a nice thought to hang on to.

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