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Author(s): Colin Radford and Michael Weston

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# HOW CAN WE BE MOVED BY THE FATE OF ANNA KARENINA?

Colin Radford and Michael Weston

*I—Colin Radford*

*'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her?'*  
*Hamlet Act 2 Sc. 2.*

1. That men feel concern for the fate of others, that they have some interest, and a warm and benevolent one in what happens to at least some other men, may be simply a brute fact about men, though a happy one. By this I mean that we can conceive that men might have been different in this respect, and so it is possible for us to be puzzled by the fact that they are not different. In a situation where men did not feel concern for others, children might be nurtured only because mothers could not stand the pain of not feeding them, or because it gave them pleasure to do this and to play with them, or because they were a source of pride. So that if a child died, a mother might have the kind of feeling the owner of a car has if his car is stolen and wrecked. He doesn't feel anything for the car, unless he is a sentimentalist, and yet he is sorry and depressed when it happens.

Of course there may be good biological reasons why men should have concern for each other, or at least some other men, but that is not to the point. The present point, a conceptual one, is that we can conceive that all men might have been as some men are, *viz.*, devoid of any feeling for anyone but themselves, whereas we cannot conceive, *e.g.*, that all men might be what some men are, chronic liars.

2. So concern and related feelings are in this sense brute. But what are they? What is it to be moved by something's happening to someone?

Anything like a complete story here is a very long one, and in

any case I have a particular interest. Suppose then that you read an account of the terrible sufferings of a group of people. If you are at all humane, you are unlikely to be unmoved by what you read. The account is likely to awaken or reawaken feelings of anger, horror, dismay or outrage and, if you are tender-hearted, you may well be moved to tears. You may even grieve.

But now suppose you discover that the account is false. If the account had caused you to grieve, you could not continue to grieve. If as the account sank in, you were told and believed that it was false this would make tears impossible, unless they were tears of rage. If you learned later that the account was false, you would feel that in being moved to tears you had been fooled, duped.

It would seem then that I can only be moved by someone's plight if I believe that something terrible has happened to him. If I do not believe that he has not and is not suffering or whatever, I cannot grieve or be moved to tears.

It is not only seeing a man's torment that torments us, it is also, as we say, the thought of his torment which torments, or upsets or moves us. But here thought implies belief. We have to believe in his torment to be tormented by it. When we say that the thought of his plight moves us to tears or grieves us, it is thinking of or contemplating suffering which we believe to be actual or likely that does it.

3. The direction of my argument should now be fairly clear. Moving closer to its goal: suppose that you have a drink with a man who proceeds to tell you a harrowing story about his sister and you are harrowed. After enjoying your reaction he then tells you that he doesn't have a sister, that he has invented the story. In his case, unlike the previous one, we might say that the 'heroine' of the account is fictitious. Nonetheless, and again, once you have been told this you can no longer feel harrowed. Indeed it is possible that you may be embarrassed by your reaction precisely because it so clearly indicates that you were taken in—and you may also feel embarrassed for the storyteller that he could behave in such a way. But the possibility of your being harrowed again seems to require that you believe that someone suffered.

Of course, if the man tells you in advance that he is going to

tell you a story, you may reach for your hat, but you may stay and be moved. But this is too quick.

Moving closer still: an actor friend invites you to watch him simulate extreme pain, agony. He writhes about and moans. Knowing that he is only acting, could you be moved to tears? Surely not. Of course you may be embarrassed, and after some time you may even get faintly worried, 'Is he really acting, or is he really in pain? Is he off his head?' But as long as you are convinced that he is only acting and is not really suffering, you cannot be moved by his suffering, and it seems unlikely as well as—as it were—unintelligible that you might be moved to tears by his portrayal of agony. It seems that you could only perhaps applaud it if it were realistic or convincing, and criticise if it were not.

But now suppose, horribly, that he acts or re-enacts the death agonies of a friend, or a Vietcong that he killed and tells you this. Then you might be horrified.

4. If this account is correct, there is no problem about being moved by historical novels or plays, documentary films, *etc.* For these works depict and forcibly remind us of the real plight and of the real sufferings of real people, and it is for these persons that we feel.<sup>1</sup>

Fine to be moved by documentary works or historical plays and novels

What seems unintelligible is how we could have a similar reaction to the fate of Anna Karenina, the plight of Madame Bovary or the death of Mercutio. Yet we do. We weep, we pity Anna Karenina, we blink hard when Mercutio is dying and absurdly wish that he had not been so impetuous.

5. Or do we? If we are seized by this problem, it is tempting for us to argue that, since we cannot be anguished or moved by what happens to Anna Karenina, since we cannot pity Madame Bovary and since we cannot grieve at the marvellous Mercutio's death, we do not do so.

we may say that we're not really moved

This is a tempting thesis especially because, having arrived at it, we have then to think more carefully about our reactions to and feelings about, *e.g.*, the death of Mercutio, and these investigations reveal—how could they do otherwise?—that our response to Mercutio's death differs massively from our response to the untimely death of someone we know. As we watch Mercutio die the tears run down our cheeks, but as O.K. Bouwsma has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> the cigarettes and chocolates go in

our response to FC differs for real life responses: we cry but we also eat popcorn and say how marvellous!

our mouths too, and we may mutter, if not to each other, then to ourselves, 'How marvellous! How sublime!' and even 'How moving!'.

'Now', one might say, 'if one really is *moved*, one surely cannot comment on this and in admiring tones? Surely being moved to tears is a massive response which tends to interfere with saying much, even to oneself? And surely the nature of the response is such that any comments made that do not advert to what gives rise to the feeling but to the person experiencing it tend to suggest that the response isn't really felt? Compare this with leaning over to a friend in a theatre and saying "I am completely absorbed (enchanted, spellbound) by this!"'

But although we cannot truly grieve for Mercutio, we can be moved by his death, and are. If and when one says 'How moving' in an admiring tone, one can be moved at the theatre. One's admiration is for the play or the performance, and one can admire or be impressed by this and avow this while being moved by it.

But this doesn't mean that we don't really feel moved by mercutio's death. Our expression of admiration is for the play

6. So we cannot say that we do not feel for fictional characters, that we are not sometimes moved by what happens to them. We shed real tears for Mercutio. They are not crocodile tears, they are dragged from us and they are not the sort of tears that are produced by cigarette smoke in the theatre. There is a lump in our throats, and it's not the sort of lump that is produced by swallowing a fishbone. We are appalled when we realise what may happen, and are horrified when it does. Indeed, we may be so appalled at the prospect of what we think is going to happen to a character in a novel or a play that some of us can't go on. We avert the impending tragedy in the only way we can, by closing the book, or leaving the theatre.

This may be an inadequate response, and we may also feel silly or shamefaced at our tears. But this is not because they are always inappropriate and sentimental, as, *e.g.*, is giving one's dog a birthday party, but rather because we feel them to be unmanly. They may be excusable though still embarrassing on the occasion of a real death, but should be contained for anything less.

Of course we are not only moved by fictional tragedies but impressed and even delighted by them. But I have tried to explain this, and that we are other things does not seem to the

point. What is worrying is that we are moved by the death of Mercutio and we weep while knowing that no one has really died, that no young man has been cut off in the flower of his youth.<sup>3</sup>

7. So if we can be and if some of us are indeed moved to tears at Mercutio's untimely death, feel pity for Anna Karenina and so on, how can this be explained? How can the seeming incongruity of our doing this be explained and explained away?

### *First solution*

When we read the book, or better when we watch the play and it works, we are 'caught up' and respond and we 'forget' or are no longer aware that we are only reading a book or watching a play. In particular, we forget that Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Mercutio and so on are not real persons.

Solution 1.  
We forget that we are only reading a book

But this won't do. It turns adults into children. It is true that, *e.g.*, when children are first taken to pantomimes they are unclear about what is going on. The young ones are genuinely and unambiguously terrified when the giant comes to kill Jack. The bolder ones shout 'Look Out!' and even try to get on the stage to interfere.

This solution turns adults into children

But do we do this? Do we shout and try to get on the stage when, watching *Romeo and Juliet*, we see that Tybalt is going to kill Mercutio? We do not. Or if we do, this is extravagant and unnecessary for our being moved. If we really did think someone was really being slain, either a person called Mercutio or the actor playing that rôle, we would try to do something or think that we should. We would, if you like, be genuinely appalled.<sup>4</sup>

We do not try to get on stage and save the character who is about to die

So we are not unaware that we are 'only' watching a play involving fictional characters, and the problem remains.

We are perfectly aware that we're watching a play

### *Second solution*

Of course we don't ever forget that Mercutio is only a character in a play, but we 'suspend our disbelief' in his reality. The theatre management and the producer connive at this. They dim the lights and try to find good actors. They, and we, frown on other members of the audience who draw attention to themselves and distract us by coughing, and if, during a scene, say a stage hand steals on, picks up a chair that should have

Suspension of

been removed and sheepishly departs, our response is destroyed. The ‘illusion’ is shattered.

All this is true but the paradox remains. When we watch a play we do not direct our thoughts to it’s only being a play. We don’t continually remind ourselves of this—unless we are trying to reduce the effect of the work on us. Nonetheless, and as we have seen, we are never unaware that we are watching a play, and one about fictional characters even at the most exciting and moving moments. So the paradox is not solved by invoking ‘suspension of disbelief’, though it occurs and is connived at.

Again, we are never unaware that we are watching a play

### *Third solution*

It’s just another brute fact about human beings that they can be moved by stories about fictional characters and events. *I.e.*, human beings might not have been like this (and a lot of them are not. A lot of people do not read books or go to the theatre, and are bored if they do).

Look! This is just how things are

But our problem is that people *can* be moved by fictional suffering given their brute behaviour in other contexts where belief in the reality of the suffering described or witnessed is necessary for the response.

Right, but the issue is that in other contexts belief in the reality of the situation is necessary for the response and this is not the case in fiction

### *Fourth solution:*

But this thesis about behaviour in non-fictional contexts is too strong. The paradox arises only because my examples are handpicked ones in which there is this requirement. But there are plenty of situations in which we can be moved to tears or feel a lump in the throat without thinking that anyone will, or that anyone is even likely to suffer or die an untimely death, or whatever.

Why should this be a problem? There are other cases in real life when we cry or feel a lump in the throat for no particular reason

But are there? A mother hears that one of her friend’s children has been killed in a street accident. When her own children return from school she grabs them in relief and hugs them, almost with a kind of anger. (Is it because they have frightened her?) Their reaction is ‘What’s wrong with you?’ They won’t get a coherent answer perhaps, but surely the explanation is obvious. The death of the friend’s child ‘brings home’, ‘makes real’, and perhaps strengthens the mother’s awareness of the likelihood of her own children being maimed or killed. We must try another case. A man’s attention wanders from the paper he

is reading in his study. He thinks of his sister and, with a jolt, realises that she will soon be flying to the States. Perhaps because he is terrified of flying he thinks of her flying and of her 'plane crashing and shudders. He imagines how this would affect their mother. She would be desolated, inconsolable. Tears prick his eyes. His wife enters and wants to know what's up. He looks upset. Our man is embarrassed but says truthfully, 'I was thinking about Jean's flying to the States and, well, I thought how awful it would be if there were an accident—how awful it would be for my mother.' Wife: 'Don't be silly! How maudlin! And had you nearly reduced yourself to tears thinking about all this? Really, I don't know what's got into you, *etc.*, *etc.*'

In this case the man's response to his thoughts, his being appalled at the thought of his sister's crashing, *is* silly and maudlin, but it is intelligible and non-problematic. For it would be neither silly nor maudlin if flying were a more dangerous business than we are prone to think it is. Proof: change the example and suppose that the sister is seriously ill. She is not suffering yet, but she had cancer and her brother thinks about her dying and how her death will affect their mother. If that were the situation his wife would do well to offer comfort as well as advice.

So a man can be moved not only by what has happened to someone, by actual suffering and death, but by their prospect and the greater the probability of the awful thing's happening, the more likely are we to sympathise, *i.e.*, to understand his response and even share it. The lesser the probability the more likely we are not to feel this way. And if what moves a man to tears is the contemplation of something that is most unlikely to happen, *e.g.*, the shooting of his sister, the more likely are we to find his behaviour worrying and puzzling. However, we can explain his divergent behaviour, and in various ways. We can do this in terms of his having false beliefs. He thinks a 'plane crash or a shooting is more likely than it is, which itself needs and can have an explanation. Or his threshold for worry is lower than average, and again this is non-problematic, *i.e.*, we understand what's going on. Or lastly, we may decide he gets some kind of pleasure from dwelling on such contingencies and appalling himself. Now this is, logically, puzzling, for how



can a man get pleasure from pain? But if only because traces of masochism are present in many of us, we are more likely to find it simply offensive.

The point is that our man's behaviour is only more or less psychologically odd or morally worrying. There is no logical difficulty here, and the reason for this is that the suffering and anguish that he contemplates, however unlikely, is pain that some real person may really experience.

Testing this, let us suppose first that our man when asked 'What's up' says, 'I was thinking how awful it would have been if Jean had been unable to have children—she wanted them so much.' Wife: 'But she's got them. Six!' Man: 'Yes, I know, but suppose she hadn't?' 'My God! Yes it would have been but it didn't happen. How can you sit there and weep over the dreadful thing that didn't happen, and now cannot happen.' (She's getting philosophical. Sneeringly) 'What are you doing? Grieving for her? Feeling sorry for her?' Man: 'All right! But thinking about it, it was so vivid I could imagine just how it would have been.' Wife: 'You began to snivel!' Man: 'Yes'.

It is by making the man a sort of Walter Mitty, a man whose imagination is so powerful and vivid that, for a moment anyway, what he imagines seems real, that his tears are made intelligible, though of course not excusable.

So now suppose that the man thinks not of his sister but of a woman . . . that is, he makes up a story about a woman who flies to the States and is killed and whose mother grieves, and so on, and that this gives him a lump in his throat. It might appear that, if my thesis is correct, the man's response to the story he invents should be even more puzzling than his being moved by the thought of his sister's not having children. 'Yet', one who was not seized by the philosophical problem might say, 'this case is really not puzzling. After all, he might be a writer who first gets some of his stories in this manner!'

But that is precisely why this example does not help. It is too close, too like what gives rise to the problem.<sup>5</sup>

*Fifth solution:*

A solution suggested by an earlier remark: if and when we weep for Anna Karenina, we weep for the pain and anguish that a real person might suffer and which real persons have suffered,

and if her situation were not of that sort we should not be moved.

There is something in this, but not enough to make it a solution. For we do not really weep for the pain that a real person might suffer, and which real persons have suffered, when we weep for Anna Karenina, even if we should not be moved by her story if it were not of that sort. We weep for *her*. We are moved by what happens to her, by the situation she gets into, and which is a pitiful one, but we do not feel pity for her state or fate, or her history or her situation, or even for others, *i.e.*, for real persons who might have or even have had such a history. We pity her, feel for her and our tears are shed for her. This thesis is even more compelling, perhaps, if we think about the death of Mercutio.

But all over again, how can we do this knowing that neither she nor Mercutio ever existed, that all their sufferings do not add one bit to the sufferings of the world?

*Sixth solution :*

Perhaps there really is no problem. In non-fictional situations it may be necessary that in order for a person to be moved, he must believe in the reality of what he sees or is told, or at least he must believe that such a thing may indeed happen to someone. But, as I concede, being moved when reading a novel or watching a play is not exactly like being moved by what one believes happens in real life and, indeed, it is very different. So there are two sorts of being moved and, perhaps, two senses of 'being moved'. There is being moved (Sense 1) in real life and 'being moved' (Sense 2) by what happens to fictional characters. But since there are these two sorts and senses, it does not follow from the necessity of belief in the reality of the agony or whatever it is, for being moved (S. 1), that belief in its reality is, or ought to be necessary for 'being moved' (S. 2). So I have not shown that there is a genuine problem, which perhaps explains why I can find no solution.

But although being moved by what one believes is really happening is not exactly the same as being moved by what one believes is happening to fictional characters, it is not wholly different. And it is what is common to being moved in either situation which makes problematic one of the differences, *viz.*,

the fact that belief is not necessary in the fictional situation. As for the hesitant claim that there is a different sense here, this clearly does not follow from the fact that being moved by what happens in real life is different from being moved in the theatre or cinema or when reading a novel, and I find it counter-intuitive.<sup>6</sup> But even if the phrase did have different senses for the different cases, it would not follow that there was no problem. It may be that 'being moved' (S. 2) is an incoherent notion so that we and our behaviour are incoherent, when we are 'moved' (S. 2).

When, as we say, Mercutio's death moves us, it appears to do so in very much the same way as the unnecessary death of a young man moves us and for the same reason. We see the death as a waste, though of course it is really only a waste in the real case, and as a 'tragedy', and we are, unambiguously—though problematically as I see it in the case of fiction—saddened by the death. As we watch the play and realise that Mercutio may die or, knowing the play, that he is about to die, we may nonetheless and in either case say to ourselves 'Oh! No! Don't let it happen!' (It seems *absurd* to say this, especially when we know the play, and yet we do. This is part of what I see as the problem.) When he is run through we wince and gasp and catch our breath, and as he dies the more labile of us weep.

How would our behaviour differ if we believed that we were watching the death of a real young man, perhaps of the actor playing the part of Mercutio? First, seeing or fearing that the actor playing the part of Tybalt is bent on killing the other actor, we might try to intervene or, if we did not, we might reproach ourselves for not doing so. When he has been run through we might try to get help. But if we are convinced that we can do nothing, as we are when we watch the death of Mercutio or read about Anna, and if we thought that our watching was not improper, these irrelevant differences in our behaviour would disappear. Once again, we would say to ourselves—and, in this case also to each other since there is no question of aesthetic pleasure—'My God! How terrible!' And as the actor lay dying, perhaps delivering Mercutio's lines, either because he felt them to be appropriate or because, unaware that he was actually dying, he felt that the show must go on, we should again weep for the dying man and the pity of it.

Secondly, but this is not irrelevant, our response to the real death is likely to be more massive, more intense and longer in duration for, after all, a real young man has been killed, and it will not be alloyed—or allayed—by aesthetic pleasure. But such differences do not destroy the similarity of the response and may even be said to require it.

So a similarity exists, and the essential similarity seems to be that we are saddened. But this is my difficulty. For we are saddened, but how can we be? What are we sad *about*? How can we feel genuinely and involuntarily sad, and weep, as we do, knowing as we do that no one has suffered or died?

To insist that there is this similarity between being moved and 'being moved' is not to deny that there are other differences between them besides the necessary presence of belief in the one case and its puzzling absence in the other. Yet, as I have already indicated, some of the peculiar features of 'being moved' add to the problem it presents. Not *any* difference between being moved and 'being moved', over and above the difference in belief, has the effect of reducing the conceptual problem presented by the latter, as is suggested by this sixth solution. *E.g.*, when we hope that Mercutio will not get killed, we may realise, knowing the play, that he must be killed, unless the play is altered or the performance is interrupted and we may not wish for that. So not only is our hope vain, for he must die and we know this,<sup>7</sup> but it exists alongside a wish that he will die. After the death, in retrospect, our behaviour differs. In the case of the real man, we should continue to be moved and to regret that happened. With Mercutio we are unlikely to do this and, in talking about his death later, we might only be moved say 'How moving it was!' For we are no longer at the performance or responding directly to it. We do not so much realise later as appropriately remind ourselves later that Mercutio is only a character and that, being a character, he will, as it were, be born again to die again at the next performance. Mercutio is not lost to us, when he dies, as the actor is when he dies.

Our response to Mercutio's death is, then, different from our response to the death of the actor. We do not entirely or simply hope that it will not happen, or response is partly aesthetic,

the anguish at his death is not perhaps as intense, and it tends not to survive the performance.

Perhaps we are and can be moved by the death of Mercutio only to the extent that, at the time of the performance, we are 'caught up' in the play, and see the characters as persons, real persons, though to see them as real persons is not to believe that they are real persons. If we wholly believe, our response is indistinguishable from our response to the real thing, for we believe it to be the real thing. If we are always and fully aware that these are only actors mouthing rehearsed lines, we are not caught up in the play at all and can only respond to the beauty and tragedy of the poetry and not to the death of the character. The difficulty is, however—and it remains—that the belief, to say the least, is never complete. Or, better, even when we are caught up, we are still aware that we are watching a play and that Mercutio is 'only' a character. We may become like children, but this is not necessary for our tears.

So the problem remains. The strength of our response may be proportionate to, *inter alia*, our 'belief' in Mercutio. But we do not and need not at any time believe that he is a real person to weep for him. So that what is necessary in other contexts, *viz.*, belief, for being moved, is not necessary here and, all over again, how can we be saddened by and cry over Mercutio's death knowing as we do that when he dies no one really dies?

8. I am left with the conclusion that our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very 'natural' to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence.

It may be some sort of comfort, as well as support for my thesis, to realise that there are other sorts of situation in which we are similarly inconsistent, *i.e.*, in which, while knowing that something is or is not so, we spontaneously behave, or even may be unable to stop ourselves behaving, as if we believed the contrary. Thus, a tennis player who sees his shot going into the net will often give a little involuntary jump to lift it over. Because he knows that this can have no effect it is tempting to say that the jump is purely expressive. But almost anyone who has played tennis will know that this is not true. Or again, though men have increasingly come to think of death as a

dreamless sleep, it was pointed out long ago—was it by Dr. Johnson or David Hume?<sup>8</sup>—that they still fear it. Some may say that this fear is not incoherent, for what appals such men is not their also thinking of death as an unpleasant state, but the prospect of their non-existence. But how can this appal? There is, literally, nothing to fear. The incoherence of fearing the sleep of death for all that it will cause one to miss is even clearer. We do not participate in life when we are dead, but we are not then endlessly wishing to do so. Nonetheless, men fear the endless, dreamless sleep of death and fear it for all that they will miss.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Not for the performance which elicits this feeling or for the actor—for those we feel admiration, are impressed and so on. This may help to explain how we can enjoy tragedy. Besides the actor's skill and the producer's we also enjoy the skill of the writer. What is difficult is that we weep. This turns the usual problem upside down. People are more often puzzled about how we can enjoy a tragedy, not how it can harrow us, *cf.* Hume's essay, 'On Tragedy'.

<sup>2</sup> In 'The Expression Theory of Art', collected in his *Philosophical Essays*. *Cf.* p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Though why that should worry us is another worry. There may be some who still feel that there really is no problem, so consider the following case. A man has a genre painting. It shows a young man being slain in battle (but it is not an historical picture, that is, of the death of some particular real young man who was killed in a particular battle). He says that he finds the picture moving and we understand, even if we do not agree. But then he says that, when he looks at the picture, he feels pity, sorrow, *etc.*, for *the young man in the picture*. Surely this very odd response would be extremely puzzling? How *can* he feel sorry for the young man in the painting? But now suppose that the picture is a moving picture, *i.e.*, a movie, and it tells a story. In this case we *do* say that we feel sorry for the young man in the film who is killed. But is there a difference between these two cases which not only explains but justifies our differing responses? Is it, perhaps, simply because most of us do respond in this way to films that we do not find our doing so puzzling?

<sup>4</sup> *Cf.* 'The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction; if we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more.' Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, and to avoid misunderstanding, I do not have a monolithic view about aesthetic response. I am not saying, for example, that we must believe a story about Harold Wilson to find it *funny*. I am saying that, with

the paradoxical exception of watching plays, films, *etc.*, including those about Harold Wilson, we need to believe the story to weep for him, to feel pity for him.

<sup>6</sup> Does 'killed' have a different sense in 'Nixon has been killed' and 'Mercutio has been killed'?

<sup>7</sup> Of course, seeing a clip from the newsreel of Kennedy's assassination may elicit the same response, 'Don't let him get killed!', and here we do realise that our response is silly, is incompatible with our knowledge that he is dead and we are watching a film of his death. But there is in the theatre nothing analogous to actually witnessing Kennedy's death. The death of a character is always irrevocable, out of reach, and out of our control.

<sup>8</sup> Either could have made such an observation, though Hume regarded death with phlegm, Johnson with horror. But in fact it was a contemporary, Miss Seward, 'There is one mode of the fear of death which is certainly absurd; and that is the dread of annihilation, which is only a pleasing sleep without a dream.' Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, for 1778.

# HOW CAN WE BE MOVED BY THE FATE OF ANNA KARENINA?

Colin Radford and Michael Weston

## *II—Michael Weston*

Doctor Radford believes that “Our being moved in certain ways by works of art . . . involves us in inconsistency and incoherence” (*supra*). He concentrates particularly on feelings aroused by the tragic fate of certain fictional characters, believing, for example, that our response to Mercutio’s death is inconsistent because, although moved by it, we never believe it to be a real death. That we can behave in such ways is, apparently, a brute fact about human beings. I believe that Dr. Radford doesn’t substantiate this claim, and that there are ways of bringing out the coherence of such feelings which he fails to utilise because he ignores the fact that our responses to characters in fiction are responses to works of art.

### I

In order to establish his thesis, Doctor Radford needs to show that a belief in the factual or probable existence of their objects is a necessary condition for our being said correctly to respond in the required ways. But there is an immediate obstacle in doing this, for if it is claimed that we are moved in those ways by fictional characters, why shouldn’t this be used to show that such a necessary condition doesn’t exist? It might, of course, still be the case that it is a necessary condition for our being said to be moved in these ways by a *putatively factual* account that we believe it to be true or likely: but since fictional accounts are not of this kind, this would be beside the point. It doesn’t follow that because some condition is necessary for our ascription of a certain feeling in a particular set of circumstances that it is also necessary for the ascription of that feeling in any circumstances whatever. This, of course, Dr. Radford is aware of, since the conditions for our responding to an account



we believe to be true are different from those for our responding to an account of what is likely to happen. Nevertheless, both sets of responses are, he believes, coherent. What must be shown in order to substantiate his claim is that *only* events we believe to have occurred or are likely to occur are *proper* objects of the feelings concerned. It must be shown, that is, that the connection between these feelings and actual or probable events is of the same kind as that existing, say, between the feeling of pride and the existence of a link between its object and our own accomplishments. But whereas we should try to establish this last point, presumably, by looking at examples of the way the notion of pride is used to discover the nature of the objects that feeling takes, Doctor Radford's problem is that we do speak of being moved in the required ways by works of fiction. It must be demonstrated that these examples of the way the required feelings are ascribed are in some way sub-standard, and this involves showing that his preferred set of examples is paradigmatic for their ascription in any case whatever.

He attempts to do this by providing us with examples in which we do feel there is something amiss with the ascription of these feelings, and suggesting a connection between these and our responses to fiction. We are moved when someone tells us of his sister's illness; we cease to be moved when we discover that he has no sister but only a penchant for telling lies. We can be moved by the prospect of what might happen to someone close to us, but "if what moves a man to tears is the contemplation of something that is most unlikely to happen, e.g., the shooting of his sister, the more likely are we to find his behaviour worrying and puzzling" (*supra*). I have no quarrel with these points, but the problem lies in connecting these examples with those of our responses to fictional characters and events. Of course, here too we are responding to characters who, like the man's mythical sister, do not have births registered in Somerset House, but this doesn't bring us closer to, but removes us from, the kind of examples we are offered. For in reading a novel or watching a play we are not even under the illusion that we are attending to reportage of real people and events, and this is reflected in the kind of responses that we can be said to have to fiction. Doctor Radford is obviously aware of the differences

between our being moved by Mercutio's death and our being moved by the death of a real young man. We do not, in Mercutio's case, try to intervene, call the police, or run away. But for the purpose of establishing his thesis of the incoherence of our feelings towards Mercutio's death, he believes these differences are irrelevant when set beside the similarities. I must admit I do not find his depiction of these similarities very convincing, but that there are similarities cannot be denied: we are saddened and may be moved to tears by what we see on the stage. But his reason for dismissing the differences as inessential, and this is the main thrust in his attempt to persuade us of the incoherence of our responses to Mercutio's death, is that such responses are the same as those we have towards a real event if "we are convinced that we can do nothing, as we are when we watch the death of Mercutio, or read about Anna, and if we thought that our watching was not improper" (*supra*). I shall have something to say about the content of this remark in a moment, but it should be noted that even if we accepted this it would still not demonstrate that our response to Mercutio's death was incoherent or inconsistent since it could be the case that we are moved in the same way by different classes of object, some known to be fictional, others not. Inconsistency could, of course, be claimed if it were shown that our feeling in the required way needed our momentary belief in the actuality of events and people which we at the same time know perfectly well to be fictional. The necessity for a "willing suspension of disbelief" might be invoked for this purpose. But Doctor Radford doesn't seem to take this way out, although, as I shall remark later on, he seems to hedge his bets on this: "But we do not and need not at any time believe that (Mercutio) is a real person to weep for him" (*supra*). In any case, the idea of such a suspension of disbelief is hardly a tempting solution, since in attending to fiction we are not in a situation in which the truth, in the sense which could involve our belief, of what we see or read is even raised. Of course, we may believe a story to be "true to life", but this hardly involves us in even a brief delusion that what we have read is the truth about historical events and persons. I may suspend my disbelief in your story so that I may check it as dispassionately as possible, but I neither believe nor disbelieve

the events in *Romeo and Juliet*. For me to feel saddened at Mercutio's death, I no more have to believe or half believe that someone is really dying on the stage than I have to believe or half believe that Renaissance Verona has been transported to the theatre in order to watch the play at all.

I have been suggesting that Doctor Radford does not have a problem, and hence a solution, in the terms in which he states it. I believe there is a problem here, and Doctor Radford's difficulties seem to stem from ignoring it. Consider his view that our responses to fictional characters are the same as those to real events if "we are convinced that we can do nothing . . . and if we thought our watching was not improper". I do not know what is intended by this last phrase, since our attention to most fictional events, and particularly those which move us in the way Doctor Radford depicts, would, if transposed to our everyday lives, be paradigm cases of improper behaviour. We should, after all, be eavesdropping, prying into the private affairs of strangers, observing them in their most intimate moments with one another, and so on. Even if we could understand this proposal, the senses in which we can "do nothing" about the fate of fictional characters on the one hand and real people on the other are quite different, and this affects the kinds of response we can have to each. I cannot have a feeling of impotent anger that I can do nothing to stop Mercutio's death, as I might have if I were physically prevented from intervening in a real fight. I cannot feel ashamed at my cowardice in doing nothing, since fear cannot prevent me interfering on Mercutio's behalf. And so on. The reason I can do nothing to save Mercutio has nothing to do with my capacities, or physical or temporal position, but has everything to do with the kind of reality Mercutio has. And it is the recognition of Mercutio as part of a work of art that I find missing in Doctor Radford's treatment. Clearly, there are similarities between the way we respond to fictional and real events, between, say, our sadness at Mercutio's death and our sadness at the death of a friend. But this does nothing to show that one of these feelings is somehow incoherent. That sadness can take such objects is a fact about the kind of consistency our language of feelings and art has, not a fact about the inconsistency of our behaviour. It is not that our sadness at Mercutio's death is the

same, though wrongly inspired, feeling as our sadness at the death of a real young man, but that the similarities and differences between the feelings are connected to the similarities and differences between their objects. And this of course raises questions about the *kind of coherence* our feelings about fictional characters have, questions which cannot even be broached if such feelings are viewed as essentially incoherent.

## II

We can be moved by the mere statement of facts, but not by the mere statement of what occurs to fictional characters. You can be moved by my telling you that my son was killed last night in a car-crash, and in a way which renders irrelevant the detail of the events leading up to his death. (I am not saying such details are always irrelevant, but that they sometimes are.) But for my saying "Mercutio is dead" to evoke your sadness, you must have been attending to the play. As I have said, this is not a psychological requirement for us to suspend our disbelief in what we see, since we have no such disbelief to suspend. It is rather a consequence of the following fact. In the world of our everyday lives we can feel for people in the situations they find themselves in, and this is possible because people and their situations are to some extent separable, for things might have gone differently with them. But in fiction this isn't so. Whereas my son might not have been killed in a car-crash, Mercutio must die in the way he does. And this "must" has nothing to do with a causal nexus, but indicates that Mercutio is part of a work of fiction: if a character in a performance of a play does not die in that way, then either he is not Mercutio, or it is not a performance of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". If we are moved by Mercutio's death, we are being moved by an episode within the context of a play. And that this should be possible will seem less strange and abstract if we remember that we can be moved, not merely by what has occurred or what is probable, but also by ideas. I can be saddened not only by the death of my child or the breakdown of your marriage, but also by the thought that even the most intimate and intense relationships must end. Such feelings are not responses to particular events but express, I

think, a certain conception of life and are the product of reflection on it. Hence, they require a certain kind of distance of the individual from the emotional demands of his everyday life. Both time and the conventions of art seem to be ways of achieving this. Of course, particular events can prompt such reflection, but the feelings that are an integral part of having a conception of life, although occasioned by particular events, are not simply responses to them. I can be saddened or angered by reading accounts of war where the object of my feeling is not the death and suffering of the particular individuals concerned, but, for example, the terrible things men can do to others in pursuit of their interests and the terrible blindness on the part of those others which enables such things to occur. What I am responding to here is, we can say, a possibility of human life perceived through a certain conception of that life. I am not responding to *events* I believe to have happened or are likely to happen, for the "possibility" here is not an expression of a prediction. Such responses are part of a conception of what is important in life and will vary with differences in what is so conceived. The feelings generated in us by serious literature will seem less strange if we connect them with responses such as these.

I said above that we can be moved by the mere statement of fact, and where this is so, we have no reason for being moved other than the simple statement of what has occurred. If you know me and are moved by my son's death, you need have no reasons for your sorrow. That you are close to me and know my son are not reasons you have for feeling the way you do. But fictional works are, in our culture, essentially objects of discussion and interpretation. It is never a misunderstanding to ask someone why he is moved by a particular fictional episode, and much literary appreciation consists in providing this kind of articulation. The provision of such reasons is a description of the object of the observer's emotion. To be moved by Mercutio's death is to respond in the light of one's interpretation of that episode in the context of the play, and hence is part of one's response to the sense we see in the play as a whole. It may be true that when we read *Anna Karenina*, as Dr. Radford says, "we weep for *her* . . . we pity her, feel for her and our tears are shed for her" (*supra*). But

this tells us nothing about the object of our tears and pity, about what is involved in responding in these ways to a character we know to be fictional. With the aid of an example, I want briefly to consider this.

John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi* contains, I think, one of the most moving death scenes in our drama. I choose the play, however, not merely for this. Doctor Radford's charge of incoherence and inconsistency in our response to fiction is that "while knowing that something is or is not so, we spontaneously behave . . . as if we believed the contrary" (*supra*). Although, as I have noted, he appears to reject explaining how we manage this in terms of a suspension of disbelief, his position is rather ambivalent: "Perhaps we are and can be moved by the death of Mercutio only to the extent that, at the time of the performance, we are 'caught up' in the play, and see the characters as persons, real persons, though to see them as real persons is not to believe that they are real persons. If we wholly believe, our response is indistinguishable from our response to the real thing, for we believe it to be the real thing. If we are always and fully aware that these are only actors mouthing rehearsed lines, we cannot be caught up in the play at all and can . . . not (respond) to the death of the character. The difficulty is, however—and it remains—that the belief, to say the least, is never complete" (*ibid.*). There are several obscurities in this passage. It is not clear to me what is meant by seeing the characters as "real persons", and since this is apparently not a matter of believing that they are real, it is even less clear why the difficulty with our response should lie in our "belief (which) is never complete". But there is a more fundamental problem with this approach. Presumably talk about seeing characters as "real" people goes with talk about "believable" creations and their "truth to life", and so forth. Such talk relates not to our psychological state when attending to fiction, but is directed at the quality of the realisation of a fictional character, and points, therefore, towards the mode of representation employed in the work—that is, towards the *kind* of fiction it is. Hence, it is appropriate in respect only of certain kinds of fictional form, notably, of course, so-called "naturalistic" and "realistic" ones. One might speak in this way, for example, of *Madame Bovary* or

Casaubon, but not, I think, of *Beowulf* or *Mosca*. Yet the interesting thing from our point of view is that non-naturalistic dramas, poems and stories can move us, and in ways which transparently have nothing to do either with suspending our disbelief or with “seeing” characters as “real”. Webster’s play is an example of this. If we can understand how we can be moved by such works, we may better appreciate the nature of our responses to naturalistic and realistic fictions, for such forms are just as much literary “conventions” as those of the *Revenge Tragedy* and the *Morality Play*.

In order to consider the nature of the object of our feeling when we say that we are moved by the death of the Duchess of Malfi it will be necessary to go into some interpretative detail about the play, for it is a point I wish to stress that what we are moved by here is not independent of the significance we see in the work as a whole. And that we attempt to work out such significance in watching the play is indicative of the attitude we adopt towards serious drama. We trace themes in the play, we want to know “what the play is about”, whereas, of course, our lives are not about anything and do not mean anything in the sense that works of literature do.<sup>1</sup> Antonio’s speech at the beginning of the play establishes the thematic background for the Duchess’s relationship with himself and with her brothers:

“A Prince’s court  
 Is like a common fountain, whence should flow  
 Pure silver drops in general: but if’t chance  
 Some curs’d example poison’t near the head  
 Death and diseases through the whole land spread.”  
 (I.i.11-13)

We are prepared by this to witness a world poisoned “near the head”, and hence to try to recognise the source of this poison. It is here the complexities of the play, and hence of our response to it, begins. The newly-widowed Duchess is told by her brother Ferdinand, with a vehemence which goes beyond fraternal care for a sister’s honour, that he does not wish her to remarry. The Duchess, however, woos her servant, Antonio, but in terms which generate an uncertainty above how we should respond, for she combines an openness of feeling with an insensitivity both to her previous husband and to Antonio:

“Sir, be confident—  
 What is’t distracts you? This is flesh and blood, Sir;  
 ‘Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
 Kneels at my husband’s tomb. Awake, awake, man!  
 I do here put off all vain ceremony,  
 And only do appear to you a young widow  
 That claims you for her husband, and like a widow  
 I use but half a blush in’t.”  
 (I.1.452-9)

She dismisses Antonio’s natural question about her brothers’ feelings with a brief:

“Do not think of them—  
 . . . Yet should they know it, time will easily  
 Scatter the tempest.”

Obsessed with the thought of her love for Antonio and with her determination to have him for her husband regardless of the cost to either of them, she embarks on a train of deception, culminating in a feigned pilgrimage to a holy shrine, which echoes the use of religion for the pursuit of personal goals that characterizes her other brother, the Cardinal. Ferdinand discovers the affair and plots to end it. The deceptions practised by them both to attain their very different ends create a world in which communication becomes opaque: actions are never done for their ostensible motives, words never spoken with their normal intentions.

It is against this background that we see and respond to the terrible revenge of Ferdinand on his sister. Without it, Act IV, Scenes i and ii would appear meaningless, dominated as they are by the use of various symbolic devices to point up the thematic structure of the play and so locate the Duchess’s death within it. Thus, the troop of madmen provides both a terrible parody of traditional wedding festivities<sup>2</sup> and a reflection of the insanity of a world in which the only possible responses are despair or a dignified acceptance of whatever comes, for here malevolence and the unpredictability of the insane render action impossible. The strength of will we noticed in the Duchess’s wooing of Antonio now appears in her ability to achieve a magnificent dignity in her suffering:

Bosola: “. . . here are your executioners.”



Duchess: "I forgive them:  
The apoplexy, catarrh, or cough o' th'lungs  
Would do as much as they do."

(IV, ii, 206-8)

If we are moved by the death of the Duchess, what, then, are we being moved by? The answer to this would provide part of an exposition of the thematic structure of the play, for it is only in its relation to the developed themes of the play that we can make sense of what we see as being the death of the Duchess of Malfi at all. The identity of the death of a fictional character is given not by temporal, spacial, and physical co-ordinates, but by the co-ordinates of the text. Our response to the death is part, then, of our response to the thematic structure of the play, and hence to the conception of life expressed by it. We are moved, if you like, by the thought that men can be placed in situations in which the pursuit of what they perceive to be good brings destruction on both themselves and the ones they love, and that nevertheless this can be faced with a dignity which does not betray the nature of those relationships for which they perish: that a man may, in fact, lose "everything and nothing"<sup>3</sup>.

Doctor Radford in his remarks on what it is to be "caught up" in a play, says "If we are always and fully aware that these are only actors mouthing rehearsed lines, we are not caught up in the play at all and can only respond to the beauty and tragedy of the poetry and not to the death of the character" (*supra*). But the situation surely is rather this. We are always fully aware that we are watching actors mouthing rehearsed lines, but that is not the focus of our attention. Our attention is directed at the *play* through the actions and words of the characters. And the "beauty and tragedy" of the poetry is not something one can attend to independently of attending to the character, for one does not know whether a given line is beautiful or tragic independently of the context in which it occurs, and that context is provided by the structure of the play. Consider the famous line at IV, ii, 264 when Ferdinand sees his dead sister:

"Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young."

H. T. Price has remarked of this: "It is strong because it is built

into the construction of the play. Ferdinand has never known his sister, and only now, when he has murdered her, and she is lying dead at his feet, does reality strike him and he sees her for the first time . . . Webster has taken infinite pains to lead us up to this line. He foresaw it and when it comes we recognise it was inevitable that it should come. It is the climax of the play, the watershed, the dividing line."<sup>4</sup> The power of the line, and the nature of our response to it, is provided by its context in the structure of the play. What we are responding to is the significance the line has in the thematic context of the play, just as with the Duchess we are moved through our perception of the significance of her death within that context. Stage deaths have a point and our response to them is not independent of our perception of it. It is because of this that our response to such deaths can be so varied: we can be awe-struck, but we can be moved to laughter too. The range of responses is determined by the range of possible significances a death can have within a play. The death of an actual person has a significance *for* certain individuals, and the range of responses is determined by the range of possible relations individuals can have with one another. Thus, whereas we should understand someone being gladdened by a death in terms of the effect this had on their own projects and interests, our response to a stage death cannot be of this kind for we cannot interact with dramatic personae. We can neither grow and develop together, nor help nor impede one another's plans and activities, and hence we cannot, *pace* Doctor Radford, respond to characters as agents.

The significance of someone's death may change *for* us as our relationships with other people develop and change, for we cannot interact with the dead. The significance of a stage death is not, however, a significance *for* individuals, but one *within* a play. Hence, our responses change as we see again or re-read the work and alter our interpretation of it: the significance we see alters in our continued interaction with the work itself, not in the contingencies of our interactions with *other people* and projects. We can be in doubt how we *should* respond to such scenes, and the "should" here is not, as it would be with a real death, a moral term, but indicates a problem in deciding what, in the context of the play, their

significance is. And this is indicative, I think, of the fact that we are not engaged with characters in our capacity as moral agents: we do not blame or praise characters for their actions, for there is no sense in which they can be said to be responsible for them. Certain moral responses to agents rule out the relevance of the context within which their actions occur: "I don't care what he's done, no-one should be treated like that." But this is not an intelligible response to death or suffering in a play.

I have said that our response to the Duchess's death is determined by our perception of its significance in the play, and that the kinds of response we can have towards dramatic personae are determined by the kind of object works of drama are. If we now ask why we should be moved by such things, we are asking why we should care to watch drama, for our being moved is one way such care appears. The interpretation of a work of art is not a self-contained game, but has its importance in its connection with what is not art, with our everyday lives. Where we are not concerned primarily with the technical aspects of works, such interpretation consists in articulating the relation the work has to concerns which are important to us independently of art: in establishing its thematic structure, its "vision of life". Our response to the death of the Duchess is a response to the sense of the play of which it is a part, and hence to the conception of life which the play provides. That we can be moved through reflection on the nature of human life is connected with the sense which "life" has when applied to human beings. Peter Winch has remarked: "Unlike beasts, men do not merely live but also have a conception of life. This is not something that is simply added to their life; rather it changes the very sense which the word 'life' has when applied to men. It is no longer equivalent to 'animate existence'. When we are speaking of the life of man, we can ask questions about what is the right way to live, what things are most important in life, whether life has any significance, and if so what."<sup>5</sup> The importance of art to us is one way this concern to make sense of our lives appears. The possibility of our being moved by works of art must be made intelligible within the context of such a concern. If we are moved through the significance we see an event possesses within the thematic context of a play, that such significance should matter to us is not itself explained

by the play, but must be accounted for by the way literature can illuminate our lives.

<sup>1</sup> Which does not mean that the two senses of meaning are distinct. It is part of my argument that works of art would mean nothing if we had no conception of the significance of our lives.

<sup>2</sup> See I-S. Ekeblad "The Impure Art of John Webster" in *The Review of English Studies*, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase is John Russell Brown's in his Introduction to the Revels edition of the play. He sees the Duchess as moving "from majesty that woos and virtue that may 'seem the thing it is not' (I, i, 442 & 448) . . . through adversity, to a majesty in suffering and a natural virtue . . . she is still the same woman—proud, instinctive, passionate, intelligent—but stripped of her obvious greatness, she has been 'proved' great: she has lost everything and nothing." (p. liv).

<sup>4</sup> H. T. Price "The Function of Imagery in Webster" *P.M.L.A.* 1955.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society" in *Ethics and Action*, p. 44.