Agents and lives offers a new and important rethinking of the traditional 'humanist' view of literature. That tradition's valuation of literature for its 'moral import' is extended in a wider, more complex, open and exploratory understanding of those terms. Literature, not simply in a didactic or exemplary sense, represents a kind of moral thinking in its own right – a kind necessary to our moral understanding, and which moral philosophy has spoken of, but cannot itself supply. Goldberg demonstrates the way in which literature combines a sense of people as voluntary agents and as moral beings whose lives extend well beyond the voluntary and deliberate, manifesting themselves in everything the individual feels and suffers, as well as in everything he or she does.

The book argues that this double way of thinking about people corresponds to traditional literary criticism's most vital insights into the way works of literature both depict and themselves manifest modes of human life. Such criticism avoids the need for separate 'aesthetic' judgments (since all literary judgment becomes moral) and for treating a work of art as if it were simply the voluntary expression of a conscious and responsible moral 'self'.

Goldberg's argument ranges across English literature since the Renaissance, focusing on central examples from George Eliot's novels and Pope's poetry. A final chapter assesses the relationship of his argument to recent accounts of literature offered by moral philosophers such as Iris Murdoch, Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty.

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Moral thinking in literature

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For Peter, Richard and Kate

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Sam Goldberg died in December 1991.

Agents and lives was by then nearly ready for editing.

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Jane Adamson

Preface

If the basic aim of moral philosophy is still to answer Socrates' question, 'how to live?', the contribution that 'poetry', imaginative literature, might make to answering it has been in dispute at least since Socrates asked the question. I must confess that I have never found the dispute particularly exciting or relevant to my interests as a literary critic, mainly because the dispute has usually been conducted by philosophers, who naturally assume that moral philosophy is the centre, so to speak, the place where truth and reason are to be found, and that literature is simply the application of moral ideas and feelings, somewhere on the periphery. (A surprising number of literary scholars and critics assume this too; we are a trusting – not to say credulous – lot when it comes to thinking.) True, some philosophers in recent years have questioned this assumption on philosophical grounds; but having grown up in the English tradition of evaluative literary criticism (which has, incidentally, very little to do with the New Criticism and other American schools of literary study), and so not having shared this assumption in the first place, I began some years ago to think about the relationship of literature and moral philosophy, but in a different way, from the literary critic's side, as it were. Coming among philosophical colleagues, I found myself trying to explain to them how and why I think literature and literary criticism form a distinctive and irreplaceable way of thinking about certain crucial aspects of Socrates' question – a way which is outside the scope of philosophy but complementary to it, which is no less subject to requirements of truth and reason, and which makes some kinds of literary judgment not just like moral judgments, nor just connected with them, but actual moral judgments in their own right.

There are, I realize, serious risks in using the term 'moral' as freely as I do, since many people still think of morality as a code of right and wrong conduct ultimately derived from God or from one of His more popular substitutes. I can only hope that it will relieve more readers than it will disappoint to say at the outset that I have no such moral code or doctrine to teach, no scheme of moral salvation to preach, and nothing so substantial and grand as even a moral philosophy. In fact, my conception of the 'moral' is altogether loose and baggy. For example, I do not assume that moral judgments are restricted only to expressions of fault-finding or resentment or righteousness or the desire to bestow guilt; I do not even think that all moral judgments are prescriptive, or universalizable, or directed only to what people intentionally choose to be or to do, as distinct from what they cannot help being or doing. In my view, moral judgments range over much more ground than that – just as Socrates' question does.

To a philosopher – even one as liberal as Bernard Williams about the range of matters that can reasonably be called moral, and as sceptical about the power of moral philosophy to deal with every one of them – all that literature and literary criticism can offer is perhaps no more than a kind of phenomenology:

> There could be a way of doing moral philosophy that started from the ways in which we experience our ethical life. Such a philosophy would reflect on what we believe, feel, take for granted; the ways in which we confront obligations and recognize responsibility; the sentiments of guilt and shame. It would involve a phenomenology of the ethical life.[1]

To those who are not proposing to do moral philosophy, however, but just want to reflect on how to live, I think literature offers much more than this; but as Williams suggests elsewhere, a major stumbling-block is the remarkable assurance with which people think they already know what moral questions are about, and consequently what can and what cannot be called 'moral'. Nor does it help matters that every moral outlook prescribes, explicitly or implicitly, what is to

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count as 'moral'. This is why I do not even try to delimit the term. Indeed, I even want to question Williams's own phrase, 'the ethical life', which seems to suggest what I doubt he believes himself: that there is only one such life-pattern (or a small number of them), and that we already know what a human 'life' consists in, and what its 'moral' or 'ethical' elements or aspects are, before we apply these ideas to any particular life. (How would, say, Jane Austen's conception of 'ethical life' be applied to, say, the Karamazovs?) This is not to deny, of course, that we can consider a particular life morally only if we have some pre-conception of a 'life' and some pre-conception of 'the moral'; but as I try to argue, literature is (and always has been in our culture) a special kind of moral thinking in that it continually re-opens such questions. What must count here as 'moral' or 'ethical'? What does this or that individual 'life' consist in? As I see it, literature does its moral thinking in the particulars it imagines, and it has to: not, however, because literature aspires to, but cannot reach, the universals of moral codes or moral philosophy, but because literature can do something that moral codes and moral philosophy cannot. It can think morally in the widest, most inclusive sense of the term – which means, I argue, thinking about people (whether as individuals or as social groups) in a double way.

On the one side, literature does consider people much as moral codes and moral philosophy do, as voluntary agents, each of whom is like any other in having passions, desires, rationality and will, in confronting recognizable moral problems, and in exemplifying recognizable moral concepts and rules of conduct. But at the same time, literature also considers people as lives: as individual unique forms of life – or better, to avoid the specifically Wittgensteinian sense of that phrase, as individual, unique modes of human life – whose particular qualities and trajectory in time are, in quite crucial ways, not like others', nor by any means entirely a matter of voluntary actions, and yet no less morally important for that. What is more, I argue, it is (and always has been in our culture) the distinctive power and importance of literary criticism to make moral sense of 'poems',

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of literature itself, and so to evaluate it, in this same double way. Indeed, this double kind of moral thinking applied reflexively to literary works seems to me essential to the traditional institution and practice of literature and evaluative literary criticism; or to put it another way, that to consider any text – lyric or memoirs, realist or fantasy, mythic or post-structuralist – as manifesting a mode of life as well as embodying voluntary intentional actions *is* to regard it as 'literature'. In the hands of traditional evaluative criticism, one might say, 'literature' is in the final analysis as much a way of considering texts as it is a body of texts that have been considered in that way.

The order of the chapters that follow is pretty much the order in which they were written. Some originated in essays (published in different form in *The Critical Review* at various times between 1980 and 1986) on literary works I happened to be interested in at the time: works in which, and through which, I found myself thinking about the moral thinking of the particular author, but progressively thinking about more and more complex issues. This is why I discuss a rather odd collection of works, and also why the terms of my argument vary slightly from chapter to chapter as I consider different aspects of literature or literary criticism. Originally, I thought that the whole argument would come to centre in a study of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, which (along with *King Lear*) seems to me to manifest the most ranging and powerful moral life, and some of the most searching moral thinking, in English literature; but for various reasons (including the one mentioned at the end of chapter 8) I have kept that study for a separate book. However, I hope that the sequence in which the chapters of this book were written forms an argumentative sequence for the reader too. I should add that I have deliberately tried *not* to discuss works in historical order, so as to avoid any suggestion that I think the issues I am concerned with are only a matter of personal maturation, of growing into a fully 'adult' moral understanding, or of historical 'systems of thought and belief which have had their day'. And I have also deliberately *not* arranged the general chapters together at the beginning and the more specific literary-critical chapters after them, so as to avoid

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any suggestion of a theory thought out in the abstract and then applied from above, as it were, to illustrative examples. My argument is largely about the inability of that kind of thinking by itself to make moral sense of people and of poems: this, indeed, being my main point of difference with some of the contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophers who have discussed the moral import of literature in ways that in many respects converge with mine, but whose limits (as a literary critic sees it) I try to sketch out very briefly in the final chapter.