

## Moral Vices as Artistic Virtues: *Eugene Onegin* and *Alice*

Stephanie Patridge

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**Abstract** Moralists hold that art criticism can and should take stock of moral considerations. Though moralists disagree over the proper scope of ethical art criticism, they are unified in their acceptance of the consistency of valence thesis: when an artwork fares poorly from the moral point of view, and this fact is art critically relevant, then it is thereby worse qua artwork. In this paper, I argue that a commitment to moralism, however strong, is unattractive because it requires that we radically revise our art critical practices in contexts where revision seems ill advised. I will consider two such cases, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Balthus' *Alice*. When we further reflect on our actual art critical practices in cases like these, we find that we do not have an unfailing commitment to the consistency of valence thesis. That is, some artworks are (artistically) good because they are (morally) bad.

**Keywords** Art · Ethics · Aesthetics · Moralism · Immoralism

On the question of the legitimacy of ethical art criticism, philosophers are generally divided into two camps.<sup>1</sup> There are those who think that art criticism should ignore moral considerations – separatists – and there are those who think that art criticism can and should take stock of moral considerations – moralists.<sup>2</sup> Amongst moralists, there is a fair bit of disagreement about how to make sense of art's moral evaluation, how to make sense of morality's connection to art criticism, and the extent of morality's scope over art criticism. Despite their philosophical differences, moralists share a general

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<sup>1</sup>For a few notable exceptions, see Daniel Jacobson, "In Praise of Immoral Art," *Philosophical Topics*, 25 (1997), pp. 155–99, Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Matthew Kieran, (ed.) (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 57–73, and Hilary Putnam "Literature, Science, and Reflection," *New Literary History*, 7.3 (1976), pp 483–492.

<sup>2</sup>For our purposes, art's ethical or moral evaluation is a straightforwardly moral practice, while ethical art criticism is an art critical practice, that of taking moral considerations as art critically relevant. 'Moralism' refers to a class of art critical theories.

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S. Patridge (✉)

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Otterbein College, One Otterbein College, Columbus, OH 43081, USA

e-mail: spatridge@otterbein.edu

commitment to a weak valence consistency – what I will call the consistency of valence thesis. The consistency of valence thesis is the thesis that when an artwork fares poorly from the moral point of view, and this fact is art critically relevant, then the work is thereby worse *qua* artwork.<sup>3</sup> Notice that this thesis has a condition built into it: when engaged in art criticism, one must determine if a moral consideration is of art critical relevance. Depending on the strength of one's moralism, negative moral considerations will either *always* count against an artwork – strong moralism – or they will do so only *sometimes* – weak moralism. But, moralists agree that when a moral consideration has a legitimate role to play in art criticism, any adequate evaluation of the work will take stock of it, so that a negative moral consideration will similarly be a negative artistic consideration – the valence consistency.

While I am an advocate of ethical art criticism, and so not a separatist, I do not share the moralist's commitment to valence consistency. This kind of valence constraint is unattractive because it requires a substantive revision of our art critical practices in contexts where revision seems ill advised. I will consider two such cases, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and the erotic painting of French painter Balthazar Klossowski de Rola, better known as Balthus. When we further reflect on our actual art critical practices, in cases like these we find that we do not have an unfailing commitment to the consistency of valence thesis: some artworks are artistically good, in part, because they are morally bad.

## Eugene Onegin

Nabokov once famously quipped that *Eugene Onegin* is a book where nothing happens. Others have claimed that it is a book where “girl meets boy, boy rejects girl, boy meets girl later and falls in love, then girl rejects boy.”<sup>4</sup> Both of these descriptions are at once illustrative of, and severely underplay, the importance of what goes on in *Eugene Onegin*.

Generally, *Eugene Onegin* is interpreted as a didactic novel because of its apparently moralistic ending.<sup>5</sup> At the novel's opening, we are told that Eugene has grown out of the emotionally indulgent, dandified life of his youth.<sup>6</sup> He is a mature individual who recognizes that life is nothing to get worked up about, especially emotionally, because life lacks what we would identify as substantive moral value. Early in the narrative we meet Tatyana – the girl who, according to Nabokov, meets the boy. Tatyana falls desperately in love with Eugene. For his part, Eugene rejects Tatyana's advances without malice, mainly owing to his normative commitments. Tatyana is devastated, but eventually comes to understand Eugene's coldness – in part through a surreptitious reading of his books, and their telling, cynical marginalia. She realizes that she should not be involved with such an amoral man. Though still in love with Eugene, Tatyana

<sup>3</sup> There is a bit of disagreement amongst moralists over the positive version of the consistency of valence thesis: An artwork is made better to the extent that its moral considerations fare well from the moral point of view, and this fact is art critically relevant. My focus here is squarely on the negative condition.

<sup>4</sup> S. Dalton-Brown, Pushkin's “Evgenii Onegin,” (Bristol Classical Press, 1997), p. v.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, *Eugene Onegin* has been read as social criticism (e.g., it features the kinds of heroes that could emerge only from the stifling social constraints of nineteenth century Russia), as a mocking of Romantic tales, and as a formalist object, amongst a myriad of other interpretative strategies.

<sup>6</sup> He is only in his twenties, a mark of maturity in nineteenth century Russia.

goes off to find her own life, eventually marrying another. At the end of the novel, Eugene and Tatyana meet once again, but this time it is Eugene who falls desperately in love. Although Tatyana appears to still love Eugene, she is now married. She rejects Eugene's advances, to his devastation.

It is not difficult to see why *Eugene Onegin* is so often regarded as a didactic novel. Eugene, it would seem, gets his just comeuppance in the end. His moral cynicism ultimately leads Tatyana to reject him, and it is this rejection that ultimately destroys him. Still, as far as the novel goes, it is not entirely clear what we are to make of Eugene's ruin.<sup>7</sup> Instead of taking Eugene as being ultimately undone by the cynical elements of his character, one might read him as being undone by his inability to maintain his cynical attitude. On this reading, his tragic flaw is not that he is morally cynical; it is that he is not morally cynical *enough*. Consider that Eugene experiences true misery only when he finally falls in love with Tatyana. As the cold, unfeeling character he is above the fray of our petty emotional lives — he is a hero. As the man who falls in love, or feels remorse, he is all too human, and frail — a tragic figure. As a result, it is reasonable to see him as a tragic hero.<sup>8</sup> But, if Eugene is a tragic hero, then *Eugene Onegin* holds up a deeply morally flawed character as laudable, and is thereby morally flawed.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> There is a tendency amongst moralists who endorse the consistency of valence thesis to try to read artworks that are regarded both as important and as morally troubling as morally sound artworks. Though I am not in principle opposed to such interpretative strategies, I am opposed to those who make the further recommendation, either implied or explicit, that the moralistic reading is the preferred reading of the artwork.

<sup>8</sup> One might claim that our identification with Eugene is a case of hating the sin but loving the sinner. In the case of many narrative artworks this may be the case. What initially looks like a case of identifying with an immoral character turns out to be a case of our identifying with something else, something not so morally problematic. Often a character has another virtue, or we feel sorry for him, or we understand how it is that he ended up the way they did. But, that doesn't seem to be the case here. Not only are we invited to identify with Eugene as an anti-hero, we are also asked to fictionally share his world-view.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Eugene is a man of no morals, and thereby someone who presumably doesn't share our actual moral outlook, there is plenty of interpretive room for reading him as the real hero of the novel: Eugene is someone with whom we are invited to fictionally identify. The way that Eugene's character is presented in the novel suggests that the thoughtful person is a moral cynic, and so we thoughtful readers are invited to take this view seriously. Consider, for example, the novel's narrator who is a third party about whom we know only that he is an acquaintance of Eugene's. Throughout the work, the narrator claims to share Eugene's morally cynical world-view. Even stronger, or even worse, while Eugene is claimed to be merely emotionally cold, the narrator claims to be bitter. Further the narrator claims that whatever happiness we are capable of stands in stark contrast to a life dedicated to others, especially if that dedication is a result of a romantic attachment.

Happy is he who has known its fretfulempire, and fled it; happier stillis he who's never felt its will,  
he who has cooled down love with parting, and hate with malice; he whose lifeis yawned away with  
friends and wife...

It seems that the best way to live is without love. It is better to never experience love; it is better to leave those you love than to be in love; it is better to experience negative emotions like hate and malice than positive ones like love. It is even better to be bored by one's life (say by being married) than to be given to emotional attachment. Eugene's (and the narrator's) skepticism about intimate bonds even goes beyond romantic relationships to other kinds of bonds like friendship. That the narrator is so closely allied with Eugene's cynicism gives further support to my contention that Eugene is the hero of the novel, and thereby gives us reason to take his worldview as what one might call a candidate for fictional truth. Thirdly, Eugene's cynicism is contrasted favorably with other not so cynical characters, such as Lensky, the young, romantic poet, Tatyana, the woman who falls in love with Eugene. Despite the fact that Lensky and Tatyana actually fare better from the moral point of view than Eugene, it is clear from the description of them that it is Eugene, and not those silly romantics, who is the hero of this novel.

How then would a moralist direct readers to respond to this *Eugene Onegin*? Depending on her theoretic commitments, a moralist can recommend one of two responses. Either she can recommend that we refuse to see Eugene as a hero, and thereby see *Eugene Onegin* as artistically flawed; or she can recommend that we tolerate the putative immorality for the sake of our engagement with the work. Is either strategy reasonable? Consider the first strategy. Because the strong moralist claims that moral considerations *always* play a role in art criticism, she is committed to claiming that *Eugene Onegin* is necessarily a worse book due to its immorality. Certainly such a claim demands justification, and to my mind the most intriguing line of justification is one that owes a debt to Aristotle's account of artistic and moral value, Berys Gaut's *merited response argument*. Roughly, the argument goes as follows: artworks invite their audiences to have certain responses. At least some artworks are successful to the degree that their audiences have an all things considered artistic reason to have the prescribed response – tragedies must evoke pity, comedies humor, et cetera. That a response is immoral is a reason not to have a prescribed response. So, that a prescribed response is immoral counts against the all things considered artistic judgment for the having of a prescribed response. Therefore, an artwork is made worse to the degree that its prescribed response is immoral.<sup>10</sup> The success of *Eugene Onegin* relies on its audience's ability to see Eugene's cynicism as a virtue, and so to see Eugene as heroic. That is, in order to see his downfall as tragic, we must be capable of seeing his lack of cynicism as a character flaw. Of course, moral cynics are morally flawed which means that *Eugene Onegin*'s success relies partly on getting its audience to make an immoral identification – they are invited to see moral cynicism as a positive character trait. But, according to Gaut's argument, if this is immoral, then we have a moral reason not to see Eugene's demise as tragic. Since, on this line of reasoning an artwork is worse to the degree that we have a moral reason to avoid such an attitude, *Eugene Onegin* is artistically flawed – however minimally – because it is morally flawed.

A view like Gaut's has a few obvious virtues. First, such a view recognizes that moral reasons are not trumping in art criticism. Instead, it conceives of morality's role as weighted against other kinds of reasons, and can thus make sense of cases of artworks that are grossly immoral, but still seem to be good or possibly even great works of art.<sup>11</sup> D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is an obvious contender here. Since this film is guided by a message of anti-miscegenation, it is obviously flawed from the moral point of view. Even stronger, audience members have a reason to avoid identifying with the work's anti-miscegenist message. Anyone who did so would expose a flaw in her character. Imagine what you would think of your friend, if she turned to you and said, "What a great film! Griffith really makes the horror of mixed race relations come alive!" However, despite the film's obvious moral failings, it is hailed as a great cinematic achievement in light of its formal features and technical

<sup>10</sup> Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 182–203.

<sup>11</sup> There is debate about the degree to which an immoral artwork can properly be seen as great. See for example, Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 227–256.

advances.<sup>12</sup> On Gaut's view, judgments like the ones made about *Birth of a Nation* can result from a process of weighing of reasons: the work's formal virtues outweigh its moral vices. A similar line of argument is open in the case of *Eugene Onegin*. While the strong moralist must see the moral cynicism as an artistic defect, he can nevertheless endorse the work overall in light of its other artistic virtues.

Second, Gaut takes seriously the challenge of connecting moral evaluation directly to artistic evaluation by tying the moral evaluation to something that seems of obvious artistic relevance, the justification for audience response. Morality has a voice in art criticism in light of art's reliance on justifying certain kinds of audience responses. Third, it is clear that the kinds of intentional attitudes that we take toward fictional scenes are open to moral evaluation. As I said earlier, we should resist *Birth of a Nation*'s anti-miscegenist call.

Despite the obvious appeal of Gautian moralism, there are two substantive worries to contend with here. First, the view appears to rely on a flawed theory of attitudes. For Gaut being immoral is cashed out in terms of taking a positive attitude toward a morally negative scene, or a negative attitude towards a morally positive scene – say by seeing moral cynicism as a positive character trait. But, as I have argued elsewhere, the success of this requires getting one to adopt a dubious principle: that the ontological status of an attitude's object makes no difference whatsoever to its moral assessment.<sup>13</sup> That is, it treats imaginative attitudes — attitudes whose objects are fictional — as if they are open to the same moral assessment as their non-imaginative counterparts — attitudes whose objects are non-fictional. Underlying this is an assumption that all attitudes imply actual moral commitments of a certain kind, namely that the same moral commitments are required of an attitude regardless of whether it is imaginative or not. As Gaut puts the point, our responses to art are not imagined, they are actual.<sup>14</sup>

If this assumption is right, and all attitudes are actual in that they imply moral commitments of a certain kind, then clearly those of good character would be incapable of experiencing so-called immoral attitudes in fictional contexts because they would lack the requisite moral commitments. But, certainly this is too strong a claim. We are capable of experiencing attitudes in many imaginative contexts that we would be incapable of experiencing in similar, but non-imaginative ones. The explanation for this distance seems to lie in the fact that we do not actually hold the moral commitments insisted upon by Gaut. If you are suspicious of this claim, I

<sup>12</sup> In a review of D. W. Griffith's overall oeuvre, James Agee gives the 1915 "The Birth of a Nation" extraordinarily high critical praise. "He achieved what no other known man has ever achieved. To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man...The most beautiful single shot I have seen in any movie is the battle charge in 'The Birth of a Nation.'" James Agee, "David Wark Griffith," *The Nation*, September 4, 1948: 264. Agee is not alone. "The Birth of a Nation" occupies the 44th place on the American Film Institute's list of the top 100 American films of all time. Even the mainstream contemporary film critic Roger Ebert argues that "The Birth of a Nation" is a great film. See, Roger Ebert, "The Birth of a Nation (1915)," *The Chicago Sun Times*, March 30, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> See my manuscript "Monstrous Thoughts and the Moral Identity Thesis," forthcoming in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*.

<sup>14</sup> Gaut, op. cit., pg. 194.

invite you to reflect on your video game, movie, television, music and reading habits. I am confident that you will find that you often root for the success of characters that you would deplore were they a real person performing real actions.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in many of these cases, though not all, you do not think that the fact that you do so is necessarily a reason to worry about your character. For example, that you find yourself wanting Tony Soprano to be a successful Mafioso does not in any way imply that you actually support the Mafia, or think that anyone should dedicate their talents to such an enterprise. The pervasiveness of this phenomena suggests that there is a significant amount of slippage between our ordinary moral attitudes and our fictional ones. I am not suggesting here that imaginative attitudes are not subject to moral assessment, very clearly they are. Our imaginative friend's response to *Birth of a Nation* shows that. My claim is that they are not subject to the same moral assessment as their non-imaginative counterparts. If this is right, then we have at least a *prima facie* reason to be suspicious of the Gauthier line of defense here. It seems that we need an argument to convince us that coming to see *Eugene Onegin* as a tragic hero is immoral, or bad for us, or somehow contrary to our flourishing. That it is not obvious why we should accept such a claim speaks strongly against our acceptance of strong moralism. Instead, we should conclude that the attitudes that we experience in fictional contexts are normatively different from the attitudes that we experience in non-fictional ones. Since context makes an evaluative difference, any adequate version of moralism must be sensitive to the nuances of fictional contexts.

### Weak Moralism: The Interference Model

Some moralists however are inclined toward a weaker version of moralism, and thereby toward the second strategy of a limited toleration of immorality in art. For the weak moralist, not all of the immoral visions we find in art are artistic flaws. Weak moralism is preferable to a strong version of moralism for a few reasons. First, it avoids the unattractive position of insisting that *Eugene Onegin* is artistically flawed because it is morally flawed. Second, it avoids this by pointing to a common phenomenon of art criticism: sometimes we disregard the immorality of an artwork. Consider an example offered by Robert Stecker, *Iliad*.<sup>16</sup> As Stecker quite rightly points out, in the case of *Iliad* serious readers are repulsed by the moral message, but not tempted to “think one iota less of it.” In a case like this one it seems that when

<sup>15</sup> I am not suggesting that we cannot discover what our real moral commitments are in light of the imaginative attitudes that we find ourselves given to. Clearly we can. My claim is that very often there is a distance between what we find ourselves capable of feeling or desiring in a fictional context and what we find ourselves capable of feeling or desiring in an actual context. This suggests that our fictional or imaginative attitudes do not require the same moral commitments as their non-imaginative counterparts. For another argument for this point, see Gregory Currie's “The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind,” in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.), *Emotion and the Arts*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 63–77.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Stecker, “The Interaction of Ethical and Aesthetic Value,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 45 (2005), p. 147.

we assess the value of the work we simply ignore the fact that its theme is immoral.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the weak moralist can accommodate our intuition that ethical art criticism is called for in some cases. Consider the infamous case of the Marquis de Sade's novel *Justine*. It presents a morally virtuous protagonist as deeply flawed. If Justine were a better person, then she would recognize that the sexual tortures that befall her do not warrant her virtuous responses. She would be *morally* better off, were she to invert part of her value system, say by adopting some form of sadomasochism. Readers have a compelling moral reason to refuse to even fictionally entertain this work's moral message.

Cases like *Justine*, however, raise a significant worry for anyone who endorses the legitimacy of ethical art criticism, but rejects strong moralism. How can we account for the fact that *Justine* calls for ethical art criticism, while *Eugene Onegin* and *Iliad* resist it? In "Where Aesthetics and Ethics Meet: Titian's *Rape of Europa*" Anne Eaton offers the seeds of a promising answer whose roots are found in Hume. She calls her view the interference model. On the interference model moral considerations are art critically salient only when they justifiably interfere with our artistic appreciation. Insofar as the immorality involved in *Iliad* does not interfere with our artistic appreciation, it is not an artistic flaw. Of course, understanding what makes a moral consideration *justifiably* interfering is key here. To try to make sense of this, Eaton draws a comparison between art criticism and friendship. The proper way to think about art criticism, she claims, is to conceive of our relationship with individual artworks as we do our relationships with individual persons. Even our closest friends will not share all of our evaluative commitments. Still, Eaton points out, there are some evaluative differences that, though they may not totally ruin a friendship, will justifiably stand in the way of a certain kind of closeness. One difference that Eaton identifies is homophobia. That your colleague has certain homophobic tendencies is a *prima facie* reason not to befriend her. Her homophobia

<sup>17</sup> How might one make the case for disregard in this case? It appears that there are at least two ways to disregard an element of an artwork. First, one could literally silence it. In a case of silencing, an art critic will simply not direct her attention to the morally offending bit at all. This kind of silencing appears to happen when an art critic offers a more or less formalist interpretation of an artwork. Such a critic will pointedly refuse to attend to the content of a work (to the degree that such disregard is possible) and so ignore the moral assessment of said content. I don't have any interest in denying the validity of this kind of art criticism. It seems a perfectly legitimate interpretative strategy to follow James McNeil Whistler's directive and consider "Arrangement in Grey and Black" in light of its compositional elements. Where Whistler goes too far, is in insisting that formalism is *the* interpretative strategy to take, i.e., that we should never consider "Arrangement in Grey and Black" as a portrait of his mother. And, while one may be capable of offering a somewhat through formalist account of *Eugene Onegin* interpreting it as an anti-heroic tragedy requires that the reader pointedly direct her attention to the narrative content. So, in this case the strategy of silencing won't work. Still, even if we engage with the narrative content so that it is impossible to "silence" the morally offending bit, we may still be capable of another kind of disregard: we may be capable of simply ignoring the fact *that the theme is immoral*. Think here of the morally offending bit as a noisy child who demands one's attention in the background. While we may be incapable of actually silencing the child, we may still be capable of paying the child no heed. Analogously, in attending to an artwork one might pay attention to the morally offending bit simply because it is part of the narrative, but pointedly refuse to allow it a role in one's art critical judgment. This second type of disregard has the benefit of allowing us to attend to the narrative content. Moreover, it seems clear that we sometimes do disregard the moral message of an artwork for the purpose of art criticism in this second sense.



may be so egregious that it even gets in the way of your ability to see the other virtues of her character. So, egregious homophobia is a compelling reason not to befriend someone. Still, Eaton points out, we can tolerate quite a bit of moral divergence in our friendships as well as our artworks. But, when the immorality gets too bad and is central enough to the work so that we cannot disregard it, then it justifiably interferes with our artistic experience, even possibly ruining it.

Eaton's analysis suggests the following way of thinking about morality's relation to art criticism. Moral considerations are tolerable when they are not so bad, but when they reach a certain threshold – they reach some level of moral badness – they demand our moral attention and interfere with our ability to enjoy the artistic experience. When things get too bad our moral judgments justifiably take over the artistic space, and thereby ruin the experience altogether.<sup>18</sup>

The interference model has a couple of things going for it. First, it captures much of what seemed promising about Gautian moralism. It recognizes that moral considerations are not necessarily compelling, and it takes seriously the challenge of articulating the connection between moral assessment and art criticism. Second, it seems quite adept at handling many putative counter examples that have been raised against moralism, and so avoids some of the difficulties of strong moralism. For example, it does not force us to say that artworks like *Iliad* and *Eugene Onegin* are artistically flawed because they are morally flawed. It can also make sense of cases like *Justine* where we refuse to make allowances for differences in moral attitudes. The immorality of the *Iliad* and *Eugene Onegin* does not reach the minimal moral threshold to interfere with our artistic experience; we might welcome a friendship with either author. The author of *Justine*, however, is someone of whom we should be wary.

## Balthus

Balthus paints primarily light and form. By the light of the wall, a polished floor, a chair, or an epidermis he invites us to enter into the mystery of a human body. That body has a sex, and that sex makes itself clear to us, with all the asperities that go with it. The nude I have in mind has about it something harsh, something tough, something unyielding and – there is no gainsaying the fact – something cruel.<sup>19</sup>

The above epigram comes from a review of Balthus' first exhibition that was written by the surrealist Antonin Artaud. Though the specific nude that Artaud had

<sup>18</sup> Though it is not clear how seriously we are meant to take Eaton's metaphor of friendship. It is worth noting that in friendships the amount of immorality we are willing to tolerate is relative to the other positive character traits that they have. That is, we are willing to tolerate a greater amount of immorality from someone with a keen wit, all things being equal, than we are from someone without. Perhaps something like this is also going on in art criticism.

<sup>19</sup> Antonin Artaud, "Exposition Balthus a la Galerie Pierre," *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, 248 (1934), pp. 899–900.



in mind was *Alice* (1933), his comments apply to most of Balthus' erotic paintings, including *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938), *Golden Days* (1939), *Georgette at her Toilet* (1948–1949), *The Room* (1952–54), and the unsanitized version of *The Street* (1933).<sup>20</sup> Each of these paintings features a pubescent girl in a sexually suggestive position.<sup>21</sup> That the subject is a girl is emphasized, often by the fact that she is wearing knee socks, so that under Balthus' direction the knee sock takes on an air of eroticism.<sup>22</sup> Each girl appears to be caught up in what have been described by Sabine Rewald as “frozen moments of self-absorption.”<sup>23</sup> Their self-absorption borders on narcissism, and operates to psychologically distance the girls from both their own fictional reality, and from us. Alice stares through us with a gaze that is “remote and clouded.”<sup>24</sup> Thérèse leans back in a chair, and with her eyes closed turns her head away from us. Georgette gazes at her own reflection in a mirror. The girl in *The Room* sprawls, eyes closed, across a chaise lounge. That each girl is wrapped up in a private moment also leaves our gaze unchallenged, which serves as an invitation to linger in our looking. When we look, we see more than just a naughty image of a school girl. There is something more ominous about these scenes. For example, the subjects' provocative poses often stand in contrast to more menacing representational elements. The overall the tonal quality of many of the paintings is flat and somber; and the subjects' bodies are often edged by thick, black outlines. In some instances, the subject occupies a sparse, dark interior – *Alice*, *Georgette at her Toilet*, and *Thérèse Dreaming*. In others, she shares the pictorial space with an ominous figure – a dwarf violently pulls back the curtains in *The Room*; a shirtless (?) male figure stokes a fire in *Golden Days*; an old woman holds a large, menacing metal object in *Georgette*; a male figure reaches under a young girl's dress in *The Street*. Devises like these combine to lend the paintings what Artaud identified as a kind of harshness, callousness, or even a touch of cruelty.

## A Return to the Interference Model

Given that Balthus' erotic paintings invite us to participate in unseemly acts of voyeurism, how then should we as audience members respond? If we are interference theorists, then we can recommend either intolerance or tolerance here. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the interference theorist claims the second option. But, this means that the putative immorality of Balthus' paintings

<sup>20</sup> At the request of *The Street's* American owner, Balthus repainted an offending portion of this painting. In the lower left corner of the painting a man stands behind a schoolgirl. As the painting is today the man's hand reaches around the school girl, originally the man's hand came closer to reaching up her dress.

<sup>21</sup> For his part, Balthus denies that his paintings are deliberately eroticized. He may be right that there is another way to interpret the paintings. Nevertheless, I think that anyone who looks at these paintings will find that there something disingenuous about Balthus claiming that we are misreading his paintings.

<sup>22</sup> In my discussion of Balthus, I will rely on the influential writings of Sabine Rewald and Jean Claire. See Sabine Rewald, *Balthus*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984); and Jean Clair, *Balthus*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Rewald, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Sabine Rewald, “Balthus Lessons – Five Controversial Works by the French Artist,” *Art in America*, (September, 1997).

fails to meet the minimum moral threshold required for intolerance. If we are to be convinced by this claim, then two substantive worries must be addressed. First, it appears that the moral vision that we find in Balthus' paintings is substantively flawed. We are invited to see Balthus' world in a way that, to borrow a phrase from Eaton, only a moral creep would. After all, we cannot even look at *Thérèse Dreaming* without looking up Thérèse's skirt. If there were some minimum moral threshold to be made out, it is not immediately obvious how such a threshold could avoid indicting Balthus' work. So, if the interference theorist is to avoid the charge of simply letting many of the great works of art off the hook, she must give us some reason to think that the moral vision here does not reach the relevant threshold. It is here where the hard work has to be done, work that can be served by paying closer attention to hard cases like Balthus' erotic paintings. Let me be clear; I do not mean to ask for more clarity than the subject admits. That is, I am not asking for some principle that will hold across all cases; I doubt such a principle is available to us. But, I think that the interference theorist should be able to say more than sometimes an immorality cannot be tolerated, and to determine if it is or not we will have to look to the work. She must say *something* about what kinds of considerations might be at play here, absent even a kind of rule of thumb articulation to help guide us, the interference theory seems to lose much of its prescriptive force.

Second, even if the interference theorist were able to make good on this challenge there is still something deeply unsatisfying about her characterization of our experience as one of *tolerance*. I have no doubt that artworks sometimes require our moral tolerance. I think that this might accurately capture our experience with *Iliad*. But, when we think about Balthus' paintings, the recommendation of tolerance does not accurately capture the phenomenology of our experience. If we are directed to tolerate or ignore the immorality in this case, I wonder exactly what it is that we are tolerating it for. Is there some other art critically relevant bit that we are after here? But what would that be? I do not deny that part of the appeal of Balthus' paintings can be found both in his virulent, anti-modernist streak, and in his masterful technique. Doubtless this is part of what a competent critic will find appealing about his paintings. But, I cannot help but think that there is something much more interesting going on in our response to his erotic paintings, something that is decidedly anti-moralist.

Consider again Artaud's declaration that *Alice* "has about it something harsh, something tough, something unyielding and – there is no gainsaying that fact – something cruel." A moralist will find it unsurprising that Artaud was disturbed by *Alice*. A weak moralist might even find it unsurprising that Artaud was a champion of Balthus' work, which he was. What all moralists should find surprising is that Artaud cites the darkness of the vision of Balthus' paintings as part of what he found so engaging about them. We are invited to see a fictional world through Balthus' moral/aesthetic lens, to experience sexual titillation at putatively inappropriate subjects, and to conceptualize this experience as slightly threatening. That these paintings are able to nudge us across a moral-aesthetic line that we would not cross in the actual world is part of their success.

I should caution that I am not suggesting that Artaud's response is the only legitimate response, or even the best one, to Balthus' paintings. I do not have any interest in claiming that there is some correct way to approach them. My claim is

that a reasonable audience member is capable of responding to Balthus' paintings in a way that is more psychologically complicated, than recommended by the interference theorist. Also, I do not mean to suggest that there are no improper responses here. An audience member whose response to *Alice* or *Thérèse* was fully constituted by sexual titillation appears to expose a flaw in her character. A competent viewer will have a much more sophisticated response to these paintings. In fact, I suspect that most of us will be somewhat bothered by our response to these paintings. That we see the fictional world as Balthus presents it should be partially disturbing. We find looking up Thérèse's skirt titillating, but uncomfortable; the emptiness of Alice's eyes a welcome invitation to look her over that simultaneously disconcerts us. Our relationship with these images is morally and aesthetically complex, possibly even confusing.<sup>25</sup> But, far from distracting us from the real task of art criticism, these problematic experiences are central to the artistic experience, and so central to the task of art criticism.

Admittedly there may be a sense in which we tolerate the moral message of Balthus' work, if all is meant by this is that the moral standards that apply in non-artistic contexts do not apply to the case of Balthus' erotic paintings. But, if what the interference theorist, and I think just about any weak moralist, would have us believe is that we should tolerate the moral message of Balthus' paintings as we would a friend, say when we mentally roll our eyes at our friend's gauche statement, then the interference theorist cannot make sense of either our experience of these paintings, or Artaud's art critical judgments about them. Artaud does not ignore or tolerate the immorality; it is too deeply tied to the artistic experience for this analysis to make sense. Seeing the world in the way that Balthus recommends, attended with sexual titillation, moral disturbance, discomfort, or unsettledness is part of why we find the works of interest; part of why we think so hard about them; part of why we find ourselves returning to them; part of why we enjoy them; and part of why Artaud is a champion of them. If this is right, then we do not tolerate the immoral vision of *Alice*, we engage it directly so that it is a virtue of the work.

Further, I can imagine an art critic making an even stronger declaration with regard to *Eugene Onegin*. Imagine coming upon the following piece of writing: "Eugene is a deliciously enjoyable character. He is an exemplar of cynicism; a man of no morals, but of course, a man of exquisite taste. I found myself unwittingly enticed into his normative world, eased unawares into playing the part of the empathetic cynic. Bravo Pushkin!" According to our imagined critic, part of the appeal of *Eugene Onegin* is his heroic status. That is, part of what is interesting, or engaging, or enjoyable is that it grates against the moral grain and does so successfully. Given that we do not have a compelling reason to think that the imaginative entertaining of the critic who claims either that "Eugene is deliciously

<sup>25</sup> This analysis raises questions about Noël Carroll's clarificationism as well. In *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Carroll advocates a position that the calls clarificationism. According to clarificationism an artwork is immoral to the extent that it obfuscates our moral understanding, and that when such obfuscation interferes with our uptake of the work, it is an artistic failing. If I am right about Balthus' work, then this suggests that even in cases where the immorality fails to serve some further moral or cognitive end, the experience itself may be rewarding in light of the confusion that that is occasioned by the painting. I see no reason to claim that artworks should be crystal clear about either their message or about how they expect one to respond to them.

enjoyable,” or that “Balthus’ dark vision is troublingly engaging,” is itself immoral, or contrary to our flourishing, or in some other way bad for us, I see no reason to refuse the legitimacy of these evaluations.

### Some Paring Worries

It might be objected that all I have done here is shown that some artworks that are immoral also turn out to be good, not that some artworks are good precisely, or at least partly, because they are immoral. In response, let me review the reasons why I think the latter claim is warranted. As I have argued, *Eugene Onegin* and Balthus’ erotic paintings can be interpreted as articulating world views that are morally unseemly. Under these interpretations, the immorality of the worldview advanced is so deeply tied to what the experience is about, that it is the immoral vision itself that is the object of our imaginative attitudes. Moreover, the attitudes that we experience – we enjoy Eugene’s cynicism, and are titillated, but disturbed by Alice – would be morally inappropriate were their objects actual. Still, in cases like these it neither makes sense to say that we tolerate the immorality for the sake of the artistic experience, nor does it make sense to claim that it is a flaw in the work. Insofar as the immoral vision makes our experience more engaging, it is reasonable to claim that the immoral vision itself can be an artistic merit.

It might be further objected that all I have is shown that there are a few counter instances to moralism, and so the basic insight of moralism – that there is a deep connection between moral evaluation and artistic evaluation, which supports a general presumption of valence consistency – survives my argument. By way of response, let me first say that my goal here is to get clearer about the norms of art criticism by building on the virtues of weak moralism. In fact, there is a great deal of agreement between myself and the weak moralist. The weak moralist is right to claim that artworks are the proper object of moral evaluation. Further, she is right to claim that our imaginative attitudes are subject to moral evaluation. Finally, she is right to claim that artworks can suffer from their immoral visions. Paying closer attention to cases like *Eugene Onegin* and Balthus’ erotic paintings, however, suggests that the tendency of weak moralists to draw a tight connection between the moral evaluation of an artwork’s message, and the moral evaluation of our response to these artworks – what I have called the consistency of valence thesis – too narrowly restricts the range of legitimate responses to artworks. While I have only mentioned a few examples in this paper, there are numerous others that the reader could construct on her own – cases that raise doubts about the moralist’s insistence on valence consistency. By way of example, consider the myriad of anti-hero characters in narrative artworks. It is clear that this inference does not hold in many cases, and this suggests that even a general instance on a weak valence consistency cannot accommodate our intuitions in a wide range of cases.

Finally, let us consider the relationship between rejecting the consistency of valence thesis and immoralism. Consider again the claim that I made at the beginning of this paper: some artworks are artistically good, in part, because they are morally bad. Read one way, this admittedly terse claim indicates that we should endorse a limited form of immoralism. If what we mean by this is that in artistic

contexts the having of immoral responses with limited or no instrumental payoff can make a positive contribution to our artistic experiences, then immoralism follows. But, read another way the claim that an artwork can be artistically good because it is morally bad, is consistent with an improved version of weak moralism, and so does not entail immoralism. If what we mean to do when we utter this claim is to highlight the fact that the context of a response makes a normative difference, then immoralism need not follow. Under this interpretation, such a claim indicates that there are two distinct kinds of evaluation at play when we talk generally about the moral evaluation of art. First, we might evaluate the moral message of an artwork as recommendation for living one's actual life in certain way. Second, we might evaluate the moral message as fictionally or artistically contextualized. On this second kind of evaluation, we do not evaluate the artwork as a recommending that we alter our actual norms, but as recommending that we do so only imaginatively. These are not at all the same kinds of recommendations, and so we should expect that there will be room for quite different evaluations given a shift in context. But if this is the lesson that we should draw from the claim that an artwork can be artistically good because it is morally bad, then it seems that we can reject immoralism in favor of an improved version of weak moralism – one that does not insist on valence consistency across these two, distinct evaluative realms. Instead of seeing *Eugene Onegin* and *Alice* as cases where our responses are immoral, and count as good making features, we should see them as cases where our responses, because artistically contextualized in a certain way, are not immoral, and are good making features. Of course, none of this is to suggest that there are *no* visions that we should all, as minimally decent community members, unilaterally reject in one voice, be they fictional or not. To borrow Eaton's analogy, there may be some friends that no one should have. Instead, my claim is that in the case of many artworks, though again admittedly not all, a flawed moral vision can be an artistic virtue. If this analysis is compelling, then we should pursue more nuanced versions of weak moralism which do not insist on the kind of overly restrictive valence consistency currently being endorsed.