

Premodern Postures for a Postmodern Ethics: On Resistant Texts and Moral Education

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At the 2006 PEN International Writers Festival, British novelist Jeanette Winterson recounted a story from her youth:

My mother was terrified of any secular influences entering our lives. My father is illiterate, and every day my mother used to read to us from the King James Bible. Only six books were allowed in the house. The Bible was one, and the other five were books about the Bible.

Although, in our house, books weren't allowed, because I had a job on the market stall, I began to buy books with the money that I was earning and smuggle them in secretly and hide them under the bed. Now anybody with a single bed, standard size, and a collection of paperbacks, standard size, will know that 77 per layer can be accommodated under the mattress. And this is what I did. And over time, my bed began to rise visibly. It was rather like *The Princess and the Pea*.

And one night, when I was sleeping closer to the ceiling than to the floor, my mother came in, because she had a suspicious nature. And she saw a corner of a book poking out from under the counterpane. And she tugged at it, and this was a disastrous choice, because it was by D.H. Lawrence and it was *Women in Love*. She knew that Lawrence was a Satanist and a pornographer, because my mother was an intelligent woman. She had simply barricaded books out of her life, and they had to be barricaded out of our lives. And when challenged, [in] her defense, she always used to say, "Well, the trouble with a book is that you never know what's in it until it's too late." How true.

The books came tumbling down, and me on top of them, onto the floor. And Mrs. Winterson gathered up the piles of books, and she threw them out of my bedroom window and into the back yard. And then she went and got the paraffin stove, emptied the contents onto the pile of books, and set fire to them.¹

Now it might seem to many of us that Mrs. Winterson harbored an irrational fear or hatred of books. But if we think about it, she was onto something: "The trouble with a book," she said, "is that you never know what's in it until it's too late." In her insistence on barricading books from her own life — and from her daughter's life — Mrs. Winterson recognized something important about books. She recognized that books can *do* things to us. Books can touch us and move us, and change our thoughts, values, and beliefs in important, but unforeseeable ways. "You can pick up a book," Jeanette Winterson later said, "but a book can throw you across the room."² If we allow books into our lives, they can affect the way we see the world and lead us into "certain postures of the mind and heart."³ Books, in other words, can play a significant role in shaping our moral identity. And it was precisely Mrs. Winterson's concern for her daughter's moral well-being that led her to ban all books from their house except the Bible and the five books about the Bible. Of course, I am not advocating that we ban books from our lives. Quite the contrary. But I want to take the idea that books can do things to us as the starting point for this essay.

Engagement with literature has long been seen as a valuable tool in moral education, especially insofar as it can contribute to the cultivation of the moral imagination as a stepping-stone to other-regarding moral emotions and virtues.⁴ And

in our increasingly pluralistic society, many educators use literature as a way to foster relationships across difference and a commitment to social justice. Key assumptions underpinning this approach are (1) that moral motivation and a desire to work for social justice rely on empathy and compassion, especially for those who are less well-off than oneself; (2) that empathy and compassion are enabled by the perception of oneself and others as part of a common humanity; and (3) that by engaging imaginatively in the day-to-day lives of others through literature, one will come to see these others (and by extension the others in one's own life) as basically like oneself, regardless of race, class, gender, religion, sexual identity, and mental or physical ability.⁵ Literature, in other words, can fine-tune our moral perception and cultivate empathic habits of heart and mind. As Martha Nussbaum puts it:

If you really vividly experience a concrete human life, imagine what it's like to live that life, and at the same time permit yourself the full range of emotional responses to that concrete life, you will (if you have at all a good moral start) be unable to do certain things to that person. Vividness leads to tenderness, imagination to compassion.⁶

This popular approach to using literature in moral education has already been persuasively critiqued by Megan Boler, Sharon Todd, and others, for its (albeit subtle) self-interest and its tendency to encourage passive empathy rather than genuine social change.⁷ Therefore, I will not rehearse those arguments here. Rather, I want to take up Doris Sommer's argument for using literature in a very different way, but toward the same end of fostering relationships across difference and a commitment to social justice.⁸ I will focus on form rather than content, contrasting the rhetorical moves and literary strategies characteristic of the realist novels that Nussbaum and others in the Aristotelian tradition advocate to those of the "resistant texts" that Sommer commends. Specifically, I will address the strategies of hospitality/inhospitality, intimacy/distance, similarity/difference, and universality/particularity.⁹

NO ENTRY

Imagine, for a moment, that you have been invited to a party. You show up at the appointed hour, and, as you approach the house, you hear laughter and the sounds of lively conversation. As you draw nearer, however, it is not clear where the door is. You walk around to the side of the house, and then to the back, but still you cannot find the door. You peek in the windows and you can see that there is indeed a party going on inside — but, for some reason, you just cannot find your way in.

This is the image that came to mind when I first read Sommer's description of resistant texts: "By marking off an impassable distance between reader and text, and thereby raising questions of access or welcome," she says, "the strategy of these books is to produce a kind of readerly 'incompetence' that more reading will not overcome" (*RT*, 524). Resistant texts, as Sommer describes them, are books (typically by cultural minority writers) that deliberately keep the cultural majority reader at arm's length; and we are ideal readers to the extent that we are excluded (*RT*, 527). Sommer's contention is that because of what encounters with resistant texts *do* to readers — especially privileged readers — they can serve as an "unlikely program of training" in modesty and respect. "These are premodern postures that

postmodern negotiations will need to revive" (*PC*, xi), she says, if ethical relationships across difference are to be possible. Her work is inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's conception of the ethical relation, with its inversion of the traditional privileging of self over other and its emphases on unconditional responsibility, irreducible difference, and asymmetry.¹⁰ A fuller discussion of Levinas's work goes beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to note that Levinas's own ethical thought was deeply influenced by literature, especially the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Aleksandr Pushkin, and Leo Tolstoy. However, since he was more interested in the content of these novels than in their form, I will not explore that connection here.¹¹ Rather, let us turn to the four literary strategies I identified previously.

HOSPITALITY/INHOSPITALITY

In *Poetic Justice*, Nussbaum reflects on her experience teaching a class on Literature and the Law at the University of Chicago. Drawing on her previous work on the connections between literature and moral philosophy, she focuses on realist Anglo-American novels that feature characters from different social strata — some more and some less advantaged than her law students (*PJ*, 87). Like Sommer, Nussbaum claims that what makes certain texts particularly successful at fostering moral emotions is not just what goes on in the story, but "what sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative. . . what sort of feeling and imagining is called into being by the shape of the text as it addresses its imagined reader" (*PJ*, 4).

Built into the very structure of the realist novel, Nussbaum says, is hospitality. We are invited into the homes and thoughts and day-to-day details of others' lives. We are invited to take up their experiences as if they were our own and to attach ourselves to them "by sympathetic friendship and by empathetic identification" (*PJ*, 35). In order to make the characters' lives intelligible to the reader, then, realist novels need to give enough concrete information to fill in the gaps in knowledge between the reader and the characters in the text. In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which is set mere blocks away from the University of Chicago, Nussbaum's class was introduced to the world of Bigger Thomas:

We enter a squalid one-room tenement, where Bigger Thomas lives with his mother, his sister, and his brother. . . We see what it is to try to maintain self-respect and order when you have no privacy to change your clothes, when your pathetic "conspiracy against shame" can be interrupted at any time by a rat running across the floor. We note the way in which the rat, cornered, strikes viciously back, and we sense from then on what Bigger's relation to the world around him will be. In short, as we follow the world to some extent through Bigger's eyes, to some extent as onlookers, we see how at every point his hopes and fears, his sexual longings, his sense of himself, are conditioned by the squalor in which he lives. (*PJ*, 93)

Contrast this to Sommer's description of resistant texts. Instead of inviting the privileged reader in, resistant texts are characterized by their inhospitality. The strategy of literary inhospitality constructs insiders and outsiders — who has right of passage into the story and who does not (*RT*, 524–5). Educated readers, Sommer claims, typically respond to rejection or rebuff by trying to overcome it. We will work hard to unravel the literary tropes and do whatever it takes to conquer the text

so that we can finally claim it as our own. The assumption, she says, is that our desire to conquer the text is matched by the book's wanting to be understood. Resistance is thus seen as simply the "spice of struggle" on the way to ultimate submission (*RT*, 528).

Now this might sound somewhat dramatic, but Sommer's point is that our response to resistant texts mirrors, in many respects, our response to the real others in our own lives. She says that we need to pay attention to our response to the "No Trespassing" signs we encounter in cultural minority texts — whether we see them as barriers to be overcome, or whether we can find a way to live with the resistance and rejection without requiring the other to submit to our desire to be welcomed into his or her life (see *RT* and *PC*).

A particularly interesting illustration of textual inhospitality is found in the books of seventeenth-century Peruvian writer Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. In Sommer's words, Garcilaso "performed wonders with prefaces...his genius was to multiply the opening move to the point of excess. Adding one prologue after another, he keeps his readers at the threshold and delays their rush forward."¹² Thinking back to the imaginary party I mentioned earlier, the image that comes to mind now is one of being admitted to the vestibule, where the host takes your coat and, before disappearing to hang it up, gestures to the main room. On stepping through the doorway, however, you are met again by the host, who welcomes you, genially offers to take your coat, quietly mentions that one of the guests is in a bad mood, so you might want to tread lightly around him, shows you to the main room, and disappears again. As you step across the threshold, yet again you find yourself in the vestibule. The host appears for a third time, and the process is repeated over and over until you grow tired of the welcome that is not really a welcome at all.

Garcilaso's strategy is to begin with a dedication — "To the Most Serene Princess," for example — followed by a "Preface to the Reader," which might offer some tidbit of information about what is to come, then a warning (or *Advertencia*) about the language of the characters in the story, and so on.¹³ He plays on the reader's desire to be welcomed into the text, and to be part of the cultural other's experience, by keeping "full familiarity unreachable in view" (*PC*, 74). Garcilaso's use of repeated prefaces and prologues to keep privileged readers hooked, but never quite letting us in, relates to another strategy in resistant texts: an insistence on maintaining distance rather than facilitating intimacy between reader and text.

INTIMACY/DISTANCE

By focusing on the ordinary, on the minutiae of the day-to-day interactions and struggles of characters' lives, the realist novels Nussbaum recommends create a kind of intimacy between reader and text. They allow us to imaginatively embrace and experience others' lives in a way that we are not normally capable of doing (*PJ*, 32). Nussbaum gives the example of Louisa Gradgrind's first visit to the home of Stephen Blackpool, one of the factory hands in *Hard Times*, and the moment of Louisa's realization that Stephen is not, in fact, just one more face in the crowd, but rather an individual with "a name, a face, a daily life, a complex soul, a history" (*PJ*, 32). It

is precisely the novel's ability to put a face on the bigger issues (of race and class, for example), and to humanize the other through imaginative participation in his or her daily life, that contributes to its potential for fostering empathy and compassion.

However, in resistant texts, such intimacy is refused. Instead, resistant texts appear to draw the reader in, but then flaunt secrets and withhold information.¹⁴ These limits of intimacy, Sommer says, "are not the same as the difficulty, ambiguity, or complexity that demand and reward interpretive labor" (*PC*, x). Rather, they should be recognized as "disruptions of understanding" and, in the words of Toni Morrison, "absences so stressed, so ornate, so planned, [that] they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose" (quoted in *PC*, x). Sommer illustrates this refusal with a quote from Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, in which he says:

I deeply regret the necessity that impels me to suppress any thing of importance connected with my experience in slavery. It would afford me great pleasure indeed, as well as materially add to the interest of my narrative, were I at liberty to gratify a curiosity, which I know exists in the minds of many, by an accurate statement of all the facts pertaining to my most fortunate escape. But I must deprive myself of this pleasure, and the curious of the gratification.¹⁵

In our engagement with minority texts, just as in our face-to-face relationships across difference, we need to learn to live with the other's secrets and silences and to curb our desire for the other's confession. Being met with the "cold shoulder" of resistant literature can help us to recognize that the other is not necessarily accessible to us, is not ours to own or consume or assimilate. And, as a consequence, Sommer suggests, we might learn to approach the others in our own lives with humility and respect rather than with the expectation that we can know and understand or otherwise reduce the other to some version of ourselves.

SIMILARITY/DIFFERENCE

In addition to creating intimacy between reader and text, realist novels foster the perception of a common humanity as a precondition for empathy and compassion. By engaging intimately in the lives of fictionalized ordinary women and men, readers come to identify with the characters as people who share similar hopes, fears and dreams — as people who could, given a change in circumstances, even be themselves or their loved ones. And in coming to see the other as basically just like ourselves, Nussbaum says, we can come to see that many of the differences that divide us are socially constructed and can therefore be overcome (*PJ*, 7). Conversely, she contends, if we do not develop the imagination in this way, we will lose "an essential bridge to social justice" (*PJ*, xviii).

On Levinas's view, however, difference is no impediment to the ethical relationship; in fact, it is the very foundation of ethics. He rejects any appeal to similarity and declares that the other cannot be known by the usual categories of perception.¹⁶ Rather, he insists that we have to find "another kinship," one that will enable us to conceive of the difference between oneself and the other in a way that preserves otherness and resists subsumption and oppression of any kind.¹⁷ For Sommer, "The ecumenical gestures made to reduce otherness to sameness suggest that difference is a superable problem rather than a source of pride or simply the way

we are in the world” (*RT*, 534). And she claims that privileged readers who seek similarity between themselves and the novel’s characters act “as if asymmetrical relationships [somehow flatten] out on the smooth surface of print culture” (*PC*, xiii). But resistant texts refuse this “murderous mutuality” (*RT*, 547). As Douglass asserts (again, in his slave narrative), the free human being (whether a white person or freed slave) “cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does” (quoted in *RT*, 532). There are some differences that simply cannot be bridged, and to attempt to do so, I would argue, is to inflict a kind of metaphysical violence on the other that is clearly incompatible with ethical relationships.

UNIVERSALITY/PARTICULARITY

Finally, in order for literature to create the kind of solidarity and fellow feeling that empathy and compassion require, the realist novels that Nussbaum recommends address “human needs that transcend boundaries of time, place, class, religion, and ethnicity” (*PJ*, 45), such as love and loss, hope, fear, anger, and joy. In E.M. Forster’s *Maurice*, for example, while the reader may approach the text unfamiliar with the experience of homosexuality, s/he likely knows what it is to love and to be loved, and is therefore susceptible to the pain and injustice Maurice experiences in a society that would deny him the expression of his love for another man (*PJ*, 98). However, hand-in-hand with such universality goes a kind of particularity (*PJ*, 45). In order to see the other as part of a common humanity, I need to see him or her as a concrete, particular individual with his or her own story to tell. The benefit of realist literature is that it allows us to experience (even if only vicariously) the joys and suffering of individuals whose historical and personal contingencies differ from our own. And Nussbaum believes that by seeing how the characters’ hopes and desires are either enabled or frustrated by the world in which they live, we will be in a much better position to form a picture of social justice and to develop the ethical competence to work for political change on a larger scale (*PJ*, 92–3).

In striking contrast to the particularity that serves to illustrate the universal, resistant texts declare their particularity up front and refuse any claims to universality. Sommer charges the champions of supposedly universalist texts with a kind of arrogance that mistakes their own particularity for universal experience. “Only the powerful center,” she says, “can mistake its specificity for universality.” Resistant texts, on the other hand, “draw boundaries around that arrogant space... They locate traditionally privileged readers beyond an inviolable border” (*RT*, 527). What is at stake here is fundamentally an issue of power. And, on my view, as on Sommer’s, an adjustment in the existing power relation, which positions the privileged experience as universal, is essential if we are ever going to move toward ethical relationships across difference.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Admittedly, I have not done justice here to either Nussbaum’s or Sommer’s full arguments, and much work remains to be done before we could take up Sommer’s “unlikely program of training” as an approach to using literature in moral education. For example, I have not addressed the complex role of desire — a necessary

precondition if resistant texts are to be able to perform their work successfully.¹⁸ Neither have I attempted to develop a list of recommended texts that might form the basis of such a curriculum. What is clear, however, is that the primary disagreement between Nussbaum and Sommer is not about whether literature has the potential to shape our moral selves and our relationships across difference. Both are committed to that view, and I imagine Sommer would readily agree with Nussbaum's claim that:

good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about people in one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. (*PJ*, 5–6)

Where they disagree is around which moral emotions are best suited to the work of fostering ethical relationships across difference and a commitment to social justice. As moral educators, should we focus our efforts on cultivating empathy and compassion for others as members of a common humanity? Or should we focus on reviving the premodern postures that Sommer says are necessary for postmodern moral relations: modesty, humility, and respect for the other as other? Given my own inclination toward Levinas's ethics, I find Sommer's work compelling, and I am drawn to explore it further as a potential framework for using literature in moral education. While she claims that the goal of resistant texts is to produce incompetent readers, she recognizes that the ultimate goal is to "refine readerly competence, not to dismiss it" (*PC*, xiv–xv). However, such competence will be marked not by our ability to interpret, understand, and assimilate the other:

It will be to notice the tropes of particularism as invitations to engage, to delay and possibly to redirect the hermeneutical impulse to cross barriers and fuse horizons. If we manage to include among our reading requirements the anticipation of strategic refusals, because differences coexist and do not reduce to moments in a universal history of understanding, this will be no minor adjustment, but a halting yet more promising approach. (*PC*, xv)

And perhaps then we will be in a better position to rethink what it might mean to educate for, and to engage in, ethical relationships across difference.

1. Jeanette Winterson, interview by Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers on Faith and Reason*, PBS, July 7, 2006, http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/media_players/wintersonfull.html.

2. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 122.

3. Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2. This work will be cited as *PJ* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. See, for example, David Carr, "On the Contribution of Literature and the Arts to the Educational Cultivation of Moral Virtue, Feeling and Emotion," *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 2 (2005): 137–51; Carr, "Taking Narrative Seriously: Exploring the Educational Status of Story and Myth," in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004); Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*.

5. See, for example, Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Kristen R. Monroe, *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a*

Common Humanity (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*; and Arne Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Enquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994). For recent writing on empathy in education, see, for example, Mary Gordon, *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* (Toronto: T. Allen, 2005); and Joan Skolnick, Nancy Dulberg, and Thea Maestre, *Through Other Eyes: Developing Empathy and Multicultural Perspectives in the Social Studies*, ed. Sean Stokes (Toronto: Pippin, 2004).

6. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 209.

7. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 43–64.

8. Doris Sommer, "Textual Conquests: On Readerly Competence and 'Minority' Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1993): 141–53; "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 4 (1994): 523–51; *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); and "Attitude, Its Rhetoric," in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000). The works "Resistant Texts" and *Proceed with Caution* will be cited in the text as *RT* and *PC*, respectively, for all subsequent references.

9. This is only a partial list of the strategies employed by resistant texts; others include silence, a refusal to translate, "feather bed resistance," and so on. See Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*, for a fuller treatment.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

11. See François Poirié's interview with Levinas, in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 23–83.

12. Doris Sommer, "Proceed with Caution: A Rhetoric of Particularism" (Working Papers on Latin America, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1997), <http://www.drclas.harvard.edu/files/96-97-2.pdf>, 5.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Sommer, "Attitude," 211.

15. *Ibid.*, 211–2.

16. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85.

17. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*.

18. See, for example, Cris Mayo, "Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002); Mayo, "Disruptions of Desire: Androgynes to Genderqueer," in *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Barbara Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007); and Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*.