

A Philosophical Inquiry into Literary Texts:  
An Interpretation of Martha Nussbaum and  
Love's Quest for Self-improvement in the *Phaedrus*

Anna Fishbeyn  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

In a recent article in *Harper's Magazine* entitled, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read," Francine Prose critiques the way literature is taught in today's high schools. She maintains that students cannot possibly fall in love with reading because of the reductive, moralistic approach in vogue today. She says that while traditionally "the love of reading has been born and nurtured in high school English class," today's students are informed that "literature is principally a vehicle for the soporific moral blather they suffer daily from their parents."<sup>1</sup> It is now a prevalent practice for teachers to use the novel as "a springboard for the sort of discussion formerly conducted in civics or ethics classes" (*CB*, 78). She argues that students should be discussing writing, metaphor, and symbolism — they should be noticing the beauty of the language and understanding why an author is considered great. The present practice of comparing novels to students' personal experiences denies students the "pleasure of surrender to the world of a book," and "reduces our respect for the imagination, beauty, art, thought, and for the way that the human spirit expresses itself in words" (*CB*, 82).

At issue is the famous question of whether we should study art for its own sake or for some moral or social purpose. To understand this question within the educational realm is to ask under what conditions literature should be taught so that it can most readily and effectively influence students and evoke in them the proper appreciation and love for art. Martha Nussbaum argues that to focus exclusively on the language and aestheticism of novels, without looking at the content, is as problematic for teaching literature as reducing the novel to a moralistic dogma. She contends that the form and content of a novel are inextricably intertwined, and because of this, the moral dimension of novels must be an essential aspect of learning. In fact, Nussbaum proposes that our study of literature begins with philosophical questions.<sup>2</sup>

Nussbaum and Prose are not in disagreement, in the sense that both are attempting to develop approaches to literature that have the most beneficial effect on students. The problem for Prose is that by infusing a moral or social agenda into literature, and having students read books with "banal, simple-minded moral equations," teachers turn students away from literature and leave in their minds a negative impression of reading (*CB*, 82). In other words, in the hands of educators, art ceases to be art. However, Nussbaum's attempt to marry literature to philosophy is in danger of running into this very problem. If one points to Nussbaum's suggestion in *Love's Knowledge* that certain literary texts can impart moral lessons and become moral guides, and to her proposal in *Cultivating Humanity* that literature has practical applications for building a democratic community, it can be argued that

the current methodology critiqued by Prose is based on Nussbaum's theories.<sup>3</sup> The very issues Prose sees as being problematic — focusing on the moral dimension of literary texts, encouraging students to compare their own lives to the lives of fictional characters, asking students to critique authors for their insensitive treatments of certain topics, can be traced directly to Nussbaum's position (*CB*, 82). However, what Nussbaum proposes is not the narrow moralistic approach to which Prose objects, but a broad and complex one that takes into consideration the complexity of the novel and explores its moral and non-moral dimensions.

Through the lens of Prose's criticism, I want to discuss Martha Nussbaum's work, the answers she offers, and some of the problems inherent in her arguments. The contradictions that arise out of Nussbaum's work only point to the difficulty in conceptualizing the "right" or "appropriate" attitude toward literature, and consequently, to the teaching of literature. My objective is to explore the difficulties and questions that emerge when we attempt to teach moral or social values through literary works. While I agree with Nussbaum's basic position about the importance of imparting the moral and social implications of literary texts, I shall argue that because she does not offer a coherent approach to literary texts, it is difficult to say whether the marriage between philosophy and literature can work. Drawing on both Nussbaum's work and Prose's essay, I shall attempt to arrive at a common theme: literature can somehow improve us as individuals and lead us to some form of self-knowledge.

By looking at the myth of love in the *Phaedrus*, I want to suggest that making the notion of self-knowledge central to the teaching of literary texts helps to solve some of the problems outlined above.<sup>4</sup> Plato's myth of love captures the experience of aspiring to better ourselves — a process that happens, according to the myth, when we fall in love. I want to suggest that falling in love in real life is analogous to falling in love with characters in a fictional world. Rather than make the notions of sympathy and philosophy the central experiences of literature, I want to claim that they are derived from the experience of falling in love with fictional characters. Unlike the moral or ethical goal we hope to achieve in the reading of a novel, falling in love occurs almost unconsciously as students become involved in the characters' world and adopt the characters' reality as their own. The result of the relationship between readers and novels is that the reader attains self-knowledge by watching how self-knowledge is achieved in the life of a fictional character. This self-knowledge, I shall argue, is an essential first step towards self-improvement.

Nussbaum begins the quest for self-improvement by asking how literature can contribute to philosophy. She holds that literature is "indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere" (*LK*, 23). However, only certain philosophical approaches are appropriate for literature. Novels cannot be understood as works of literature if we look at them through Utilitarian or Kantian conceptions. Kant's question "What is my moral duty?" artificially cuts off some of the life in the novel. (*LK*, 24). In other words, Nussbaum does not want to end up with the problem, outlined by Prose, of applying reductive moral theories to literary texts (*CB*, 82). Instead, if one is to capture the complexity of ethical dilemmas expressed in

literature, Nussbaum suggests that we ask Aristotle's question, "How should a human being live?" (*LK*, 25). With this question as the starting point, we do not have to see life as being split into moral and non-moral realms, and thus we might escape philosophy's sometimes-narrow approach to complex moral problems (*LK*, 25).

Nussbaum states that the Aristotelian conception of learning is "well suited to support the claims of literature. For teaching and learning, here do not simply involve the learning of rules and principles. A large part of learning takes place in the experience of the concrete" (*LK*, 44). It is not so much that a novel necessarily causes us to become good, but rather it captures the ambiguity of moral situations and serves as a guide in our own moral dilemmas. Because texts mimic or capture real life events, they reflect the moral complexity of human nature and evoke our sympathy in a way that philosophy cannot. While Plato argues in the *Republic* that feelings and poetry distort philosophical arguments, literary texts create arguments by grounding them in actual experience. It is precisely through moral ambiguity that fiction seeks to help us gain moral and philosophical understanding (*LK*, 142-43). By asking in what way literature contributes to a philosophical discourse, Nussbaum reverses Prose's concern and yet at the same time is asking the same question: is it proper or appropriate to discuss ethical dilemmas and moral values when discussing literature? Nussbaum seems to be saying that it is.

Nussbaum proposes that when we read literature, we begin with the "Aristotelian idea that ethics is the search for a specification of the good life for a human being" (*LK*, 139). According to the Aristotelian model, the theoretical moral study of the text becomes intertwined with the practical moral life of the reader (*LK*, 139). For instance, it is impossible to speak about erotic love in the novel without also speaking about the way it is opposed to the moral life of the characters. In Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, for example, conflicting moral duties arise over the question of erotic love.<sup>5</sup> The exclusivity of love is incompatible with fine awareness and rich responsibility. If we use an Aristotelian procedure, we see how this situation is directly applicable to our own conflict between erotic love and moral duties (*LK*, 51-53). In other words, Nussbaum proposes that literature be used as a practical guide for the readers' lives.

For Prose, however, it is precisely this use-oriented approach to literature that has altered, and in a sense, worsened the quality of English classes. Because teachers focus exclusively on the moral, political, and social implications of a text, they neglect to draw attention to "aesthetic beauty — felicitous or accurate language, images, rhythm, wit," and thereby fail to inspire the kind of awe and admiration that is necessary to awaken one's love for reading (*CB*, 78). Nussbaum disagrees with Prose: a love of reading should not be based only on the beauty of the language, but also on the meaning of that language (*LK*, 22). Nussbaum offers Ralph Ellison's novels as expressions of this point: his concern with "social stratification and injustice, manipulation and use, and above all invisibility and the condition of being transparent to and for one's fellow citizens" is an example of art directly addressing the political and moral conscience of its audience (*CH*, 87-88). Prose does say that if teachers want to raise such issues through literature, they should use texts that are

more complex, interesting, and powerful than the ones being used in the current curriculum (*CB*, 82). However, her main point is that teachers should teach students to “value literary masterpieces” because that is “our best hope of awakening them to the infinite capacities and complexities of human experience” (*CB*, 83). Prose seems to be saying that in order for a student to be inwardly affected by a literary text, a certain amount of respect, awe, and admiration must be involved, and even some distance. But for Prose, this will not be possible if teachers put too much emphasis on the moral and political themes of the text — the aesthetic experience must be the vital component of reading a text.

Nussbaum insists that we form intimate relationships with texts and bring ourselves, our fears, our hopes, and our confusions to the text; in other words, a reader-novel relationship is formed (*LK*, 22). Prose fears that this relationship is jeopardized by an exclusive focus on ethics (*CB*, 83-84). For both Prose and Nussbaum, however, it is the relationship between the reader and the novel that matters. For Prose, the complexity and moral ambiguity of literary texts will make us more tolerant and accepting of “the eccentric, the idiosyncratic, the annoying ... individual” (*CB*, 84). For Nussbaum, it is the Aristotelian search for a better life that will lead us to analyze our own relationships and guide us in moral dilemmas. Implicit in both writers is the notion that somehow reading novels will bring us closer to a greater good, will improve us as human beings, and will help us achieve some kind of self-knowledge.

In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum states that

[N]arrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy (*CH*, 101).

She claims that by exposing us to different kinds of people and different situations, literary texts evoke our compassion for others. She defines compassion as “the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame” (*CH*, 90-91). Sympathy allows us to connect with people with whom we would never have come into contact in our everyday lives. Once we recognize that those from whom we thought we were different from us have similar feelings and concerns, we begin to see them as human beings, just like ourselves, belonging to the same community (*CH*, 95).

Prose agrees that students need to think about others. The problem, however, is that too many teachers are encouraging students to relate their own experiences to the world of the book (*CB*, 82). To get the students to sympathize with fictional characters, students are taught to think about themselves instead of thinking about others. Prose states that “by concentrating on the student’s own history they narrow the world of experience down to the personal and deny students *other* sorts of experience — the experience of what is in the book, for starters” (*CB*, 82). She says that instead of concentrating on “the powers of language to connect us, directly and intimately, with the hearts and souls of others,” the purpose of fiction has become “to make us examine ourselves” (*CB*, 80). Nussbaum, on the other hand, argues that

the practical, immediately useful component of fiction is its ability to make us reflect on our own lives. Thinking deeply about the events and moral choices of characters means that a reader goes beyond the context of the novel, and considers “the particulars of one’s own case.” The interaction between the novel and readers ultimately means that readers become “readers of their own selves” (*CH*, 39).

Another source of disagreement between Nussbaum and Prose is the question of how to evaluate fiction. Prose argues that great literary texts should be taught as masterpieces rather than be disparaged for failing to respond to the modern politically correct standards. For instance, Prose points out that the teaching of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has turned into a critique of Mark Twain’s rendition of Jim’s humanity. Students are asked to choose among a variety of endings and “atone for the sins of their creators” (*CB*, 80). Prose is surprised to find that teachers do not teach students to recognize the greatness of Twain’s work — the humor, the wit, the language, the emotional appeal of the novel, but rather to criticize Twain for his depiction of African Americans (*CB*, 80). Nussbaum, in contrast, warns that literary works “are not free of the prejudices and blind spots that are endemic to most of the political life” (*CH*, 101). She claims that it is impossible to not view the canon critically: “If we are reading and teaching such novels with democratic ideals of equal concern and respect in mind, we will probably come to feel that there is something incomplete or even defective in these works.” She urges us to ask “how our sympathy is being distributed and focused,” and to view critically a writer who is insensitive to minorities and women (*CH*, 101).

Although Nussbaum offers a powerful counter-argument to Prose’s critique, there are certain contradictions in her work that confound this morally and politically conscious approach to literature. The first problem occurs when she attempts to marry philosophy to literature. In a later section of *Love’s Knowledge*, she states that novels do not provide us with any moral explanations, moral hierarchies, moral laws or moral obligations. In order to express her point, she sets up Plato as the philosophical protagonist and Proust as his literary opponent. But here she focuses on the *Republic* where Plato argues that intellect must be freed from our emotions and from poetry in order for us to reach truth and goodness. Nussbaum claims that in the novel, we do “not have a hierarchical deductive system of the sort Plato would have wanted” (*LK*, 258). She argues further that to try to explain the entire world, “to put it all into a systematic order, may be, in the novel’s terms, an inappropriate relation for a human being to have to this world” (*LK*, 258). In other words, there are no laws, no explanations, no moral lessons that can be taught through the novel; we only arrive at psychological truths and the realization that life is mysterious. Nussbaum explains that “The novel’s procedures do not bring everything about the soul into a perspicuous ordering; but this is part and parcel of its view that not everything about the human soul is perspicuous, that the deepest depths are dark and shifting and elusive” (*LK*, 258). Any other expression of the human soul would be untruthful (*LK*, 258). Here Nussbaum’s approach begins to resemble Prose’s emphasis on the ambiguity and complexity of literary texts. Nussbaum no longer contends that one can gain moral knowledge through novels. Although she does initially make clear that the novel has a nonmoral realm as well, she does not ask the

Aristotelian question of “How should a human being live?” in a discussion of Proust’s work, for example. Thus, it seems that Nussbaum fails to connect this psychological reading of a text to her initial claim that literary texts can be used as moral guides.

Earlier she argues that literature and philosophy should be in a conversation with one another, but what kind of conversation is this? (*LK*, 24). When Aristotle is conversing with Henry James, a literary text operates as a moral guide, but when Plato speaks to Proust, a literary text becomes a journey into our psychological depths. It seems to me that the content of the conversation depends in part on who is talking to whom: Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl* or Plato’s *Republic* to Proust’s *Remembrance*. If one does not know which philosophical question to ask during the reading of a literary text, can one still achieve a sympathetic reading of the text? Does sympathy somehow have a position outside the philosophical approach?

In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum uses the Socratic method in her investigation of sympathy, but she divorces Socrates from Plato. She claims that while Plato wanted the political elite to reign over the masses, Socrates’ method of questioning every human being reinforced the idea of a democracy (*CH*, 32). Therefore, according to Nussbaum, the sympathetic reading of texts is a way to build a democratic community because it induces readers to recognize and ultimately to understand one another. The problem, however, lies in the very nature of sympathy and its’ relationship to reading a novel. Could not one argue that sympathy depends on what experiences readers have had? Another question one asks is how does feeling sympathy result in our acting sympathetically towards the people around us? Is the person who feels sympathy for a character in the novel the same person who helps an older woman carry her groceries down the street? Is literature’s ability to evoke sympathy a by-product of the personality of the person reading the work? Can it also be the case that we feel sympathy for one character and not another — in other words, sympathy does not work in the same way for every novel for every person? In *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum notes that it is important to match “the good person with the good character, the good reader in life with the good reader inside a text” (*LK*, 141). The reader of this text must be “a moral being of the appropriate sort or else he (or she) will clearly cheapen the value of the text” (*LK*, 141). And yet it seems that part of a teacher’s job to get students to open up their imaginations and awaken their sympathies? Could Nussbaum’s work be considered a guide for how a teacher might do just this?

The problem of sympathy is connected to the problem of various philosophical approaches to literature: sympathy needs to be subsumed under some larger question or purpose, otherwise it becomes a relativistic phenomenon, turning up in one place, and failing to turn up in another. But even if sympathy is subsumed under the question of how I become a better human being, asking this question will not necessarily *make* the person into a better human being. How, then, is the moral and political approach to literature more effective in reaching students than Prose’s aesthetic approach? The moral, social and political ramifications of one’s method for teaching literature make the method itself as important as what the texts

themselves have to say. At this point, in response to the questions raised thus far, and building on Nussbaum's findings and Prose's critique, I propose another possible method: to think about Plato's notion of love, as it is discussed in the *Phaedrus*, as a metaphor for the reader's relationship with a literary text. While most of Plato's work, in particular the *Republic*, argue that truth and goodness can only be achieved when the intellect is wholly separated from the passions; in the *Phaedrus*, he shows that "philosophy itself is said to be a form of madness or *mania*, of possessed, not purely intellectual activity, in which intellect is guided to insight by personal love itself."<sup>6</sup> By looking at how a reader's experience with texts is similar to Plato's depiction of love, I want to suggest that readers must achieve a certain form of self-knowledge before they can arrive at any moral truths.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates explains that there are two realms in the myth of love: the human realm and the divine realm. The souls of both humans and gods can have wings and rise into the divine realm where they will see divine verities. The gods, however, are immortal and therefore, they always have these wings. Human beings, on the other hand, have to struggle to grow them. When human souls try to see divine truths, they have to compete with one another: one's ability to rise higher than the others depends on who has the better, more developed wings. While not all the gods get to see the divine truths, human beings nevertheless idealize gods because they have wings. The way to get these wings is to fall in love, and beauty is what first stirs these feelings of love. The lover chooses his beloved according to which god his beloved most closely resembles. When the lover is in the presence of his beloved, he forgets himself, grows wings, and is reminded of eternal truths.<sup>7</sup>

My claim is that just like the human beings in Socrates' myth, readers fall in love with the characters in the novel. The reader is initially drawn into the novel through the beauty of the language. The language resonates with the reader, and makes her want to keep reading and experiencing the life of a character. The reader begins to see that there are certain ideas and feelings voiced in the novel that remind her of things she has thought of but could never formulate into words. These "truths" make the reader feel that the novel is speaking directly to her. The "truths" are like the eternal verities in Socrates' myth: never fully explained, but existing out there as entities to which human beings aspire. Eventually, the character in the novel manages to come alive. In other words, the reader no longer thinks of him or her as a fictional creation but as a real living being. This means that the realm of the novel becomes more real than the reader's own reality.

On his own take of the *Phaedrus*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that in order to arrive at "truth," it is necessary for the fictionalized world to become a reality.<sup>8</sup> He states that a spectator of a play must undergo self-forgetfulness — "being outside oneself," in order to be "wholly with something else."<sup>9</sup> When the spectator recognizes himself and the power of fate in the tragedy, he achieves "a kind of self-knowledge," and "emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives."<sup>10</sup> Similarly when we read a literary text, we enter a state of self-forgetfulness. While self-forgetfulness does mean that we are wholly concentrated on the experience of others, as Prose wants readers to do, being in this state does not

mean that we deny our own reality.<sup>11</sup> Gadamer points out that “what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is — that is, to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself.”<sup>12</sup>

The “truth” is the central moral experience of the novel. In the myth of love, the human world is split into the idealized divine realm and the human realm. When a lover falls in love with a beloved, at first he is drawn to the beauty of the beloved, and it is this beauty that reminds him of the idealized divine realm. In the myth, however, Socrates makes it clear that not all of the gods we idealize are good, and therefore, not every lover is able to reach the divine realm. In other words, the lover might not be suited for the beloved that he has chosen.<sup>13</sup> When a reader falls in love with characters, she does so because she sees in the character qualities that she has, or wants to have. Just like the lover discovering that he has not been matched with the correct lover, so the reader discovers that a character is not what he or she seems to be at the beginning. In other words, in the reader-novel relationship, four realms exist: the realms of reality and idealization within the life of the reader and the realms of reality and idealization within the life of the novel. Characters, just like readers, have certain idealized views of themselves, as the author attempts to describe what they are truly like in their fictional reality. By seeing this split between the idealized self and the real self in fiction, and translating it into her own life, the reader is able to learn a kind of “truth” about herself. This discrepancy between what we perceive to be true about ourselves, or *want* to be true, and what in fact is true about us, is often a source of immorality among human beings.

For instance, in the short story “The Enormous Radio” by John Cheever, we meet a heroine who seems pristine and content with her own life until she discovers the dark secrets of all her neighbors.<sup>14</sup> Yet as she expresses her repulsion at other people’s hypocrisy and evil to her husband, the story reveals that she is just as repulsive in her own actions as those whom she has vilified. It is often the case that individuals who most vehemently criticize others in society turn out to be the very types of people whom they denounce. Related, Lionel Trilling calls for moral realism, which he defines as “the perception of the dangers of the moral life itself.”<sup>15</sup> He critiques moral righteousness and asks that we look behind our supposedly good motives. The problem boils down to an inability to face reality and the truth about oneself.

This is where my position departs from Nussbaum: I want to suggest that we must ask the question of what is “true” before we ask the question of how we become moral and sympathetic members of a democratic community. Nussbaum does talk about how novels make us realize that we have complicated and hidden motives and that appearances can be deceiving, but she does not clarify how an Aristotelian reading of literary texts brings this to light (*LK*, 261-85). She does claim that literature can serve as a reflective mirror for our lives, but mainly for the purpose of becoming a moral guide for our own particular situations or by evoking in us memories of our own pasts and complicated relationships (*LK*, 139, 154). I want to suggest that before literature can guide us to be moral, it must ask us to examine ourselves in a way that may be uncomfortable and even painful, not because it reminds us of our personal tragedies or lost loves, but because it forces us to see those



flaws and failures in ourselves that we may not want to consider. The point is that we might sympathize with others not because we will realize how similar we are to a poor person, but because we will be reminded of how we had dismissed, mocked, or condescended to a poor person, and we might feel ashamed. Through our connection with the hero or heroine of the novel, we might get a glimpse at our true selves and the illusions that blind us. And this self-knowledge would flow directly from our relationship with the fictional character. Those who are able to see how self-knowledge comes to fictional characters will also be able to achieve self-knowledge in their own lives, and thus take their first step toward self-improvement.

The same questions, of course, still remain: what if one does not fall in love with a character, or what if it is not possible to translate what one perceives in a novel into one's own life, or what if a reader does not perceive at all? These questions are complicated and not easy to answer; they point to how difficult it is to find the appropriate approach to teaching literature and to decide what it is that we want literature to do for us. And yet, at the same time, they point to the infinite possibilities of literature and the power that literary texts can wield over our lives.

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1. Francine Prose, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read," *Harper's Magazine*, Sept. 1999, 76. This book will be cited as *CB* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 23. This book will be cited as *LK* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1997). This book will be cited as *CH* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

5. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1904).

6. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1986), 201.

7. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245 D-257 B.

8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1998) 112-13.

9. *Ibid.*, 126.

10. *Ibid.*,132.

11. Prose, "I Know by the Caged Bird Cannot Read," 80. Prose uses the example of becoming so involved in her reading of *King Lear*, that she felt as though she had become King Lear.

12. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

13. Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Benardete discusses the problem of mismatched lovers, and how that results in a distorted view of our own selves.

14. See John Cheever, *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1953).

15. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 207.