

Literature's Place in Philosophy: Challenging Disciplinarity

Zelia Gregoriou
University of Cyprus

Everyone who converses and interacts with toddlers and children must have noticed that they are never bored with listening to their favorite stories, browsing the pages of their favorite books, dramatizing with ecstatic absorption the howls of wolves and the lilliputian steps of mice. However around the world educators and the media alike notice that adult readers form a small minority. In Greece, journalist Stavroula Papaspyrou ponders, "How do these young readers, anxious to read stories, grow into teenagers who grumble even in the sight of a novel? What goes wrong as the reading of literature changes from pleasure to toil?"¹

Caged birds do not love to read, Francine Prose probably replies. Her analysis of the moralistic approach to the teaching of literature, the springboard for Anna Fishbeyn's investigation of the philosophy of literature teaching, offers an interpretation of the condition of "caged birds."² The teaching of literature is moralistic, quasi-instrumental, and quasi-reductive, thereby affecting negatively young people's attitudes. Is it valid to attribute negative attitudes towards literature exclusively to the moralistic teaching of literature, or, are there other factors involved? Is the instrumental reading of a text necessarily reductive and boring? In this response I attempt, first, to problematize this semantic equation of the instrumental with the reductive by pointing out other kinds of reductive statements implicated in the diagnostics and cure of the "caged bird." Second, I offer clarification on Martha Nussbaum's marriage of philosophy to literature that will show, I hope, the divergence between her approach and the moralistic approach that both Prose and Fishbeyn reject.

The moralistic teaching of literature cannot be simply causally related to negative student attitudes toward literature. Such attitudes might also be related to attitudes of reading in general and to the development of a utilitarian conception of reading as a mandatory task even among preschoolers. Other reasons might well be the Augustinian attitude toward school (with knowledge as the product of labor if not pain) and the politics of the canon.

In a larger sense, critique of the moralistic teaching of literature tends to recapitulate the history of literary criticism, particularly binary questions on the value of literature and the philosophy and methods of literary criticism itself: Formalism or Phenomenology? Reading the text as a closed universe or as a site of intertextuality, a site where multiple texts, including the text of the reader's experiences, meet, converging and departing at the same time? Prose or Nussbaum, as Fishbeyn, provisionally and tentatively, map the binaries of literary theory onto positions for the teaching of literature? Form or Content?

The opposition between form and content is invalid in several ways. Remapping literary criticism's debate of formalism versus moralism as a debate on the teaching of literature is a reductive rather than insightful move because it fails to recognize

that teaching is not a neutral process of mediation between text and student but rather a creative process that changes and re-writes the text, its form and content. Literary form, however, is indistinguishable from content, which I believe is one of Nussbaum's main premises. If language does and does not simply say things, then literary language, that is to say, language in its most self-consciously and deliberately performative forms (narrative devices, polyglossia), does things which are indistinguishable from the meanings of the text: it moves, it sensitizes, it moves; not our *eros* or sympathy for the characters — as Fishbeyn suggests — but our relation to language itself.

Reading A.S. Byatt's *Possession* for example, I did not fall in love with any of the characters. But I was enchanted by the delicacy of the description, the lovers-writers' dance on the precipices and in the grooves of language, a dance that did reveal but re-enacted the awe of the ordinary. The incommensurable difference between poem and the description of a cucumber-sandwich, for example, becomes obsolete if both can re-write the word, if both can re-create the world. As R.H. Ash replies to Christabel LaMotte,

[B]ut you may imagine the perversity of the poetic imagination and its desire to feed on imagined cucumber-sandwiches, which, since they are positively not to be had, it pictures to itself as a form of English manna — oh the perfect green circles — oh the delicate hint of salt — oh the fresh pale butter — and thus, as in all aspects of life, the indefatigable fancy idealizes what could be snapped up and swallowed in a moment's restrained greed, in sober fact.³

Slowness that ruptures the greed of sober facticity: Is not this an effect that defies the categorization content/form, aesthetic and political? Such slowness allows intervals of intertextuality to slide in, as I recall tastes and scents of childhood, tastes and scents of vegetables and fruit that have disappeared from the local Cypriot markets. The urgency to comply with European agricultural standards and the competitiveness of a global market, has led to the near extinction of many local brands from the shelves (and the fields) and from cultural memory.⁴

Debating whether the value of literature is intrinsic or instrumental is reductive for another reason. It understands literature as a uniform and unified kind of art and does not recognize that different forms of literature can sensitize readers towards different aspects of humanity — self or others, the personal or the social — as well as different aspects of the workings of language itself. Nussbaum's exploration of the relation between philosophical questions and characters in *Love's Knowledge* should not be taken as paradigmatic for the entire range of literature's possibilities.⁵

Returning to *Possession*, "What makes me a Poet, and not a novelist," writes Ash to LaMotte, in their erotic correspondence on literature, "is to do with the singing of Language itself. For the difference between poets and novelists is this — the former write for the life of language and the latter write for the betterment of the world."⁶

Which brings me to a final point. What does Nussbaum write for in *Love's Knowledge*? Although Fishbeyn contends that her attempt to marry literature to philosophy does not have the narrow moralistic approach as Prose criticizes, she does contend that moralistic trends can be traced in Nussbaum's work. Promoted is

s a reader reception approach where students are encouraged to compare their own lives to the lives of fictional characters but in which literature is reduced to *catechesis*. Fishbein also finds that Prose's aesthetics is premised on a distancing from the text that produces an effect of estrangement/awe/admiration, while Nussbaum's reader-novel relationship disavows such distancing. Yet what exactly does it mean to form intimate relationships with texts? For Nussbaum the text-reader relationship is not a cradle of love wherein the reader serves as a receiving place for a perfect character's imprint, nor does the text serve as the therapeutic receptacle for the reader's confessions. Her goal is not to offer answers, to provide moral guides or yardsticks to measure excellence; Kantian or Utilitarian ethics would suffice for that. Nussbaum's claim is that texts can be used as catalysts in ethical thinking, not as moral guides. Significantly her shifts from philosophical questions to discussions of *examples* from literature, and vice-versa, remind us of an artist's immediacy with her pallet. One should not rush to understand the function of literary examples in terms of identification, illustration, or erotic *cathexis*. One needs to keep in mind the paradoxical logic of the example as a link of similarity but also a breach of exemplarity, pointing to the similar but also to the particular which displaces and ruptures the pattern. Her thesis is not that philosophy can utilize literature but rather that literature could "*intervene* to make certain that we get a sufficiently rich and inclusive conception of the opening question [How should one live?] and of the dialectical procedure that pursues it."⁷ The connections she attempts between literature and philosophy are not supplementary, where philosophy borrows imagery from literature to clothe its logos or literature is read philosophically. These connections should not be analyzed through the model of identification but rather the model of rupture. Her hypothesis is that philosophical logos — a style "remarkably flat and lacking in wonder"⁸ — would gain in its understanding of the complexity and mysteriousness of ethics "if we are to make, inside [it], a place for literary texts."⁹ The question that such an unfinished project presents us (philosophers of education) with is how to make a place inside education for such interdisciplinary investigation, for such a non-disciplinary pleasure. It seems to me there are two ways to understand the metaphor of place and, correspondingly, two ways to go. Either to understand place as home and the particular as the disciplinary, thus to accommodate ethics in disciplinary domains such as civics or literature courses, or, to think of place as spacing and interval, and thus to rethink the entire curriculum. This is the crucial question: Can we rethink the priority of the particular outside disciplinarity (both the disciplines of knowledge and the disciplinary confession a modernist self)?

1. Stavroula Papaspyrou, "Desks Do not Nurture Readers," *Elephtherotypia* Section on Books, 10 October 1999, 22.

2. Francine Prose, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read," *Harper's Magazine*, September 1999, 76.

3. A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 173.

4. For an anthropological study on cultural memory and the senses read Nadia Seremetakis, ed., *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

5. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
6. Byatt, *Possession*, 147.
7. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 26.
8. *Ibid.*, 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 9.