Surrendering to Other Means: On Philosophy and Literature

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Panel: Writing as Philosophy and Craft

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Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird  
[.]  
I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after,

– Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

As is customary in philosophical endeavors, let’s start from common opinions.

“Literature—at least in its highest examples—constitutes a substantial paradigm of the world and its ethics, becoming philosophy proper.”

This (rather idealistic) position exemplifies a very popular, though (in my mind) false, expectation that art could provide us with surprising and finite conclusions about the nature of reality.

Borges gives us a wonderful example of the futility of such an expectation. In the History of Infamy a king orders the making of a map delineating every minute detail of his land. This undertaking eventually leads to total destruction because the whole kingdom devotes itself to the colossal task, disregarding all other activities and aspirations. The same allegory is expressed in another emblematic piece of literature, Balzac’s Unknown masterpiece. In this story (which Picasso loved) the quasi-mythical painter Meister Frenhoffer slaves away for ten years on a painting he cherishes as his greatest creation. When Frenhoffer’s pupil Porbus and the painter Nicolas Poussin are finally allowed to view the miraculous work, all they see are “blocks of different color in a confused mass, bound by a multitude of weird lines which form a wall of paint” In a desperate bid to represent a “real” figure, the old master covered his canvas with a wild chaos of colors out of which only a single lovely foot emerged in a forgotten corner of the painting.

My appreciation of art is more restrictive, though not necessarily more simple. If we consider artwork (in our case, the literary text) for what it really is—an artifact of a specific genre—then it suddenly becomes purely a Form: an Object of devised, autonomous, complex structure which, nevertheless, does not constitute a unifying and defining whole. In that respect, the essence of a work of literature lies not in the everlasting “truth” it carries, but in the synchronicity of a literary

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1 Martha Nusbaum, interview in the Greek philosophical journal COGITO, issue No5, Athens, 2006. See also Martha Nusbaum’s major work, Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, OUP, 1992.


incident, of something that happens, and its limitations stem from the fact that narrative, forces on its subject a grammatical (that is, linear) procession when, in reality, everything exists concurrently: a timeless “now,” a universe of events.

This is something every attentive writer knows well. The writer’s consciousness (or, if you prefer, the writing consciousness) does not stand “above,” or “next to,” or “behind” the physical person that does the actual writing; the writer is not a brain directing the hand that leads the pen on paper. Between the writer (as a guiding intellect) and the scribe (as a craftsman) exists no distinction, because no matter what he does, the writer cannot escape metaphor. Only that metaphor is never the transmission of a concrete feeling or sense or thought, but a signifier that belongs to a specific Language Game. Meaning appears within the text, not as an exclamation, but in the form of a voice that listens to itself. It is the “auto-pathy” of a condition where “one listens to oneself speaking.”

So literature provides another way to approach Being, becoming an interlocutor and not a disciple of philosophy. Literature is neither philosophy nor theory. In other words, following Maurice Blanchot, “literature remains an exceptional and miraculous power, provided that it is kept in pure condition.” Heidegger hands down to us something similar: “Poetry meets Thought at one and only [one] place, . . . as long as the two remain distinctive in their separate natures.”

Under those circumstances, literature performs an intellectual leap that surpasses the persuasive process (the ratio of philosophical reasoning). One could say that the writer “abducts” meaning (even though, in essence, meaning never “exists” anywhere concretely). Literature uses expressions that—from the outset—belong to a finite image, an image appearing to have been born adult. The writer does not strive to “persuade,” but (even in our postmodern times) seeks an experience that has no childhood.

Kant calls that leap Urteilskraft (“the ability to make distinctions”). It is literature’s ability to harmonize even the most distant explanations, to fictionalize them, and deal with them as manifestations of some normality that leads to a “new objectivity”.

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4 Wittgenstein used the term Language Game (Sprachspiel) to designate forms of language, “consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven” (Philosophical Investigations [PI], §7), and connected by Family Resemblance. The concept was intended “to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.” (PI §23). The term Language Game is used to refer to fictional examples of natural language and other regions of our language with their own “grammars”, “contracts” and relations to peripheral language-games. These meanings are not separated from each other by sharp boundaries, but blend into one another. The concept is based on the following analogy: The rules of language (grammar) are analogous to the rules of games; meaning something in language is thus analogous to making a move in a game. The analogy between a language and a game brings out the fact that only in the various and multiform activities of human life do words have meaning (the concept is not meant to suggest that there is anything trivial about language, or that language is just a game). The term was later used and expanded by Lyotar (The postmodern condition) and Austin (Speech acts).

5 Maurice Blanchot, Literature and the right to death, p.64, Stanford, 1995.


7 Immanuel Kant, Kritik Der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgment), 1790.
Thusly, Urteilskraft becomes (in our domain) a trait of a work of literature itself: everything “connects” on the same level and not as object to subject. Every negation and every affirmation, all questions, have their place in the fictional world under the playful logic of a convention that defies strict Logic.

Let’s return then to the position of the writer. He “builds” his thought through suspicion. It would be better to say “he suspects,” because the writer conceives his phrases before he understands the words themselves. Nevertheless, his language carries epistemological value because, while carrying knowledge, it articulates something not yet known. To put it in other words, the writer “takes from what is being said.”

In this context, Thought is Form itself. And the mythologized “inspiration,” the “fury of form” that possesses the writer, is the fury of creating one satisfying “shade” or interpretation. It is—in Wilhelm Worringer’s words—a Kunstwollen (a “will for art”), an urge to which broader cultural forces contribute (and partake of), and is never—never!—a simple wish to replicate the objective world. This is why every accomplished work of art constitutes a unique “consonatia” (consensus) between Form and Content. The “will for art” is a “will for form” that does not correspond to any specific style or genre, but is explained as a widely varying intention.

That’s also why the careless writer, by deciding to imitate the philosopher, greatly weakens the bonds of fiction and his work ends up an anemic heir of idealistic reasoning. It is what we sometimes understand in literature as shallow, pretentious or didactic. In reality this weak literature carries a twofold lie: it both mocks the philosophical fundamentum and it subjects it to its own alien goals.

This is the underlying distinction between literature and philosophy: art in general does not respond to the question “what is this?”—or even “what is the meaning of this?”—but rather tries to tackle the question “How could this be interpreted?”

Moreover, I would say that in order to approach the nuances of the practice of writing, we need to distance ourselves from the philosophical stance altogether. The philosopher can speak to us only what can be spoken of. Of all else, he would refrain from speaking. I do not propose here a strict early-Wittgensteinian divide. Neither do I proclaim that non-specialist, non-academic philosophy is unattainable. Nor am I saying that literature has no ties to philosophy. I have in mind a sense of Family Resemblance. Philosophy is everywhere to be found (even in bare “facts”), and in no place...
is philosophy safe from narrative. The dividing border among the two disciplines is delineated by Paul De Man’s phrase: “philosophy is destined—to the extent that it relies on rhetoric—to be literary. And literature—as an heir of this problem—to be in some way philosophical.”

The distinction between philosophy and literature is methodological and does not entail the separation of aesthetic or epistemological categories. The fact is that philosophy—as a discipline—remains a discipline. That is, its method expels what it considers not belonging to its territory. Moreover, philosophy carries with it the sense that it expels all foreign bodies, or at least all sources of potential mistake or folly. This action characterizes all modern philosophy.

In the end, what I would like to show (speaking in defense of philosophy) is the futility of a sort of philosophizing that does not control the periphery of its domain. Without the strictest control of language, philosophy cannot reach the outer borders of its territory, even though these borders are, arguably, not clearly marked.

The borders between literature and philosophy, the affinity and the distance between the two, are ever changing, but before anything else, we (either as philosophers or as writers) are obliged to choose. First of all, we make a choice of craft. And in reality, no matter what route we take, we never reach so far as a final destination. We just continue forward, hoping to proceed as far as we can.

Lastly, swapping positions, speaking now on behalf of literature, I would say that in some sense, all literature starts from the last phrase of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. It is what Richard Rorty put so eloquently: “post-Nietzschean philosophers (including Wittgenstein and Heidegger) became caught up in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry which Plato began, and they all ended by trying to work out honorable terms on which philosophy might surrender to poetry.”

all; some are entertaining, but not all; some require skill or luck, but not all. Similarly, he argued that there is nothing that all “numbers” have in common; but furthermore that we regularly extend the notion of “number”. So we might start by thinking only of the natural numbers, and later learn to extend this to rational numbers, integers, cardinal numbers; but then to irrational numbers, complex numbers, surcomplex numbers, surreal numbers and so on, the only limit being the capacity of mathematicians to innovate. Similarly he says we are only playing games with words. The major example he uses, and the one that provides him with the name, is a “family”: *I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities between different uses of language, than ‘family resemblance’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. Nevertheless there is no unique definite characteristic that necessarily runs through all members. Family Resemblances might be taken to have ‘blurred edges’. Wittgenstein points out that in such cases the term nevertheless has a sense; for example one can quite sensibly say ‘stand roughly there’, indicating a spot by pointing. The lack of precision does not make the expression meaningless. Similarly, even though the definition of “game” may be imprecise, it is still meaningful. Furthermore a sharp boundary can be chosen, to suit whatever purpose one has to hand. In such cases, it is the way in which the term is employed, and how it is learned, that are pivotal, rather than any precise meaning.*

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