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Reading for the Good Life?

1. *Where literature enters moral discourse*

With great emphasis Martha Nussbaum has made a case for the use of literature in moral philosophy. Nussbaum points out two main contexts where literature enters moral discourse. First, the literature we read during our lives plays an important role in the formation of our moral beliefs, not only in so far the content of our value judgements is concerned, but also with respect to the faculty of moral judgement itself. Thus, the reading of literature is of significance in moral education, since it supports and guides our development as moral agents. Second, Nussbaum claims that literature has a crucial place within her own research project on the „thick vague theory of the good“, in establishing a list of essential activities, capacities and restraints of human life. The picture, roughly, is the following: Both philosophical ethics and works of literature are endeavours to answer the question: „How should we live?“¹ In order to compile that list of essential activities, capabilities and restraints,² the moral philosopher asks both real people and works of literature, what they consider to be elements of this list, i.e. what are according to them the things they would least want to miss in their lives. Not only human self-interpretations written down by philosophers should be considered relevant, but also those self-interpretations in myth and literature, i.e. in stories coming about by means of literary imagination.

Both contexts, however, display a certain similarity. The readers of, say, a novel are confronted with various patterns of actions and decisions and with the value judgements of the novel's figures and the implied author. The readers have to compare these diverse patterns with each other and to evaluate them on the background of their very own value judgements. If a pattern presented in the novel and the reader's value judgement do not coincide, the reader can either disapprove of the decisions made in the novel or revise his own judgement. In this holistic process the reader aims both at coherence and at saving as much of the literary 'phenomena' as possible.³ Basically the moral philosophers – the scientific community – have to do the same job as the readers of novels as Nussbaum conceives them. They, too, have to form a coherent picture out of the divers and dissenting material they collect.⁴ Nussbaum's project thus has a strong socio-empirical element.⁵ She researches expressions of human self-interpretation in different cultures, in different times and places. This approach is thought to provide a shared universal basis “in a world in which practical discourse is and must be increasingly international”.⁶

2. *Literature is good, some literature is better*

In the first place, it is not exactly literature as such, which Nussbaum is up for. Literature is a concept that is on the one hand too wide and on the other hand too narrow to cover the material Nussbaum wants to use.

2.1 *The concept of literature is too wide*

It is a concept which is too wide, because Nussbaum is quite sceptical, whether genres like satire or comedy can serve her purpose; she is also reluctant to include lyric poetry, partly, or so it seems, out of personal and partly

¹ Nussbaum (1990a), p. 15.

² A list that is, though open to specification and alteration, of universal validity.

³ There is, however, a third way literature can be used in moral discourse. Similar to the two preceding contexts, the idea is to form a coherent picture out of both the material provided by literature and our ethical theory. As this is conceived to a holistic process, the direction of fit is not fixed. Whereas the preceding ways try to distill ethical theory out of literature, the third way changes the direction of fit: It tries to communicate ethical theory by way of literature. Nussbaum's lectures on *Poetic Justice* (Nussbaum (1995b)) present a good example of this usage. In order to convince law students of the shortcomings of utilitarianism, she chooses to discuss Dicken's *Hard Times* in class. The student's point of view is not different from the first situation, but the decision for *Hard Times* as the set text reverses the direction of fit: The novel is chosen as a means to put forward a certain point in ethics.

⁴ Nussbaum (1990b), p. 173-174.

⁵ It is striking that, strangely enough, when talking about this method, Nussbaum only characterizes it shortly and then immediately confronts the reader with her results. The bulk of the work is hidden, has not been presented to the scientific community, is not accessible for criticism. Thus there is not much opportunity to see her method actually at work.

⁶ Nussbaum (1990a), p. 28. Another socio-empirical ethical enquiry, done for the same motivation, is Hans Küng's project of finding world ethos by comparing the moral teaching of the major religions. Cf. Küng (1990). However, Küng is looking not so much for a theory of the good, but is heading directly for normative ethics. Küng's work actually induced interreligious conventions on ethical questions; cf. Küng/Kuschel (eds.) (1996).

out of formal reasons.⁷ She thus puts the stress on novels, especially on novels of the realist Anglo-American tradition.⁸ In addition, Nussbaum seems to have use only for literature of a certain artistic quality, not for trivial stuff.⁹ Furthermore, not every content will serve Nussbaum's purposes: "Many of the stories we tell one another encourage the refusal of compassion, so not even the literary imagination itself is free from blame."¹⁰ Thus, for Nussbaum there are "wrong books" as well as for Mr Gradgrin,¹¹ Nussbaum's punching-utilitarianist from *Hard Times*, only that Mr Gradgrin prefers literature that transmits facts, whereas according to Nussbaum literature should be passionate and subversive.¹² Hence, there is need for constraints with regard to form, quality and content.

2.2 The concept of literature is too narrow

Then, literature is a concept that is too narrow: Why should it only be literature that influences our moral development in the way Nussbaum describes it? Why not, e.g. television soaps or rap music? In Nussbaum's life, it was literature that did the job of enhancing the moral development, as she tells us in the introduction to *Love's Knowledge*.¹³ But in lower class families there is a good deal less reading. Television and pop music take the place of reading as spare time amusement, why not the place of reading in moral development, too? In recent works, Nussbaum at least submits that the odd movie film may fulfil the same functions she ascribes to literature.¹⁴

Furthermore, if we take the term „literature“ seriously as something composed of *litterae*, written down in letters, we have to exclude all the myths and value judgements of societies living without any kind of literature, both in the past and in the present.¹⁵ We neither would acknowledge the analogous role of oral traditions in the development of moral beliefs and judgement, nor could we expand the overlapping consent to the „thick vague theory of the good“ so as to include oral societies and story-telling in general. And this could play havoc to the possibility to use Nussbaum's theory for moral discourse across the border of nations and cultures.¹⁶ Actually, Nussbaum makes use of ancient myths to put forward her points,¹⁷ which, though now literally fixed, originated in oral traditions.

Nussbaum presents brilliant examples that do their job in her project. But, as we have shown, it is not clear at all, in virtue of what these brilliant examples are able to do this job. It is not in virtue of being literature, nor in virtue of being novels. Pragmatically, however, in the remainder of this paper we will use the word „literature“ to designate the material that is appropriate for Nussbaum's project.¹⁸

3. Learning by reading

3.1 Is literature a better teacher than philosophy?

According to Nussbaum, literary texts sensitize the readers' attention for the particularity of situations and enhance their care for the particularity of persons. This is done simply by telling stories about certain people and their decisions and actions in highly complex situations. Readers are guided through the lives of the literary figures, witnessing their emotions and moral conflicts. This is the first advantage of literature as against philosophy: Literature may present situations in its complexity, philosophy tries to reduce the complexity to a few abstract principles. The difficult and complex world we live in is reduced to a more simple and schematic one. Even when giving examples or suggesting thought experiments, moral philosophers are bound to reduce the situations they describe to a bare skeleton of facts, whereas novel authors may present whole biographies of the persons involved. In contrast to philosophy, which has the „seductive power [...] to lure the reader away from

⁷ Nussbaum (1990a), p. 46.

⁸ Cf. Nussbaum (1995b), p. 10, p. 87.

⁹ Though she does not want to condemn morally the reading of trivial literature. Cf. Nussbaum (1990c).

¹⁰ Nussbaum (1995b), p. xvii, cf. also p. 10.

¹¹ Nussbaum (1995b), p. 1.

¹² Nussbaum (1995b), p. xvii and p. 1.

¹³ Nussbaum (1990a), p. 11.

¹⁴ Nussbaum (1995b), p. 6; on p. 92 Nussbaum herself uses a scene from „Schindler's List“ to illustrate a point.

¹⁵ For the role of traditions in oral societies cf. Assmann (1992). Even in the middle ages, oral traditions were sometimes more important than something written; cf. Vollrath (1981).

¹⁶ This intention is explicitly expressed e.g. in Form and Content, 28.

¹⁷ Cf. Nussbaum (1986); cf. also Nussbaum (1995a).

¹⁸ To put it in Aristotelian terms, there is no *kath' hauto* relation between the functions of e.g. *Hard Times* in moral discourse and it is being a piece of literature or a novel. (One obvious candidate for being this cause-designating term is narration, story-telling. And indeed, this kind of ethics often is called "narrative ethics". The term "narration" includes books as well as non-book media and oral traditions. Thus, it is not too narrow. Though, for the reasons given above, it seems to be too wide a concept, too.)

the richly textured world of particulars to the lofty heights of abstraction”,¹⁹ literature has the „seductive power” to direct the reader’s attention back to the richer and more complex world of particulars, as well as to the realisation and acceptance of emotions and chance. Nussbaum herself tries to combine the virtues of both philosophy and literature by quoting long passages from novels. In this way she enriches the generality of her philosophical reasoning with the concreteness of literature.

Over and above, philosophical essays normally cultivate a style of rational and uncommitted thinking, while in our emotional responses and conflicts we are highly partial. Thus, philosophical essays seem not to be able to express the complexity of actual moral conflicts. Their very style seems to be a contradiction to what they should say. Where the message must be “Emotions are important”, the medium says “Forget your emotions”.²⁰ Thus, the narrative form of the text is of importance in Nussbaum’s project, since a certain content needs to be expressed in a certain form, in order to be expressed appropriately.

Hence, the important contribution of novels to moral philosophy is that they are context-specific without being relativistic.²¹ In a novel „a general idea of human flourishing [is brought] to bear on a concrete situation”.²² Nussbaum herself does not hold the literary text alone sufficient in the field of morality so that literature and literary imagination are not able (and not meant) to „displace moral and political theory or to substitute emotions for principled arguments”.²³ This, however, is an important point, which throws some light on the relation between philosophy and literature. For with regard to the diversity of human self-interpretations it is probable that a simple consent concerning the content of the capability list is hard to be found. A case in point is the diverging opinion the stoics hold about emotions. Here there is no close analysis of pieces of literature, though works of literature are cited, but in a rather illustrating or decorative way. Nussbaum does not weight the impact of „emotional“ literature as against „emotion controlling“ literature, although obviously there are many examples for both types: The controlling or suppression of emotions is a standard topos of western novel, and many variations of this theme can be found, for example, in the novels of Karl May²⁴, which have accompanied generations of German boys during their adolescence. Their hero, Old Shatterhand, has learned from the Apaches to control his emotions and to suppress bodily signs which would reveal them to others; in this he continues to be the idol of many boys, who themselves strive to be like the Apaches: There’s no pain for an Indian, and boys don’t cry.

However, Nussbaum does not really care about the existence of such literary counter-evidence to her view about emotions. Nor does she really cite “emotional” literature to proof her point. The onus of proof lies totally on philosophical grounds. It is philosophy, who has to figure out which of the competing value systems offered by different pieces of literature are to be preferred.

3.2 *Is literature a better teacher than reality?*

Even when we agree with Nussbaum that literature is a better teacher about morality than philosophy, we could still hesitate also to admit that literature is a better teacher than real life itself. Nussbaum adduces several arguments to sustain the superiority of literature. First, there is the quantitative aspect: „we have never lived enough”,²⁵ Nussbaum rightly says. Literature can help to extend our own confined and parochial experience, „making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling”.²⁶

¹⁹ Nussbaum (1990c), p. 238.

²⁰ Nussbaum describes this kind of performative selfcontradiction between style and content in Nussbaum (1990a), p. 7. Her paradigms for how not to deal with these matters are Spinoza’s Ethics and an article on love by W. Newton-Smith; *cf.* Newton-Smith (1973). *Cf.* Nussbaum (1990a), p. 20 and p. 30. The idea that the medium of communication itself influences the content has, of course, notably be highlighted by Marshall McLuhan before; *cf.* McLuhan (1964).

²¹ Readers start both with different intellectual capacities and with different educational and cultural backgrounds. Thus, reading will improve the readers’ faculty of judgement to different extents. This is not yet a problem, for normally these differences do not make people quit moral life and discourse. But Nussbaum also suggests that the literary text provides concrete value judgements and answers to the question “How should we live?”. However, different readers will understand texts differently and thus gain different value judgement from the texts, depending on their educational and cultural backgrounds.

²² Nussbaum (1995b), p. 8.

²³ Nussbaum (1995b), p. 12.

²⁴ May’s novels caught the attention of the philosophers as early as the 1930s; witness E. Bloch (1935/1962). Bloch however stresses the revolutionary potential of the fictive worlds created by May’s fantasy.

²⁵ Nussbaum (1990a), 47. Nussbaum traces this argument back to Aristotle; *cf.* Nussbaum (1986), Interlude 2.

²⁶ Nussbaum (1990a), 47.

Second, literature not only presents situations, but represents them *as* situations with certain problems, evaluating them normally from different perspectives, from the point of view of one or several figures and of the implied author.²⁷

And, Nussbaum continues, there is a third advantage of literature as against real life: In relation to fictitious characters „we are free of certain sources of distortion that frequently impede our real-life deliberations”, with the effect that, maybe, „it is only in relation to the literary text, and never in life, that we can have a relation characterized by genuine altruism”.²⁸

It is true: In real life, emotions like envy and hate often prevent us from having an empathic relationship to our companions. The absence of such emotions (which are characteristic of real-life situations) is a necessary requirement for truly recognizing the point of view of others. *Prima facie*, Nussbaum seems to have a good point here: Why should we hate a fictitious character? Why should we envy him? All which is said to belong to him, actions, achievements and possessions, belongs to him only fictitiously. There seems to be no reason to envy a fictitious person for her fictitious success.

On the other hand, it is not the case that we do not have any emotional relations to fictitious characters at all. Nussbaum herself relates to us that one summer her daughter was in love with James Steerforth, a character from Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*.²⁹ There is a nice radio play by Woody Allen, where the protagonist actually starts an affair with Madame Bovary. And if we can fall in love with a fictitious character, why should it not be possible also to develop feelings of envy, hate or jealousy towards a fictitious person? Why should a character in a novel if pitied in a certain situation not be envied in another? Sure, the object of desire causing, for example, envy and jealousy does not have a real existence and therefore could not be possessed by the reader at all. But the same applies, should fictitious persons become the object of feelings like love or pity. And if it is possible to feel sympathy and love, it should be possible to feel jealousy and hate as well. Obviously, Nussbaum tries to advertise the lack of realness as a big advantage, which could as well be seen as a disadvantage of literature in comparison to reality.

But what about Nussbaum's other claim that literature is both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to real life when it comes to the 'education of sentiments'? Nussbaum claims that „reading novels, as *David Copperfield* learned, is a practice for falling in love. And it is in part because novels prepare the reader for love that they make the valuable contribution they do to society and to moral development.”³⁰ But how could this preparation possibly work? How can love be practised, so to speak, in the simulator provided by the novel? And, in the first place, what can we learn about emotions by reading alone? When reading novels, we are confronted with situations that might have been previously unknown to us, and with emotional responses from the characters that appear strange to us, because we have never experienced them ourselves before. Once, maybe long before we fell in love for the first time, we did not know what love is. From novels and films, from operas and the reports of our friends and family we learnt: There is a feeling called love. People do fall in love with each other. When this happens, they behave strangely, do things they normally would not do. Having acquired these pieces of information, did we know what love is? Did we know what it is to be in love? Could we really assess the significance of that strong feeling? Rather, it seems, love remained some funny don't-know-what that strikes elder brothers and sisters.

The conclusion is pretty much forward: Only they who have been in love know what it is to be in love. Only they who have experienced pain know what it is to feel pain. In general, for a person to know what it is to have an emotion of a certain type requires that the very person herself has had this sort of emotion before. Then literature and other narratives still play an important role in putting our emotional responses into the cultural shape they have.³¹ And how, if not by the help of the very same stories that formerly seemed so ridiculous, could we possibly recognize that strong feeling that strikes us as love? How would we know how to react, what to do, having fallen in love, if not these stories provide us with patterns of behaviour from similar situations? Indeed, narratives and emotions jointly make up narratives and emotions. But, in the end, it is not a novel but real life which allows us really to experience feelings, feelings that are constitutive and characteristic of human life. Ultimately, only life can teach us, what it is to be in love. Realistic though the literary text may be, it cannot be a substitute for reality. And this is a serious restraint to the extent literature can teach us empathy.

4. Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum's project is to promote a partnership between literature and moral philosophy. In this paper we discussed how this partnership could possibly look like. There certainly are some fields to which literature can contribute more than philosophy and also more than reality. Nevertheless, so we argued, literature is

²⁷ Cf. Nussbaum (1990a), pp. 5 and 47. For the concept of the implied author cf. Nussbaum (1990c), p. 233 and Nussbaum (1990a), p. 9.

²⁸ Nussbaum (1990a), p. 48, with reference to Henry James and Marcel Proust, respectively.

²⁹ Cf. Nussbaum (1990e), p. 335.

³⁰ Nussbaum (1990c), p. 238.

³¹ Cf. Nussbaum (1990d), pp. 287, 293-294 on this point.

dependent on reality, on real people and real emotions. Literature might be a useful supplement of reality, but it can never be its surrogate. And literature needs philosophy as well. For it is philosophy that has to decide between rival pictures of the good life. The task of literature is mainly heuristic. Thus, the partnership between literature and philosophy is one with a clear division of labour: both partners have their own job to do, but it is philosophy that makes the decisions. Literature is bound to be the junior partner – though an important one – but it has to share this position with reality.

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