

Symposium

Patrolling the Borders

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In recent years, from the new base camp of literary theory, forays have been made across disciplinary borders. These forays are in the cause of intertextuality and the right to situate texts (as they say) in unusual ways. Creative artists cross borders: Art galleries contain 'installations' that mix plastic and visual forms with language; a biography of Dickens includes fancied dialogues in the life of the writer;¹ there are *factions* in books and on film. The very idea of borders is under challenge. The conviction that works belong to disciplines, distinct practices or distinct traditions, is past its time. We are to be disabused of differences or make them trivial by finding so many 'contexts' for reading a text that the idea of a right reading, grounded authoritatively in criteria bound up with a discipline or tradition, will disappear from the intellectual landscape. A top Nazi, Herman Goering, is said to have remarked about 'culture', that when he heard the word he reached for his revolver. When I hear the word 'context', I want to reach for some less violent weapon. Let it be a reminder of what, not too long ago, was standard fare in undergraduate humanities courses. It seems to me that fare contained nearly all that is legitimate in currently fashionable views about how to read critically.

First, consider the distinction between fact and value, one of the longest established borders in intellectual life. It was attacked some time ago by a leading figure in literary theory, Terry Eagleton.² Eagleton downgrades the distinction on the grounds that when anybody writes anything, there will be values lying behind the decision to say this rather than that and an assumed authority to be listened to on the matter, which is a kind of value judgment. This is a confusion between the point of saying something and what is said.

Value judgments proper contrast (not much) with the implicit making of them by writers of fiction, history, science, and everything else, when they determine what to say and what not to say, what to ask and what not to ask. This homily was drilled into me as an undergraduate, along with everybody else who studied anything

seriously. Along with that went the lesson that when you read something critically, you should attend (within limits of course) to what has not been said as well as to what has been said. I gather these homilies of attentive and critical reading now get called something like deconstruction. This reminds me of garbage collectors in the US, who are called sanitation engineers. Of course, whether the fact that something had been left out was important was a matter of judgment; and the idea that leaving it out was due to some quasi-conspiratorial enterprise on the part of the author or his subconscious was not something you took for granted. There probably are good reasons for attending to this rather than that. For that matter, minimal reflection shows there must be, for not everything is relevant to everything. There seems to be another aspect of deconstruction which also reminds me of what I was taught by my philosophy teachers. It is that a philosopher may very well need, for coherence in part of what he says, assumptions that he explicitly or implicitly denies elsewhere. I am not sure if this is exactly a deconstructive idea; but it sounds a bit like one, especially the famous example of Plato's using the metaphor of writing in the soul in the course of himself arguing that speech is to be preferred to writing. I confess to bewilderment as to why this is taken as so important. A much better *tu quoque* is to ask Descartes why, if he can doubt everything, he doesn't doubt whether he knows the meaning of the words 'doubt' and 'everything'.

We are also regaled often of late with the thought that even if there are virtually undisputed facts, what is of interest is the interpretation or the explanation of them, and, further, that any number of interpretations or explanations may fit the facts. There is much to be said for this idea. It is associated in the philosophy of science with Pierre Duhem in our century. But it traces at least to the thirteenth-century's Nicholas of Cusa, who pointed out that in statements of the form: If P then Q, where Q is a fact we want to explain and P is a proffered explanation, there will always be a variety of Ps from which Q follows. The point can be illustrated by letting P be 'God wills that Q'. That gives us 'If God wills that Q, then Q', which, if true (assuming God exists) would certainly explain Q. This would not be, to most of us (theists included), a satisfactory explanation. But the point is only that 'God wills that Q' does entail or explain Q, for any Q whatsoever. A more realistic case is, of course, the observed planetary motions being susceptible of explanation either in the Ptolemaic or in the Copernican way.

And the most prevalent contemporary case of more than one

explanation for a cluster of data is the unending debate about nature v. nurture as the reason for differences in various dimensions among men and women, or, for that matter, people in general.

This allows that in any given case, the competition among Ps may be intense; but it also allows that it may not be much of a competition at all. There can always be cases in which the support for some P is so overwhelming, the arguments in favour of P so convincing, that P becomes the only game in town. This is how things have fallen out with the heliocentric as opposed to the earth-centred story of the (relevant part of) the heavens. This remains so even if, as hardly anyone denies these days, later developments may cast doubt on even this P, or any other. This modest fallibilism, as it is called, is nowadays the consensus position. It is sanguine in the face of the threat of scepticism. It says to the sceptic's nagging 'So, it is possible this is not the explanation.', 'Yes, it's *possible*; but that does not mean there is any reason to think so.' The mere possibility of being wrong, all by itself, is not much of a shaker of confidence.

I want now to consider border crossing between literature and philosophy. More effort lately has been expended, I think, assimilating philosophy to literature than the other way round. There is a strong push to encourage us to read philosophy as a species of rhetoric, to attend to the style of philosophical writers, hound down their metaphors and similes, etc. However, with Martha Nussbaum,³ we have a thinker, clearly competent—even brilliant—in both philosophy and literary criticism who has more to say about assimilating a good deal of literature—mainly Greek drama and the novel—to philosophy, in particular to moral philosophy, than about assimilating philosophy to literature.

Nussbaum's philosophical hero is Aristotle, especially in his ethical texts; and she concedes that Aristotle is not widely recognised as a literary giant. So she has reason to incorporate literature into philosophy rather than the other way round. The *Nichomachean Ethics*, along with the rest of Aristotle's corpus, is relentlessly philosophical; it is hard to imagine a great work in philosophy that is more so. Perhaps Russell's *Principia Mathematica* would be a case. The contrast with Plato is notorious, that philosopher having written works that belong both to literature and to philosophy. This alone will make it difficult, I think impossible, to resist the legitimacy and depth of the distinction between the two enterprises. About Plato, as philosopher, and about Aristotle, we are still concerned with the question: Who, if either of them did, got it right? about ethics and much else. But the

power and literary value of, say, Euripides' *Hecuba*, with its theme of affliction undermining virtue, simply does not depend on whether Euripides was—as he may well have been—cocking a snoot at Plato's famous thought that nothing in the world can affect a good person so as to make that person vicious. The power of affliction to turn a good person into a vicious one, a theme informing Euripides' work does not have to be a view or a position or a theory that you agree with for that work to be appreciated. The 'opposite' themes of virtue triumphant in the face of cruel adversity, or vice transformed to virtue through loving justice and kindness, may not inform as many great works, if they inform any convincing ones; but if it did, we would not treat the authors as holding contrary views (they might not); moreover, we would not expect critics to take stands and argue on the issue. But when philosophers discuss the ethics of Plato and Aristotle, this is one of the main things they do have to take positions on, present arguments for, etc. They will be occupied with the question whether Plato or his greatest pupil got it right. That is what makes it philosophy. That is what makes it different from literature. Nothing is implied as to which discipline or tradition is the more important one.

Literary works, especially the Greek tragic dramas and many novels of the last two centuries, have themes which are plainly recognisable as issues that get taken up in philosophical texts. The teaching of ethics can be improved by using more than philosophical works. Nussbaum, however, is maintaining more than the banality that moral philosophers would do well to use literary works in their ethics classes. Even so, this advice is not so banal as it sounds; I recall Richard Hare exploding with anger during a seminar in Oxford at the suggestion that he should, as a test of his ethical theory, see if it would illuminate the novels of Iris Murdoch. But that was long ago and in another country, though the wench is still writing novels.

Nussbaum maintains that some literature is an integral part of moral philosophy and ought to be recognised as such. She is quite aware that there is a stronger claim being made than the minimal one that there are good examples of moral conflict and moral dilemma in literary works which will prove useful in ethics courses. To see what she means, before doubting its plausibility, I need to say a bit about how Nussbaum thinks of moral philosophy. For there are some conceptions of the subject which suit her thesis better than do others. It ought not to surprise anyone that philosophers do not agree about what the branch of philosophy called ethics or moral philosophy is supposed to accomplish.

The first position to notice is that of Iris Murdoch,⁴ in her philosophical work. She holds that teaching and studying ethics ought to contribute to making us better people. This was, and in some circles still is, a shocking position, confusing teaching with preaching. In most work in ethics, the idea of the meta-ethical is in the forefront, and it is contrasted with ethical theorising designed to establish and articulate normative principles. Even the latter enterprise does not see itself as immediately engaged with trying to make the students in the class better people at the end of the semester. Normative ethical philosophising is highly theoretical, striving to reconcile a mass of intuitions about ethical matters with a package of general principles of some kind. The recently developing area called Applied Ethics is not plausibly seen as trying to improve the morals of our students. Furthermore, it is controversial whether we want to train PhDs who can help corporations to get around ethics when those corporations already have lawyers to help them get around the law. I am not myself enthusiastic about this new region in the teaching of philosophy.

The methodology of many philosophers in ethics is one of pursuing reflective equilibrium, which is a modern name—from John Rawls—for Aristotle’s practice of taking into account all the appearances and saving as many of them as possible. The appearances are the intuitive ethical judgments of anybody who cares to contribute to the enterprise or intuitions of decent people generally. Some weighting is given to the intuitions of experienced people whom we think to be particularly good or virtuous. Aristotle said they had the *what* of ethical life, even if not the *why*. Aristotle differed from Plato in that he did not think the true nature of goodness had to be glimpsed in a realm of Forms; he thought you would find it in the deeds and words of those among your fellow citizens who were good men (there was some emphasis on their being men, an emphasis which neo-Aristotelians assume is not essential).

The metaphysical differences between Plato and Aristotle have real consequences in relation to where and how we look for guidance in working out how to live our lives. But Plato and Aristotle were nevertheless both asking: ‘How is it best to live our lives?’. They were not, like the later great figure in the field, Kant, trying to show, a priori, that the very notion of behaving ethically could be analysed so as to demonstrate that it is irrational or incoherent to be bad. The two Greek philosophers did think that it was irrational, in the sense of not in your best interest, to be wicked; so they thought there was

room for the question 'What is in it for me, this business of being good and just?'. And they thought philosophy ought to answer that question and also probably thought that only philosophy could answer it. What Nussbaum thinks is that ethics ought to be guided by that concern. And I reckon that is what Murdoch thinks too.

So Murdoch's radical sounding position is not really so radical. It is not yet preaching to inquire into whether the best sort of life for a human being requires decency and justice as ingredients. It is not all that far from preaching; but the sermons would be of a sort you will not find much of in our time. Joseph Butler in the eighteenth Century did give, as sermons, some of the best ethics ever written.⁵

The contribution, if any, of ethics to making us better is via better understanding of what virtue and justice are. Murdoch herself has a remarkable view that moral virtue and intellectual virtue are just two sides of one deep trait of character, which shows itself as disinterested concern to get things right in inquiry and what she calls the eye of loving justice in practical life. Perhaps one will not find loving justice accompanied by rampant ambition that pinches ideas from others, desperately minimises the force of objections to pet theories, suppresses data so as to promote one's students' prospects for jobs, etc., etc. But there is a mass of anecdotal evidence for the claim that such conduct exists among good scientists and researchers. A good inquirer who is not a very good person is probably not merely not a rarity; with many artists of major stature—perhaps even greatness—the horridness of the life may sit beside the fineness of the work; and I suspect this is not entirely accidental. That is what is really wrong with Murdoch's position. At the very least, her thought has to be an empirical one and she has just not assembled the evidence for and against it, and analysed that evidence. Given that the life and the work can conflict in lives less exposed to deep frustration and a sense of failure than those of artists, I should find it surprising if investigation revealed anything other than that many very good artists have been vicious people. Simone Weil was disposed to think in the way Murdoch suggests; but she had a reservation on the matter; she said, as I have quoted elsewhere: 'Every great artist, at least in his moments of finest conception, shows himself to be an authentic lover of the good'. But she followed that with a parenthesis: 'Possible exception, Rimbaud'.

Let me conclude with what I think is the best argument for the impenetrability of the boundary between literature and philosophy. During the Soviet regime in Russia, now 30 or more years ago (I am not sure any more), two writers called Sinyavsky and Daniel were

tried for slandering the Soviet State. One of them (I can no longer recall which) was on the witness stand. He was interrogated concerning a story in which he wrote about a period of 24 hours in which the government abrogated the laws against murder. Characters in the story went through various agonies deciding whether or not to take advantage of the situation and go forth in pursuit of enemies or to take cover and avoid them. The prosecutor extracted from his witness that to write such a story was, in effect, to allow that it was *possible* for things as depicted in the story to happen. Thus, argued the prosecutor, the writer is asserting that it is possible for the Soviet state to do such a thing, a clear slander on its integrity as a state.

Now the point is this. If a philosopher wrote about such a thing, he would be presenting what is common in philosophy, a proof of a possibility. A philosopher would precisely be interested in whether such a thing was possible, whether it is or is not true that such behaviour on the part of the government is possible. It is unlikely any philosopher would ever be so specific, however; and would thereby probably avoid prosecution. For it is much feebler to say that some government somewhere might do such a thing than to say of the current government that it might. The law against slandering or insulting the state may strike us as a bad law, against all our liberal traditions. But if there were such a law, it seems to me the philosopher I have imagined would be guilty under it, while the writer of fiction would not be. I am aware that there are philosophical theories which view fictions as constructions of possible worlds. If that means that fictions assert possibilities, then the story from Russia refutes such a theory. And the border remains secure.

Notes

- 1 See Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens*, London, 1990.
- 2 See his *Literary Theory*; Oxford, 1983; especially pp.10–16, where a sustained discussion does little more than insist that if you say something you must think it worth saying.
- 3 See her collection *Love's Knowledge*; Oxford, 1990 and *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge, 1986.
- 4 See her *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, 1970 and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, London, 1992.
- 5 *Fifteen Sermons*, London, 1726.