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Philosophy and Literature

»Philosophy and literature« is an area of study devoted to both written works of artistic creation and philosophical works, with a view to how both categories can illuminate experience and address human perplexities. This conclusion is reached through a discussion taking an overview of mainly analytic philosophy over the last twenty-odd years, particularly with a perspective on how the initial hostility between philosophy and literature has been overcome. The justification for claiming that »philosophy and literature« is a viable field of its own can only be found by looking at how both parts of the conjunction makes fruitful use of the other, while also making good the claim that these two pursuits belong together.

Plato is responsible both for philosophy as we know it, and the idea that philosophy and literature should have quarrelled from ancient times. It is shown that this alleged quarrel was Plato's invention, and used to open up for the new discourse of truth-seeking philosophy. Paradoxically, it seems, Plato was a writer who had learnt much from the great tragedians, yet spurned their creations as mere inspiration and without knowledge – as well as dangerous to the souls of the ideal republic. This paradox, however, is only apparent. Any new discourse will have to find converts, and cannot therefore use the as yet unknown means of communication. In short, it will have to use the language of the cave. The purpose of this visit to the past is mainly to show that it is not easy to justify putting the word »and« between the two opponents of this alleged quarrel. Ever since Plato, philosophy's conception of itself as the discourse of reason has pitted it against the fanciful creations of literary fiction.

Philosophy's conception of itself has been as the discourse of reason, and literature is seen as a vehicle of creative verbal art, where inspiration rather than deductive reasoning is the main dynamics of writing. Analytic philosophy has seen fictional literature as a pack of lies or as pure nonsense. The main use of literary art in analytic philosophy has been as examples of sentences which have no reference, sense or anything else much to recommend them to the discourse of truth. This changed, or changed apparently, with the »narrative turn« in philosophy in the 1980s. However, this turn failed to take proper account of the »literary« in their literary examples, and may have continued the practice of using literature as mainly a stock of examples, but now with an openly positive attitude.

The main focus of the section »Literature as Philosophy« is Martha Nussbaum and her claim that moral philosophy needs literature as a way of entering formerly closed perspectives on human life. Nussbaum opened up the interest in literature among philosophers, and she claims that schematic philosopher's examples almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing

plottedness, the variety and indeterminacy, of good fiction. I discuss her views through the arguments of some of her opponents, including John Horton and Richard A. Posner, as well as the duo Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen. Finally in this section, Mark Rowe comes to the rescue to show that literary criticism and philosophy use similar modes of argumentation. This takes us over to the section ›Philosophy as Literature‹, where the main part of the discussion is devoted to how philosophers actually communicate and try to convince readers. Conceptions of philosophy in our day and age seem to take it for granted that philosophy is a stylistically ›neutral‹ discourse, but in the words of William Righter, the modes of argument and imagination are interdependent. There must be varying circumstances in which intentions, moral or otherwise, choices and decisions, have one or another kind of sense. And it is by altering this picture, by setting different terms and conditions, or telling a different kind of ›story‹ that arguments become relevant or irrelevant, have force, look foolish – and even, persuade or fail to persuade.

The differences of philosophy and literature, at least arguments to the effect that there is a chasm between these, may rest on a much too narrow conception of how philosophy operates. Daniel Dennett is an advocate of intuition pumps in philosophy, and claims that an intuition pump should be the ideal tool in the philosopher's kit. The crucial point is what philosophy is *for*, and Dennett maintains that it is for enlarging our vision of the possible, for breaking bad habits of thought. Stein Haugom Olsen's sharp division between philosophy and literature when he writes that ›literature does not compete with philosophy, nor does it complement it‹, is shown to come from a worry that the aesthetic experience of literature has been systematically ignored. What is necessary for ›philosophy and literature‹ as a field of study is that perspectives and traditions from both ends of the spectrum can illuminate each other – and human experience. This can only be demonstrated through the quality of the work produced under this heading.

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