Essays on Language, Literature, and Philosophy

Königshausen & Neumann

Michael Eskin

Discursive Osmosis

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For Kathrin

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Prefatory Note

Among the essays I have written roughly over the past two decades, I have selected for inclusion in this book those that best represent the arc of an intellectual trajectory that has straddled the domains of literary and cultural criticism, linguistics and literary translation, the ethical and epistemological interface between literature and philosophy, and, more recently, the concrete moral-political force and societal ramifications of words – especially those presumably weighed on the scales of professional wordsmithery. I am grateful to many an academic and nonacademic institution stateside and abroad – including Dartmouth College, Rutgers, London, Cambridge, Oxford, Columbia, Princeton, Munich, Stanford, Düsseldorf, Harvard, and Georgetown Universities – for welcoming me and allowing me publicly to share my thinking over the years and hone my arguments in light of the invaluable comments and critique I have received from various audiences and readers. I am also grateful for having been generously granted permission to reprint material that has previously appeared in scholarly journals or anthologies, as well as – and most importantly – for the privilege of having, yet again, been offered the opportunity to publish with K&N under the expert guidance of Jasmin Stollberger and her team.

I couldn't even begin mentioning by name all those who have had a more or less profound and lasting intellectual impact on me, who have contributed to the evolution of my thinking and authorship, and who have been instrumental in enabling me to find myself *here*, today, on the Upper West Side, sitting – ironically, not unlike Descartes in 1641 – by the radiator, wearing these winter clothes, typing on this MacBook Air, looking out onto snowed-in Manhattan … One person, however, I would like to mention by name, since without his imagination, initiative, occasional coaxing, and multiple commissions over half of the essays collected in this book would most likely not have been written, or not exist in their present form: Slav N. Gratchev of Marshall University – author, editor, and scholarly impresario extraordinaire. Thank you.

Throughout this book, all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. As far as the third person singular pronoun in reference to general, singular nouns in non-gender-specific contexts is concerned, I employ, for reasons of economy and simplicity – and with no gender determination, preference, or value judgment whatsoever in mind – 'he', 'his', 'him', or 'himself' where the somewhat cumbersome and inelegant (to my ear, any-

way) – and not necessarily appropriate – ‘he or she’, ‘his or her’, ‘him or her’, ‘him- or herself, ‘they’, ‘them’, or ‘themself’ might also be used.

New York City, January 2026

Schreib dich …
zwischen die Welten

Paul Celan

ONE

On Literature and Ethics

I

I want to begin this meditation on the ethical significance of literature and its relation to moral philosophy from the empirical recognition that what we have come to call 'literature' has been credited, in the Western cultural context at least, with an ethical force ostensibly exceeding that of moral philosophy. Literature has been held to be capable of *doing* – in J. L. Austin's sense – certain things ethical that moral philosophy would fall short of.[1] This is not to deny the latter's heuristic significance in ethical matters (nor its recourse to devices that have been said to be characteristic of literature, such as fiction, figural language, and so on); it is simply to foreground the fact that our moral education has not, fundamentally, been entrusted to ethics. Nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives perused from early childhood have been supposed to ensure, more or less successfully, the formation of the variously conceived 'good' person.[2]

My objective in this essay is threefold: (1) to raise the question of literature and the ethical with a view to (2) uncovering the theoretical impasses vitiating traditional accounts of their enmeshment and, subsequently, to (3) suggesting what I take to be a plausible explicatory frame for what we seem to have been taking for granted prior to and beyond any philosophical problematization, namely, that literature is capable of *doing* things ethical in an exemplary way.

[1] Throughout this essay, I use – for the purposes of stylistic variation – 'ethics' and 'moral philosophy', as well as their adjectival cognates interchangeably. It should be contextually evident whether 'ethical'/'moral' refers to philosophical argument or to pragmatic import. For a discussion of the history of the two terms and their conceptual entwinement and interchangeability going back to Cicero, Seneca, Quintilian, Lactantius, Macrobius, Christian Wolff, and Kant, see: Eskin, 574n2.

[2] For a cursory list of works representative of philosophy's reliance on literature and literary devices by such authors as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Murdoch, Derrida, de Man, and MacIntyre, among others, see: Eskin, 574n3. Among the plethora of texts on the morally formative, educational function of literature, suffice it to mention Augustine's *Confessions* and Schiller's "On the Aesthetic Education of Man."

Rather than focusing, as has frequently been done, on their putative differences, I want to look at literature and ethics as parts of a continuum along which differences in mode and degree determine differences in ethical impetus. More specifically, I suggest that insofar as we take literature to be ethically significant in an exemplary way, we may want to start thinking about locating its ethical force not so much in its referential make-up and thematics – for reasons I shall clarify – as in, among other things, what I would call, for lack of a better term, its discursive-transformational 'capaciousness', that is, in its ability to absorb and transform virtually any kind of discourse, including the discourse of ethics.

Following a brief historical sketch of the entwinement of literature and ethics, I discuss some of the theoretical assumptions informing dominant accounts of literature's ethical import. I then present a number of powerful criticisms of these assumptions, which necessitate a reassessment of the very notion of literature in its relation to ethics. In a final step, I suggest a framework for casting the question of literature and its relation to ethics in a productive new light while obviating some of the difficulties posed by available takes on the subject – the impasses of what could summarily be called 'textual essentialism' and 'pragmatic contractualism' in particular.

II

Since its appearance as a philosophical discipline on the scene of the Western intellectual and cultural tradition in ancient Greece, ethics has been, not surprisingly, enmeshed with literature. The subject which Socrates "invented" and "added to … philosophy," as Hegel notes, continued to be informed by its (by no means exclusive) roots in its predecessor and 'begetter' in matters of the discursive engagement with human life, interaction, and conduct, namely, poetry.[3] Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Aeschylus, to name only a few, constituted a prephilosophical moral tradition that presumably provided Socrates, Plato, and their successors with the basic themes – and their paradigmatic artistic treatment – of what we have come to call ethics: how we ought to live and act so as to live a (variously conceived) good life. Whether as positive or negative instances of virtue, character, interaction, and response, or as dangerous seductions, the yarns spun by the poets, their protagonists' situations, quandaries, decisions, words, and deeds served and continue to serve philosophers – witness the

[3] Hegel, 46. Diogenes Laertius, 327 ("philosophy … in earlier times discoursed on one subject only, namely, physics, then Socrates added the second subject, ethics [τον ηθικον], and Plato the third, dialectics").

profuse recourse to literature on the part of contemporary moral philosophers of various colors – as touchstones for their theoretical reflections.[4]

If it is true that "before philosophy there was poetry," and if it is furthermore true that prior to the rise of ethics "the poets … were understood … to be the central ethical teachers and thinkers," then the very practice of literature must evince an ethical dimension.[5] While the overall moral import of literature has certainly been implicitly and explicitly acknowledged and put to use through the ages as a matter of course – as is borne out by pedagogical and educational practices involving literature – the specific site and force of the ethical in the literary have been the subject of considerable debate among poets, critics, and philosophers beginning with Plato's and Aristotle's pioneering meditations on these issues.

Depending on the given author's particular theoretical framework and approach, the ethical valence of literature (and art in general) has been located, for instance, in what could be roughly subsumed under the heads of its relation to truth, thematics, structure and uses of language, power to effect a change in perception, inherent appeal to responsibility, or powers of discursive subversion.[6] Literature has been ascribed the idiosyncratic, if variegated, capacity to make us see, feel, and realize "certain truths about human life [that] can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the … artist [as opposed to] abstract theoretical discourse," to solicit the "supremely difficult ethical act of responding to … singularity and otherness."[7]

III

Notwithstanding their specificities and putative differences, the various accounts of the ethical valence of literature summarily outlined above share certain assumptions about literature as a particular mode of discourse that are by no means unproblematic. Insofar as these assumptions can be shown to be, if not unfounded, at the very least (onto)logically contestable, the theoretical positions subtended by them, too, reveal themselves as equally contestable. Probably, the most basic among these assumptions is the very acknowledgment of *modes* of discourse, that is, of the possibility somehow clearly to distinguish between literature and such

[4] See, e.g.: Nussbaum, *Love's*, 5; MacIntyre, 181-87, 239-43; Rorty, xiv, 141-188; McGinn, 108-178.

[5] Becker and Becker, 3; Nussbaum, *Love's*, 15

[6] For a catalogue of representative authors, including Plato, Bruni, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Wilde, Dilthey, Spitzer, Heidegger, Nabokov, de Man, Derrida, Levinas, Gadamer, and Brodsky, among others, see: Eskin, 576n7.

[7] Nussbaum, *Love's*, 5; Attridge, "Singularities," 119.

other modes as philosophy (of which ethics is, of course, a branch). And it is precisely this basic distinction, which has relied on a particular view of language and its uses *and* on a particular anthropology or psychology hinging on the notion of *mimesis* or imitation – both paradigmatically articulated by Aristotle – that needs to be critically interrogated.

In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle makes an (onto)logical distinction between two modes of speech:

> While every sentence [*logos*] has meaning [*semantikos*] … not all can be called propositions. We call propositions [*apophantikos*] those only that have truth or falsity in them. A prayer is, for instance, a sentence but neither has truth nor falsity … Let us pass over all such, as their study more properly belongs to the province of rhetoric or poetry. We have in our present inquiry propositions [*apophantikos*] alone for our theme.

Aristotle then specifies that a proposition can be either an "affirmation [*kataphasis*]" or a "negation [*apophasis*]," whereby "the presence of some other thing in a subject in time past or present or future" is being affirmed or denied. Apophansis requires, Aristotle emphasizes, the presence in a proposition of an "'is', 'was' or 'will be' … indicating a single fact [or] many."[8]

The distinction between apophantic and nonapophantic discourse, which Aristotle clearly establishes on the basis of an utterance's referential relation to reality and the world, is further elaborated in *Poetics* (which, among other things, the reader interested in nonapophantic discourse is referred to in *On Interpretation*). Aristotle has in mind "poetry in general" and the specific genres of "epic and tragic poetry, as well as comedy [and] dithyramb … all, taken as a whole, kinds of mimesis" – in short, what *we* have come to call 'literature' – when he writes, in the famous ninth chapter of *Poetics*: "It is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity."[9]

Aristotle's (onto)logical distinction between apophantic and nonapophantic speech, that is, assertive discourse aiming at propositional truth (e.g., philosophy, history) and nonassertive, nonpropositional discourse (e.g., literature) facilitated the common view – held by many a philosopher and poet alike – of philosophy and literature as 'serious' or nonfictional

[8] Aristotle, *The Organon*, 17a1-17, 23-27.

[9] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a1, 1447a13-16, 1451a36-39. Although poetry does not affirm anything about facts, states of affairs, or "actual events" the way history or philosophy in their own complex ways do, it can and indeed often does, as Aristotle observes, "concern actual events" (1451b27-39).

and 'nonserious' or fictional modes of discourse, respectively.[10] While the former makes referential statements, the latter dispenses with direct propositionality and referentiality. In other words, whatever the poets may say or 'state' "in their works … they neither believe nor assert it as a fact, but only as a myth or fiction."[11] Aristotle's conception of poetry as nonapophantic speech, popularized by Sir Philip Sidney – "the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" – does not seem to have lost its epistemological or poetological appeal. Such contemporary notions as literature's "pretended reference" or "pseudoreference" speak to the Stagirite's continuous sway.[12]

Aristotle drew an important conclusion from his insights into the manifold uses of language: because literature does not work apophantically, because it is neither bound by states of affairs or fact, nor by the limits of logical truth, it can be, paradoxically, in its very concreteness – "even though attaching names to agents" – more universal than apophantic speech.[13] Literature, Julia Kristeva writes in a passage representative of the abiding presence and reach of Aristotle's thought,

> takes the most concrete signifieds, concretizes them to the utmost degree, and, simultaneously raises them to a level of universality which surpasses that of conceptual discourse … The poetic signified … is simultaneously concrete and universal.[14]

In order to understand the ethical significance of what, for the longest time, has been taken to be literature's particular ways of creating meaning, it is necessary to attend to one contextually pertinent aspect of Aristotle's anthropology or psychology, namely, the twofold stipulation that human beings are essentially *mimetic* beings *and* that mimesis is a source of pleasure and cognition:

> It is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis (indeed, this distinguishes them from animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through mimesis that he develops his earliest understanding); and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects.[15]

[10] I should stress that Aristotle does not and could not possibly equate poetry with what we call 'fiction' – an essentialist notion alien to Aristotle's poetics (and metaphysics). Aristotle merely notes that poetry does not make apophatic or kataphatic claims about the world and that it is *mimesis*.

[11] Boccaccio, 65

[12] Sidney, 123; Searle, 330; Genette, 25.

[13] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451a36-b10 (here: 1451b9-10).

[14] Kristeva, 191.

[15] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b5-9.

"Everyone," Aristotle further explains, "when listening [or watching] imitations is thrown into a corresponding state."[16] Thus, tragedy's "fearful and pitiable" events find their responsive correlate in the audience's "horror and pity" by dint of the complex interface between what Aristotle calls "fellow-feeling" and the perception of resemblance with or difference from "one like [or unlike] ourselves."[17] The catharsis of fear and pity, in turn – achieved through the audience's participation in "imitations" – is, as Aristotle emphasizes, ethically crucial: it facilitates the citizens' virtuousness, allowing them to reenter the polis, as it were, free of those emotions and views that may turn out to be ethically-politically perilous.[18]

It is important to keep in mind at this point that art's ethical-political effectiveness is based, according to Aristotle, precisely on the fact that it takes its audience out of the domain of "actual events," that its "events and names alike have been invented" in the broad sense of not immediately relating to "facts," that it is – to translate aesthetics into logic – nonapophantic. It is because we perceive what art gives us not as referentially tied to our immediate reality that we *know* it to be and read it as a nonapophantic kind of language; that "we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight [may be] painful to us" rather than avoiding or fleeing them; that literature can function, according to Aristotle, as the ethical medium *par excellence* – as "equipment for living," to quote Kenneth Burke.[19]

As the following representative statements suggest, much of contemporary moral philosophy *and* literary criticism continues to rely on a mediated version (through the likes of Boccaccio and Sidney) of Aristotle's semiotics and poetics, taking it for granted that it is the *fictional*, nonapophantic, 'nonserious' character of literature and its concurrent capacity to short-circuit the universal and the particular that ultimately opens a space for the ethical closed to apophantic modes: "Literature," Daniel Schwarz writes, "provides surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences that, because they are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies, heighten our awareness of moral discriminations"; Martha Nussbaum suggests that literature "cultivate[s] our ability to see and care for particulars," while simultaneously catering to our "interest in the universal and in the universalizability of ethical judgments"; and Colin McGinn observes that the "fictional work can make us *see* and *feel* good and evil in a way no

[16] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1340a11.

[17] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453b1-5, 1452b38-1453a6.

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean*, 1094a1-b13; *Politics*, 1341b37-40.

[19] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b9-12, 1451b4, 22-23; Burke.

philosophical treatise can – unless it takes on board what literary works achieve so well."[20]

IV

But what if the apophansis/nonapophansis distinction cannot be sustained? It is precisely on the basis of a critique of the Aristotelian view of language that a critique of Aristotelian poetics and its subsequent versions can be and, in fact, has been mounted.

Methodologically, the most powerful critique to be brought to bear on the strict Aristotelian separation of apophantic from nonapophantic speech and its corollaries for our understanding of the putative specificities of literature and its ethical significance is provided by structuralist linguistics and poetics. In particular, Roman Jakobson's stipulation of the interface of six linguistic functions – emotive, referential, poetic, phatic, metalingual, and conative – operative in any utterance discloses the (onto)logical impossibility of clearly distinguishing between apophantic and nonapophantic speech[21]:

> Although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity [of genres of speech] lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions. The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function. But even though a set *(Einstellung)* toward the referent … – briefly the so-called referential, "denotative," "cognitive" function – is the leading task of numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account.[22]

Given that all utterances are constituted by the interplay of all six linguistic functions, generic differences, Jakobson suggests, are not a matter of ontology or essence but of the degree of predominance. In other words, what distinguishes apophantic from nonapophantic speech is the place of the referential and poetic functions, respectively, in the hierarchy of functions. Thus, literature, according to Jakobson, distinguishes itself from apophansis not on the basis of the presumed obliteration of referentiality but on the basis of the predominance in it of the poetic function, that is, by dint of its emphatic solicitation of a "set *(Einstellung)* toward the

[20] Schwarz, 5; Nussbaum, *Love's*, 184, 38; McGinn, 176.
[21] Jakobson, 71.
[22] Ibid., 66.