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“Reading for Life”:¹ Martha C. Nussbaum on Philosophy and Literature

RICHARD ELDRIDGE

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. (Oxford University Press, 1990), xix + 403 pages, \$42.50.

WHAT is it to understand something? According to the modern extensionalist view of the world, to understand an object is to know its measurable properties, such as its mass, location, and velocity. Knowledge of these properties of an object furnishes us with knowledge of possibilities for manipulating it. Within this modern view, the paradigm form for the expression of understanding is the scientific report or treatise, which lists the procedures employed for obtaining measurements, the measurements so obtained, and the possibilities for interaction with other objects that the measured object is thus known to possess.

The philosophical theory of this form of understanding in turn naturally models itself on its scientific object. A measure or criterion is sought for when understanding has measured its objects correctly. In this way, the treatise on the proper employment of the understanding becomes the central textual form of modern philosophy.

When moral philosophy is done within this paradigm, it naturally focuses on the measurement of human action. Having thus understood physical objects and the understanding itself, it then becomes natural to ask “What will persons do in such and such circumstances?” The most thoroughly developed modern scientific forms for the understanding of persons all share in this effort to measure the determinants of action. This effort is the common thread linking such otherwise divergent research programs as behaviorist psychology, cognitivist psychology, economic revealed preference theory, game theory, and dispositional personality theory. These enterprises all seek neutral, detached control of their object, the human person.

Martha Nussbaum is not pursuing this form of the understanding of persons. Instead, the sort of human understanding

that she pursues "does not even attempt to approach the world as it might be in itself, uninterpreted, unhumanized. Its raw material is the history of human social experience, which is already an interpretation and a measure" (164). Her reasons for rejecting the modern paradigm for the understanding of persons and preferring instead the textures of understandings to be found in novels and other narratives include such thoughts as these. There is no stably measurable and controllable object there. A human life — any human life — is instead a shifting mixture of envisionings of ideals, responses to historical inheritances of possibilities of action and expression, and promptings of unruly desire. It displays historically and biologically constrained exercises — courageous or cowardly, moving or repulsive, vicious or virtuous as may be — of self-responsible self-creation. Measurement can investigate some of the historical and biological constraints on these exercises, and it can sometimes usefully suggest therapies involving the alterations of these constraints through behavioral modification or drugs. But measurement cannot capture the courage or creativity or love that human beings sometimes display in response to the conditions that constrain their action. And since similar courage or creativity or love are likewise possibilities for us, we who reflect on the actions and lives of others, the serious investigator of human action is not external to her object. She is called upon to love or to reject it, discovering in it either revelations or denigrations of her own best possibilities of human life.

Love's Knowledge is the record of Martha Nussbaum's loves for and disappointments with some major texts that claim to describe and to embody human wisdom. Nussbaum's attention in these essays — most of them published previously between 1983 and 1990 to wide notice — ranges across the texts of Plato and Aristotle in philosophy, of Homer, Dickens, Proust, Beckett, Beattie, and above all Henry James in narrative literature, and of Stanley Fish and Wayne C. Booth in literary theory, with brief glances at numerous related figures. Always she is concerned to ask: How do the writers and the characters who are their various imaginative vehicles love? In what friendships, activities, and forms of self-understanding do they place their energies and trusts, and with what results? How am I to learn from and against them to inhabit my own friendships, assume my own ways of being, and develop my own self-understand-

ings? How am I, as a human being subject to various forces and constraints, and open to various narrative possibilities, to live well?

Among the forces and constraints in play in a human life, Nussbaum mentions such things as these. There are historical inheritances of complex forms of personal expression and action. Maggie Verver and Strether, for example, are Americans of quite particular gender, class, geographic, and family backgrounds. The Prince, and Marcel, and David Copperfield are Italian, and French, and English. While each of these figures evidences capabilities of self-transformation in moving in some measure away from the forms of expression they have inherited, their characters are also evident not only or principally in the new expressions at which they arrive, but also and more deeply in the trajectories of their developments from their particular pasts to their particular presents. (It is for this reason that Aristotle ranks the plot which traces these developments and the character that is therein revealed — and not language or imagery or diction — as the most important elements of serious narrative investigations of human action, and Nussbaum as a reader joins him in this thought.)

Second, there are facts of desire. David Copperfield's attractions to Steerforth and to Dora, Marcel's passion for Albertine, and Chad's sexual love for Marie de Vionnet all testify to a human susceptibility to being moved by a particular other. Parents and children likewise play highly particularized roles as objects of central concern and relationship for us. Expressing and sustaining such passions or coping with their refusal are central shaping activities of human lives. It is not clear how the promptings of these passions are to be reconciled to either the possibilities of expression that these characters find historically available or to the demands of a more impersonal morality. There is something, Nussbaum finds, of the private and inarticulate about them (351–52), and she confesses to some unsureness about how to balance the claims of passion and particularity against those of morality and generality (50–53). Yet there they are.

Third, there are ideals. Human beings are not prisoners of their histories and biologies. They have capacities of imagination and reflection that free them from full control by their constraints. Hence ideal but currently unavailable possibilities of

life can guide our responses to the imperfect situations that we confront: "'unavailable' does not imply 'irrelevant'" (64).

Fourth, there is luck. What Nussbaum calls "uncontrollable happenings" matter. Whether one's child dies, whether one's former lover happens to be at home to receive a telephone call during a brief visit to New York, whether the object of one's passion has the sensibility and aspirations to return it, whether the social world makes possible forms of action that enable the expression of human personality—these kinds of happenings and states of affairs shape the lives of human agents attempting to realize their best human possibilities.

Finally, in blending all of these—history with biology with ideality, national, class, and geographic character with particular passion with justice, everywhere under the influence of luck—there are still facts of human character: courage and creativity and love, or their refusals.

It is obtuse to deny the roles of these constraints and forces in shaping a human life. Or perhaps, Nussbaum suggests, principally through a magnificent reading of Plato's *Protagoras*, such a denial—indulged in by utilitarians, rational preference theorists, behaviorists, and other measurers of value—is a possible human act of intellectual desperation and self-mutilation. Better or easier, some think, to have a univocal measure of value than to acknowledge the salience in human life of incommensurable forces and constraints along with the risks and responsibilities that such forces and awareness of them bring. Nothing, as Stanley Cavell has insisted, is more human than to deny the human.²

Once we see human lives as courageous or cowardly, creative or routine, loving or narcissistic responses to such constraints and forces, then the treatise, the favored form of philosophical expression in modernity, immediately becomes less attractive as a vehicle of human understanding of human possibilities. Instead it will be "texts that narrate the experiences of beings committed to value" (149), novels and perhaps related historical and biographical works of sustained narration, that will have the most to show us about how we might best live in response to our constraints and to the incommensurability of goods. "It is only by following a pattern of choice and commitment over a relatively long period of time—as the novel characteristically does—that we can understand the pervasiveness of . . . conflicts [among

qualitatively different actions or commitments, when . . . one cannot pursue both] in human efforts to live well” (37). Novels and their kin, not treatises, are the central texts of *psychegegia*, of the soul’s education. It is through our emotional reactions—aversion, fearfulness, sympathy, grief, awe, love, reverence, or boredom as may be—to narratives that we learn the best possibilities of human life and the best paths toward them that various contexts make available.

This account of our responses to novels and other sustained narratives in one way resembles what has come to be called New Historicism. Adopting a phrase from Henry James, Nussbaum is happy along with critics inspired by a blend of Marx and Foucault to speak of a “projected morality” of either an individual text or a genre (10). Both individual texts and whole genres induce in their readers responses to historical phenomena that are typical perhaps of certain social classes. Greek tragedy in general and Sophocles in particular induce in readers with certain sensibilities and interests a sense of awe at and identification with those who seek to transcend natural limitations, coupled with a sense of relief or appropriateness at their ultimate downfall. The modern novel, with James and Proust as its supreme practitioners, induces in certain readers an identification with those undergoing the vicissitudes of individual character formation and a sense of shared triumph with those who successfully discover or create their personalities, becoming individuals against a background of social convention. It is surely right, as New Historicists have insisted, to locate our interest in and responsiveness to the modern novel as in part a function of the rise of a modern society, in which more scope is given to the development of certain sorts of individual personality than was typical in feudal economies.

But there is also a central difference between Nussbaum and the New Historicists. Where New Historicists are typically interested in explaining both our responses to individual works and the rises and falls of whole genres as functions of the independent emergence and attenuation of certain forms of social life, Nussbaum in contrast regards the texts in which she is interested as tracings of possibilities that are not external to us. For her, we face the same problems of human life—of choosing between static harmony or a life lived in awareness of death and loss, or between patient domesticity and reckless adventurism,

or between intimacy and public egalitarianism — that have been faced by Odysseus and Maggie Verver, by Hyacinth Robinson and Marcel.

It is this sense of our having something to learn from the particularities of novels in which standing human problems are canvassed that separates Nussbaum from both New Historicists and more traditional ethical theorists. Unlike New Historicists, postmodernists, social constructionists, and their kin, she retains "a deep commitment to getting somewhere" rather than resting content simply to "stop with an enumeration of differences and with the verdict that we cannot fairly compare, cannot rationally decide" (28). Unlike modern philosophical theorists of reason-sanctioned more or less algorithmic rules and principles, where incommensurabilities are denied in the interest of hewing to action-guiding calculations, she holds that there is no more direct route to a reasonable understanding of what it is for a human being to live well than working through our various emotional responses to various sustained narratives of quite different drifts. Deliberation, according to Nussbaum, need not be and at bottom isn't "either quantitative or a mere shot in the dark" (60). It involves instead "getting the tip" from cases, wherein "progress comes not from the teaching of an abstract law but by leading the friend, or child, or loved one — by a word, by a story, by an image — to see some new aspect of the concrete case at hand, to see it as this or that" (160). The genre of philosophical criticism of the novel of which she is our most eminent current practitioner involves taking up these tips from various cases, setting them "side by side," both interrogating and letting oneself learn from manifold stories at hand and our complex, powerful, and ambivalent responses to them. I cannot think of any better way, any way more faithful to the reversals and triumphs of human life, in which to do moral philosophy than this.

Nonetheless there are, as there always are, certain themes in *Love's Knowledge* that are for me regions of concern. I will mention two.

The first is that in holding that the possibilities of contextual human development that are displayed in the careers of the protagonists of the novels she surveys are *not* external to us, Nussbaum is committed further to holding that there are at some level certain perennial problems of human life. But what are

these problems? I am inclined to wish for more articulation of them, perhaps along a slightly different line from the one Nussbaum takes. It is useful here to compare her sense of the persistent problems of human life with Kant's. In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant writes that "the concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the sensible world the end proposed by its laws."³ (Passages like this lead me to think, by the way, that it is a mistake on Nussbaum's part to regard "What is my moral duty?" as "Kant's organizing question" in moral philosophy [24].) This passage says, among other things, that we are not as agents content to rest with an empty or unrealized freedom, but instead seek to express our free personality in the world in such a way that it receives ratification or recognition, and we seek further to discover whether and how the natural and social worlds might support this ambition. One way to read novels and other sustained narratives is then to see their protagonists as concerned with the enduring problem of expressing and winning ratification for their free personality, against the obstacles to doing this that the natural and social worlds variously throw up at various times and places.⁴ Insofar as all human beings have this aim of expressing their free personality, and insofar as certain protagonists develop powerful strategies in context for winning through to better forms of expression than are typical in their times and places, we then have something to learn from these protagonists.

In place of this sort of Kantian account of the enduring problems of humanity, Nussbaum instead offers us largely reformulations and revisions of Aristotle's remarks on *eudaimonia*. "The general answer to [the] question ['How should a human being live?'] suggested by Aristotle himself is, 'In accordance with all the forms of good functioning that make up a complete human life.' The notion of good human functioning steers and guides the inquiry at a deep level, focusing attention on certain features of situations rather than others" (95). In contrast with a Kantian view, this sense of the problems faced by human beings seems to me both to overspecify and to underspecify our situation. The problems of human life are here overspecified to the extent that the paradigms of good human functioning are drawn from relatively narrow ranges, say from the most impressive exemplars of the Greek aristocracy, or from intellectual life only, or from the Jamesian world of the salon, or from the

thought that good human functioning requires centrally the satisfaction of biological needs, such as those for food and clothing. In each case, the successes in good human functioning that are then canvassed seem too specific to certain historical epochs or class configurations, and canvassing all of them together leaves us less with a way of appreciating and integrating all these successes, as Nussbaum surely and rightly wishes it to, than it does a hodgepodge. For all her insistence on the internal or anthropocentric objectivity of morality, in a way her procedure here leaves her perhaps a bit too open to appropriation by New Historicists, who will see in all these divergent exemplars just the projected but subjective moralities of various irreconcilable interest groups.

Good human functioning is left underspecified to the extent that the problems and interests that these divergent exemplars share are relatively unarticulated. There are in *Love's Knowledge* few paradigms of reconciliation among members of divergent groups in the emergence of a shared commitment to equal justice, conceived as the equal chance for expressing free human personality and having its expression supported and ratified. "Politics is about using human intelligence to support human neediness," where among our needs Nussbaum lists such things as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education for children, and property (373). Absent from this list is something like an aspiration or need for a culture of political justice or equal freedom. There is perhaps something characteristically Greek, as opposed to Christian, in this emphasis. Nussbaum seems to me sometimes to value in her heroines such qualities as courage, integrity, gaiety, and improvisatory alertness at the expense of such qualities as fairness, reciprocity, and concern for equality. This tendency is perhaps reflected in her response to *David Copperfield* where she rightly praises David's interest in Dora rather than Agnes as part of his openness to the emotions, the private, and the inarticulable, but in this praise fails to see, I think, how uncomfortable both David and Dickens are with Dora, with an attachment in which genuine reciprocity and human equality are not possible (in part as a result of Dora's familial and cultural background).

I have little doubt that on most substantive questions of political judgment Nussbaum and I would be in fairly close agreement. She is clearly concerned with political justice and

reasonable economic equality. She believes in these things. But her protagonists do not show us much about how to integrate a commitment to these ideals with their other commitments, or to do better in doing this than those around them do, and the result is that we get almost a laundry list of commitments that make for good human functioning. To some extent the readings Nussbaum gives of extended narratives, particularly of *The Princess Cassamassima*, take up these issues and develop a richer and yet more universally shared conception of the problems faced by human agents than is afforded by the Aristotelian background. Perhaps her revisions of Aristotle and mine of Kant do not end up in very different places. But perhaps also Kant's thoughts about human agents and the problem of free personality would be of some help here.

The second region of concern revolves around the question "What is really doing the work in moving us toward Nussbaum's vision of the human person and its prospects?" In particular, is the effective, conviction-inducing structure of her writing more that of an intellectual autobiography, a narrative of the evolution of her concerns, or that of a comparative theoretical study? There is no doubt that it is in places each of these things. In various places, bits of autobiographical reflection break out. She was, she tells us, an impassioned young reader, alive with sympathies for the moral dramas of the great novels and tragedies. She was both committed to the powers of systematic reason and brought up short by the various rigidities of thought of academic moral philosophy and classics and literature. She has managed through her writing somehow to make herself whole. This is quite a story, particularly for those who had childhoods and graduate school experiences resembling hers. At the same time, Nussbaum in places writes as a theorist of our practical concerns, comparing and contrasting and adjudicating among the accounts of our concerns that are put forward in various literary and philosophical texts that serve as inputs to be scrutinized by the theoretical consciousness (cf. p. 290). Here the result—an elaboration or theory or account of our human concerns—is achieved less through an odyssey or narratable course of progress than it is through an almost timeless act of judgment among alternatives. One of her deepest hopes, I think, is in the end to reject these questions—is her writing narrative or theory? is it autobiography or moral analy-

sis? — and instead to produce a new mixed genre, one that lies between and partakes of the strengths of both narrative and theoretical prose. She seeks instead a style that is “non–reductive, and also self–conscious about its own lack of completeness, gesturing toward experience and toward the literary texts” but also a style that canvasses “the distinctive features of novels in a way that contrasts them with features of other conceptions” (49). Perhaps the central question to ask in coming to terms with this effort is “What happens in the reader’s moments of sympathetic engagement with and openness to learning from it?” Is it that the reader judges the analysis worthwhile according to some implicit and intellectually articulable criterion of worth, moral or aesthetic or both together? Or is it that the reader instead finds herself in the course of her progress already engaged and sympathetic—in love with the text one might call it—before comparative analysis gets going? It may be, I think, that it is more the latter, and that this fact has consequences for the appropriate character of texts of the most serious human wisdom, pushing them even more toward the narrative and novelistic than Nussbaum’s mixed genre. One might ask, “Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?”⁵

In a wonderful reading of an Ann Beattie short story, Nussbaum herself describes the process of acquiring love’s knowledge, where this includes both knowledge of what love is and the knowledge that is involved in being in love. “Knowledge of love is not a state or function of the solitary person at all, but a complex way of being, feeling, and interacting with another person” (274). Entering into this way of being involves deliberately not insisting on criteria of judgment, but instead a willingness and ability to “stop stopping” what will happen (278), the simultaneous discovery and creation of newly actualized possibilities of human value. “Reading a story is like that” (280). And if it is, and if reading stories is central to entering into valuable ways of being, and if entering into these ways of being is fundamental in a well-led human life, then stopping stopping what will happen is likewise fundamental to acquiring and enacting human wisdom. This is not the image of wisdom and its acquisition that is central in modern philosophy. But I did not want *Love’s Knowledge* to stop, and I find myself trusting its progress as much as that of any work of moral thinking of recent times.

NOTES

A shortened version of these comments (originally presented before the American Society for Aesthetics, November 1991) will appear in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume 52, number 2 (June 1992).

1. This title quotes the title of the ninth essay of Nussbaum's collection, on Dickens, itself a near quotation of a remark of David Copperfield's about his own boyhood habits of reading. All further references to *Love's Knowledge* will be given in the text in page numbers in parentheses.

2. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 109, 207.

3. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 14.

4. I take up this way of reading in *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism and Self-Understanding* (University of Chicago Press, 1989). For related readings of Victorian novelists from Dickens to Joyce, see Philip M. Weinstein, *The Semantics of Desire* (Princeton University Press, 1984).

5. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 496.