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Iris Murdoch and the Ancient Quarrel: Why Literature is Not Philosophy

A Summary of Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

When Plato banished the poets from his ideal philosophical state, he accused their work of being merely an art of illusions: speaking to the lower parts of our soul, making us take the sensuously apparent as unquestionably true, relaxing our impulses for philosophical investigation and giving us license to have way too much erotically charged fun. Since then, a great deal of philosophical work has been dedicated to proving him wrong by defending a view of literature as philosophically relevant, or even as being philosophy in another form. Iris Murdoch, philosopher and novelist, is one of the few modern thinkers who has taken Plato's side in this ancient quarrel, by insisting on a firm distinction between philosophy and literature. Nonetheless, most of the scholarship on her work has (often in order to read her own novels as philosophical) disputed her emphasis on the distinction. In this dissertation, I set out to do the opposite. With Murdoch as my main guide, among other thinkers such as Stanley Cavell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone Weil, Hegel, Kant and Plato, I argue for why literature is not philosophy. After giving a historical background for the ancient quarrel, I propose some aesthetic characteristics which make it unfruitful, unnecessary or misguided to regard literature as philosophical. Through a discussion of the sensory illusion of sense, the role of conceptual thinking in literature, the clash between epistemology and fiction, the consolations of tragedy, and the immorality of art, I provide an extensive description of literature as distinct from philosophy.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, literature, philosophy, ancient quarrel, aesthetics

Problem definition and delineations

This dissertation argues for why literature is not philosophy. It seeks to answer these questions: Why would it be misleading, unnecessary, distortive, misguided and/or unfruitful to regard literature as philosophical? What is it about literature that conflicts with the purposes, focuses and methods of philosophy – broadly and generally understood as a theoretical, truth-seeking, conceptually clarifying, hermeneutical, rational and/or critically discerning practice? What does it mean that literature is an art, and not philosophical thinking?

The dissertation takes its cue from Iris Murdoch, philosopher and novelist. Murdoch constitutes a rare example of a modern philosopher arguing consistently for an emphatic distinction between the disciplines. The dissertation situates her approach in the quarrel at large by presenting its historical background, and then moves on to investigate certain characteristics of literature that Murdoch has noted makes it distinct from philosophy. However, the dissertation is not an exposition of Murdoch. Rather than explaining her argument, it only follows her to the extent to which the author of the dissertation finds fruitful, which means that the text often diverges into discussions of other philosophers, most notably Kant, Stanley Cavell and Plato.

It would be wrong to assume that the aim of the dissertation would be to create a failproof taxonomy that would define, limit and police the categories “philosophy” and “literature.” This assumption may be founded on what the dissertation takes to be one of the most harmful principles in contemporary academic philosophy: the refusal to speak in general terms. “Terminological precision” has become a universal golden standard, whether it comes in the analytic form of isolating concepts from their contexts and endowing them with artificially fixed technical meanings in distinction from near-synonyms, or in the continental exegetical form of analysing how a certain word is used in the work of a certain philosopher

or tradition. Not only does this principle result in terribly boring articles and books – the dissertation also argues that it serves to make an already difficult discipline further isolated from how the rest of the world lives and reflects. Ordinary language philosophy has attempted to remedy this illness by looking at how words are used in lived contexts. But, in the anxiety to create a new standard of verification in the confusing reintroduction of the flux of life into philosophical language, the investigations done in the name of ordinary language philosophy often tend to become too localised, as if accuracy here could only mean being as particular as possible.

However, speaking in general terms about philosophy and literature is not only possible, it is something we regularly do. In everyday life, we have no trouble with terribly vague concepts such as “life,” “everyday” and “trouble.” Nonetheless, in philosophy, a heightened awareness of what we mean when we say something is perhaps needed to create a functional academic dialogue. Some historical understanding is essential here too. But this does not mean that it would be impossible to talk about “philosophy” and “literature” in general and make oneself understood, and this is what the dissertation proceeds to do.

“Literature” is a porous, heterogenous category. The dissertation seeks to describe some of its general characteristics: those that are most prominent in regards of what makes literature distinct from philosophy. These explications should not be taken as complete, definitive or absolute. An exhaustive definition of what literature is and does is impossible to make. Instead, the dissertation speaks in general terms about the distinction between two long-standing, various, shifting and permeable disciplines. Some of the characteristics that Murdoch notes about literature are described more extensively. Everything said in this dissertation is not applicable to all literary works, but most may nonetheless be applicable to many.

The dissertation argues that literature is not philosophy by making an aesthetic description of literature as a form of art.

Chapter overview

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first, “The Ancient Quarrel: A Background Story”, asks: How have the ancient quarrel developed since Plato’s time? This chapter provides a historical (but non-chronological) background to the philosophical understanding of the distinction between literature and philosophy and aims to situate Murdoch’s (and the dissertation’s) view in relation to ancient, modern and contemporary approaches.

In chapter two, “What Is (Not) A Philosophical Novel? The Sensory Illusion of Sense”, some preliminary aspects of Murdoch’s distinction between the disciplines are introduced, especially in relation to the concept “philosophical novel”. With Kant and Hegel, the dissertation explicates “the sensory illusion of sense” in art. A philosophical reading of Murdoch’s novel *The Black Prince*, by a philosopher who claims to be respecting her distinction between philosophy and literature, but nonetheless ends up claiming that literature is “doing philosophy”, is criticised. Then, Murdoch’s own appreciation of Sartre’s *La Nausée* as a good philosophical novel is discussed, as well as some of the limitations that come with doing philosophy in the form of fiction. Finally, Murdoch’s novel *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is described as a novel that is about philosophy and a philosopher, without being philosophical.

Chapter 3, “The Feel of Muddled Thinking: Conceptual Content in Literature Following Kant’s Aesthetics”, takes the discussion of Kant’s aesthetics further, and asks what the non-conceptuality of the aesthetic judgement might mean in relation to literature, an art which obviously makes use of concepts. Murdoch’s quarrel, and subsequent reconciliation with, Kant on this topic is touched upon, after which the chapter mainly follows Kant’s arguments directly. Kantian notions like the intellectual interest in the beautiful, sublimity and aesthetic ideas are clarified. To exemplify how his notion of non-conceptuality might be understood in relation to literature, “muddle” in Murdoch’s fiction is described as an aesthetic idea.

Chapter four, “Real Characters and Fictional People: Stanley Cavell and the Epistemology of Fiction”, asks: What is a fictional character? The chapter takes off from a contemporary debate about the status of fictional characters in literary studies and moves through the epistemological problem of fiction unto Stanley Cavell’s usage of fiction to question the epistemological approach. With some support from Coleridge and Freud, Cavell’s understanding of the character Othello as a “literary fact” is criticised, together with his attempt to question the boundary between literature and philosophy. Our engagement with fictional characters is described as deep and meaningful, yet as different from our relations to actual people. At the end of the chapter, Murdoch’s insistence on the difficulty of creating fictional characters is discussed.

The next and fifth chapter, “Problems Purged: The Consolations of Tragedy”, asks: Why is tragedy not philosophy? The philosophical popularity of the genre is approached through Murdoch’s Kantian notion of “form”. The fluctuations in Murdoch’s own philosophical understanding of the concept of tragedy are also discussed. Aristotle’s description of tragedy as a highly ordered art form then provides the means for a questioning of Martha Nussbaum’s attempt to use the genre to question the distinction between literature and philosophy, in what the dissertation calls Nussbaum’s paradox of clarified muddle. Finally, this understanding of tragedy is confronted with Socrates’ description of philosophy as practising dying.

In the sixth chapter, “Playing with Fire: Literature and Immorality”, some lengthy attention is devoted to the Platonic origins of Murdoch’s view of the distinction between literature and philosophy. This last chapter asks with Murdoch “the not uninteresting question whether Plato may not have been in some ways right to be so suspicious of art”.¹ Some of the

¹ FS, 387.

notions that have been central in the attempts of previous research to read Murdoch's fiction and view of art as philosophical and/or morally edifying are explicated as more ambiguous than meets the eye: attention, the distinction between fantasy and imagination, bad art and great art, and art as love. Finally, the dissertation provides its own interpretation of what Murdoch calls the "unique truth-conveying potential of art", conceptualised with Freud and Kant as "sublime sublimation".

Findings

A condensed summary of the dissertation's description of literature as distinct from philosophy may go like this:

Literature presents a sensory illusion of sense. This is not best understood as a form of indirect communication, but as a form of sense-making that is reflective rather than determining. That means that is the perceptive appearance, rather than a conceptual understanding, which provides a unity of the manifold for our impressions in art. Literature may still at times make a common case with philosophy, but the aesthetic mode of presentation brings a certain vagueness which makes the discursive functionality of philosophy-as-fiction rather limited. Even when literature seemingly is "about" philosophy, it might be more occupied with enchanting, sensuous illusions than sensemaking.

The aesthetic judgement is non-conceptual. So how are we to understand literature, an art which obviously makes use of concepts? As an art, literature is more concerned with conveying a feeling of a state of mind, than to make determinate judgements. Conceptual understanding may, in various ways, play into our experiences of art, but it does not constitute their aesthetic character. The way concepts work in literature is better understood with the notion of aesthetic ideas, which boundlessly enlarge the imagination in relation to a given concept, such as hell or eternity, rather than bringing any determinate conceptual understanding.

Another central aspect of much literary writing is its fictionality. Even though the epistemology of fiction has been very discussed, fictionality might not be best understood as a problem of knowledge. Rather, fiction brings an important challenge to the entire epistemological approach, since we engage with it without asking what is real or not. We suspend our disbelief, which gives a heightened immersion into the real and the phantasmatic

alike. But relating to fictional characters is different from reacting to the presence of actual people. Since we cannot in any way interact with the characters, we can indulge in feelings and attitudes towards and with them that we would normally censor from interpersonal relations. Although this can make fiction deeply meaningful to us, it also makes it difficult to use fiction as philosophy; especially if one looks to it as expressive of fundamental human conditions, since crucial aspects of what it means to be human are altered in our engagements with fiction.

Tragedy, a genre of fiction, has been given a prominent role in many attempts to question the divide between literature and philosophy. How this highly ordered form of drama can be expressive of real miseries, or some essentially tragic aspect of the human condition, is, however, far from evident. The genre creates an artificial form for rather than presents us with suffering and death. As art, it gives a pleasing sense of purposiveness to even the most purposeless of experiences, an appearance of order to things that in life may be chaotic and senseless, and a consolatory imaginative feeling of having confronted these horrors. Thus, tragedy does not present us with the muddled and self-contradictory ethical problems of life; rather, it brings the artistically pleasing illusion of doing so. Philosophy may in contrast to this metaphysical consolation be understood as a refusal of letting go of doubts: as a practise of dying in the sense of remaining open to the unknowable.

Art is mimetic. This means that it does not need to go beyond its own as if-character: it may show us what appears to be goodness, divinity, courage or practicality, without inducing us to ask what is real or not. Morally, this is especially troublesome, since art invites us to enjoy the basest parts of ourselves. It stays in the cave and plays with the fire. The good, which is simple and stable, might not appear attractive in fiction – the evil and neurotic is more various and interesting. Reading novels as morally edifying, or even as works of moral philosophy in their own right, thus becomes problematic. The attention of art is based on

desire, not will, and is inherently dubious. Since artistic inspiration springs from unconscious sources, we lack volitional control of its power, and there is no way of knowing what it is mad or divine. We are all storytellers – we live our lives within approximate imaginings and fantasies. Art celebrates these aspects of being human and might thus risk make us content with the second best. But it also has the rare ability of letting us rub against the limits of our imagination. This unique truth-conveying potential of art is bound up with its pointlessness: it is by being radically non-instrumental that art mirrors the good. Virtue may not have a point, but great art can be the ambiguous and flickering proof that it is nonetheless meaningful.

Implications for future research

In Murdoch scholarship, there has been a widespread unwillingness to accept her firm distinction between literature and philosophy. Several attempts have been made to question it, many in order to read her own novels as philosophical, and some of those attempts have been discussed and refuted in this dissertation. As such, this dissertation provides a challenge to the continuing research on Murdoch's aesthetics as well as her fiction. Murdoch claimed that literature is not philosophy: this dissertation explicates some of the main reasons why. Hopefully, it thus makes it difficult to ignore or dispute Murdoch's insistence on the distinction.

Additionally, the dissertation hopes to make a contribution to the ancient quarrel at large. In the *Zeitgeist* we are currently in – in literary studies, artistic research, continental philosophy, and the kind of analytic philosophy which seeks to challenge its methods from within – there is a nearly dogmatic aversion to making firm distinctions between philosophy and literature. After its initial account of the history and current state of that dogma, this dissertation provides a polemical resistance to it. This is done with the belief that important and valuable artistic aspects of literature are skewed and devalued by the well-meant approach to appreciate literature on philosophical grounds. A philosophical turn to literature may also risk making us forget how difficult philosophy is. If any wider influence of this dissertation might be imagined, it is to induce reflection on the often-presupposed virtue in questioning the distinction between the disciplines.

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