

The Epistemological Basis of Philosophical Criticism

A CUCKOLDED MAN yells at his unfaithful wife. She has just written a letter to her lover, which her husband has intercepted. The betrayed husband describes his own experience through a metaphor of authorship:

Thou trothless and unjust, what lines are these?
Am I grown old, or is thy lust grown young,
Or hath my love been so obscured in thee
That others need to comment on my text?
Is all my love forgot which held thee dear,
Ay, dearer than the apple of mine eye?
Is Guise's glory but a cloudy mist,
In sight and judgment of thy lustful eye?

(*The Massacre at Paris*, xv.23–30)

Imaging his wife as his text (which is only one of several possible readings of the line), turning her from possession into intellectual property, serves to color the meaning of gendered ownership. She becomes words—his words, his lines, his precious production. This constitutes not only an intriguing form of objectification but also of articulating erotic bonding. The beloved, likened to one's expressed language, is being fantasized as the lover's externalized and objectified thought, which is also disturbingly out of control. Beyond ownership or love, figuring cuckoldry in terms of a commented text imports texts into the world of erotic ownership. The alarming perception of one's text being modified by another, noting its loose and prostitute-like nature, says something about the meaning of writing. Metatheatrical awareness deepens this dimension of the metaphor: *this* text, Marlowe's text, being sold to others to be changed and acted by them—Marlowe himself turning, as it were, into a cuckold forced to watch.

By saying that moments such as these exclamations of the Guise are pregnant with insights—insights about the meaning of erotic possessiveness, about relating to what one writes—we are registering an awareness of literature's capacity to awaken a realization, to inform, to create

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knowledge. Is this faith in literature's instructive power justified, or does this talk of insight perpetuate a misleading mirage? Does anything distinguish such knowledge, if it is one? Is it possible to strip away the literary dressing from what is credited as knowledge, or is the "medium" somehow necessary, and if so, why? Any examination of the relations between philosophy and literature requires facing these familiar questions. If the above literary excerpt informs, there must be something in the lines, in the configuration of the words, in the arrangement of the images, or the imagined or perceived vocalization of them, which is doing important and mysterious epistemic work.

Five features are needed for the epistemic (knowledge-yielding) linking of philosophy and literature.¹ A complete account regarding literature's contributions to knowledge needs to: (I) elucidate how a literary work can support a general claim; (II) show what is uniquely gained by concentrating on such support-patterns as they appear in aesthetic contexts in particular; (III) clarify whether and how features of aesthetic response are connected with knowledge; (IV) maintain a distinction between manipulation and adequate persuasion; (V) achieve I–IV without ending up with what David Novitz has called "a shamelessly functional and didactic view of literature." I shall postpone discussion of the connections between literature, epistemology, and morality until the next chapter.

LITERARY LANGUAGE AND LITERARY EXPERIENCE

Many theories explain the ways by which literature yields knowledge. Some say that literature enables forming hypotheses, thereby creating

¹ I will not deal with conceptualizations of the philosophy/literature links that do not appeal to the knowledge-yielding aspect of literary works. I am thinking here mainly of deconstruction (which by virtue of dropping altogether the philosophy/literature distinction in favor of an all-embracing textuality, makes it impossible to investigate the relationships between philosophy and literature), but also of suggestions regarding noncognitive contributions of literature to philosophy, such as that of Cora Diamond, according to which philosophy should not be conducted as an investigation, but should rather be "an imaginative response to life" (1993, pp. 144–45). Stanley Cavell's readings of Shakespeare are in part motivated by the idea that turning existential concerns into epistemological problems is itself a form of evasion (e.g., 1987, p. 179) that philosophy has repeatedly indulged in. Cavell is focusing on skepticism, and it is difficult to know whether he means this claim to have a broader scope. I agree with Cavell that epistemological concerns do not exhaust the thoughts, anxieties, and sentiments triggered by weighty philosophical issues. But this cannot mean that the move to epistemology is itself wrong, unimportant, or forms an evasion.

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beliefs—albeit not necessarily justified ones.² Others argue that reading a literary work creates coherence in our beliefs by revealing possible discrepancies between our general convictions and detailed contexts.³ A third view is that a literary work can advance knowledge by functioning like an example⁴ or a prolonged thought-experiment⁵ in which conceptual insights are gained through engaging with the rich and complex contexts of lifelike occurrences. Others maintain that literature establishes knowledge not of the actual but of the possible.⁶ For the purpose of investigating the relevance of literature to philosophy such suggestions cannot suffice. At best, such accounts will show philosophers that rigorous philosophical reflection requires examples, thought-experiments, or a delineation of the possible, not that it needs literature. In order to convince philosophers that they need “literary” examples, or “literary” thought-experiments, it is necessary to delineate an epistemological gain stemming either from features peculiar to literary language or from the experience that literature creates.

The first option, appealing to aspects particular to literary language for the purpose of advancing knowledge, will fail. Oppositions that were employed in the past to articulate the distinctiveness of literary discourse (figurative/literal, particular/general, emotions/thoughts) are no longer generally accepted. One cannot then claim that emotional appeals, particular descriptions, or figurative constructions make for distinct, irreducible, and nonparaphrasable forms of knowing. A further obstacle is that, again, all these aspects are not essentially related to literature. An elaborate case for the importance of figurative language, for example, will merely succeed in proving to philosophers that they require figurative statements, not the rich, involving experience of the literary work.⁷ This

² For variations of this idea, see Beardsley (1958, pp. 429–30), Hospers (1960, p. 45), Mew (1973), McCormick (1983), Novitz (1987, pp. 131–32), and Putnam (1976).

³ Richard Rorty (1985) links literature and knowledge through coherence, as do David Novitz (1987, p. 135), Nussbaum (1990, p. 389), and Diamond (1993, esp. p. 151).

⁴ For different variations of literature as example or counterexample, see Sirridge (1975), Pollard (1977), Nussbaum (1986, p. 32; 1990, pp. 45–49, 87–93), Eldridge (1989, pp. 19–21), and Carroll (1998, pp. 142–46).

⁵ Zemach (1997, pp. 198–200).

⁶ This idea does not begin with the various contemporary counterfactual accounts of literature but rather goes back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, ch. 9. For some other modern examples, see D. Walsh (1943), H. Putnam (1976), and some of T. S. Eliot’s ideas in “Poetry and Propaganda.”

⁷ Such an account may, however, be incorporated into the analysis of the existence of “literary aspects” of philosophy—that is, when a philosopher employs such means, this might suggest that he has reached the limits of philosophical discourse. The neo-Platonic

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rather underrated objection is also fatal to other suggestions as to how and why literature is philosophically relevant. Consider the suggestion that literature formulates in words what has hitherto been unexpressed or not fully described. Poetic articulation can thereby form or re-form a philosophical position.⁸ But descriptions of this sort require nothing as intense as involvement with literature. Citing or paraphrasing the appropriate sentences is enough. Appeals to literature's particularity lead to the same objection.⁹ Particular descriptions presuppose general assumptions. A uniquely particular mode of thought is thus an illusion. Besides that, particularity is not unique to literature.

Literary experience is our second option. Colin Falck writes that literature operates through tapping into "preconscious moods," thereby circumventing a more aware experience. Martha Nussbaum characterizes literary experience as one in which certain emotions are drawn out, emotions that constitute specific beliefs that cannot otherwise surface.¹⁰ Neoromantic accounts of reading experience stress the role of the imagination in belief formation. If the imagination plays a constitutive role in belief formation, we need to involve ourselves with the imaginative realm (literature).¹¹ Empathic beliefs are another popular suggestion: literary reading experiences involve knowledge of what it will be like to "live through" the situation portrayed. Shared by all these suggestions is the

tradition of interpreting Plato's myths as expressing the ineffable is a well-known example. See also De Man's (1978) reading of Locke.

⁸ Lamarque and Olsen (1994) present a variation on this theme: ". . . [literature] . . . develops themes that are only vaguely felt or formulated in daily life and gives them a local habitation and a name" (p. 452). (Lamarque and Olsen reject the philosophical use of literature. Nevertheless, their suggestion can easily be enlisted in a defense of philosophical analysis of literature through the route that I am exploring here.) Keats presents another example of literature as articulation: ". . . Poetry . . . should strike the Reader as a wording of his highest thoughts." See his letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818, in D. Bush, ed. (1959, p. 267).

⁹ Phillips (1982, p. 29), Diamond (1993, p. 149), Eldridge (1989, p. 4, 19–21), and Nussbaum (1990, pp. 37–40) all appeal to literature's focus on particulars and aim to connect this with knowledge. In Shakespeare criticism, this idea goes back to Richard G. Moulton's *The Moral System of Shakespeare: A Popular Illustration of Fiction as the Experimental Side of Philosophy* (1903).

¹⁰ Falck (1989, pp. 56–59); Nussbaum (1990, pp. 40–42, 282); for another formulation of emotional knowledge, see Reid's (1961) development of the idea of "cognitive feeling."

¹¹ Novitz (1987) and Falck (1989) both attempt to defend reformulations of romantic epistemologies along these lines by stressing the imaginative. On the cognitive relevancy of the imagination, see also Nussbaum (1990, pp. 75–82) and Currie (1998).

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objective to connect qualitative features of the literary reading experience (not the makeup of literary language) with cognition.

Qualitative uniqueness, however, cannot suffice. Claims do not turn into justified beliefs merely by being contemplated in an involved and emotionally attuned state. Powerful discovery never constitutes justification.¹² The same holds for empathy. Knowing what it can be like to have a particular belief or what can make someone have that belief is not a justification for the belief itself. In fact, a recurring objection to claims on behalf of literature's moral import highlights the threat that empathy poses to a just moral assessment—the danger of developing a selective sense of justice.¹³ Empathic knowledge thus seems helpful only if literature's contribution to knowledge resides in the insights gained from it regarding processes of belief formation. But if *justified* beliefs are being sought, being empathic or nonempathic to the positions discussed is clearly insufficient.

Qualitatively oriented explanations, therefore, all relate to types of belief formation, to the unique ways in which literature creates beliefs, not to the assessment of those beliefs (whether or not these are the beliefs one ought to have). Formation and assessment of beliefs can be combined, and Nussbaum attempts to integrate them by asserting that some beliefs could not be assessed at all if one did not employ emotional, empathic, or imaginative processes that enable one to form them in the first place. Nussbaum's integration of formation and assessment is sound, but can be synthesized into a broader account, which I will now outline.

LITERARY ARGUMENTS

I propose a conception of rational justification that can accommodate the idea of literature as knowledge yielding. I begin with theories of argumentation that employ more than deductive or inductive inference patterns as rational means of establishing propositions. Aristotle's account of examples and enthymemes in his *Rhetoric* remains the fountainhead for such theories (although the idea is older). Aristotle argued that in some domains, what we take to be a credible source of knowledge is the reapplying of a principle that was successfully applied in another known case.

¹² Along these lines is Hilary Putnam's (1976) partial rejection of the idea of knowledge through literature.

¹³ For such criticism, see Posner (1997) and Statman (2002).

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Examples of this kind do not make for inductive inferences, but only for a “kind of induction” (I.ii.13).¹⁴ The notion of induction does not include learning from the local incidents that make up our lives and from which we reasonably establish many of our attitudes. Learning in such ways is a noninductive yet rational reapplication of a principle that emerged in a similar context. The principle in question is not a categorical “For all cases of type *X*, *Y* is the case” but is a particular affirmative or negative judgment of the form: “For some cases of *X*, *Y* is the case”.¹⁵

At first, employing Aristotle’s analysis in the context of the philosophy-literature question seems to simply lead back to the idea mentioned earlier: a view of the process of learning from fictional happenings as analogous to that of learning from examples. But Aristotle’s rhetorical analysis allows for relocating the literature-as-example idea from being only a suggestion linking aesthetics with cognition to an argumentational move justified through rhetorical theory. This is *not* a terminological shift. Such relocation explains not only the plausibility of the move from one case to the other but also delineates the contingent logical status of some of the philosophical beliefs with which literature deals. For Aristotle, the need for rhetoric arises when discussing assumptions and beliefs that can be other than they are—claims that can be derived from premises that are usually not necessary but are “for the most part only generally true” (I.ii.14). Aristotle was of the opinion that most of our judgments are of such a contingent nature.

Placing literary examples, thought-experiments, arguments by analogy, or coherence-establishing mechanisms within the framework of a rhetorical theory of rationality makes it possible to deal with objections regarding the nonvalid nature of such kinds of argumentation. Drawing

¹⁴ Readers of Nussbaum’s account of Aristotelian practical reasoning (1990, pp. 54–106), or Stuart Hampshire’s (1983, pp. 10–69), could easily see how the following sketch of Aristotle’s rhetorical views could be neatly integrated with his ideas concerning ethical method. I shall later specify some of the gains of adding the rhetorical emphasis in relation to the philosophy-literature question.

¹⁵ The distinction between particular and categorical propositions, coupled with the claim that literary examples support the former, strikes me as a more defensible position than the abductive/paraductive distinction employed by Warner (1989, pp. 345–54) in order to legitimate the inference from examples. Moving from “case to case,” as paraductive reasoning supposes, cannot really circumvent assuming the existence of a mediating particular judgment that legitimates such reasoning. Peircean abduction is one way in which such a particular statement can be grounded, but it is not the only route of this kind [Abduction is the idea that *P* is observed, but if *Q* was true, *P* would be a matter of course: ergo, there is reason to believe that *Q*].

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an inference from an example is not valid in the traditional sense: the impossibility of accepting a conjunction of the premises coupled with a negation of the conclusion.¹⁶ Accepting the need for nonvalid yet rational argumentation of this kind stems from the recognition that many of the beliefs relevant to philosophical reasoning are, for the most part, contingent. Identifying justification with logical necessity is an obvious fallacy. But when this mistake is recognized, the question then becomes how to argue for claims that are contingent in the sense of an inability to derive them formally or necessarily from other assumptions. Establishing nonarbitrary first truths leads to the same problem.¹⁷ Opting to choose argumentational principles that cannot accommodate such beliefs is to endorse a limited mode of philosophizing. Broadening the intellectual range to which philosophical methodology should be sensitive involves accepting means of argumentation that do not conclusively demonstrate a claim, but rather make it plausible, by supporting it to a certain degree. The connections surveyed above, which link the literary context and the beliefs it supports through identifying it with an example, with a delineation of the possible, etc., are such means.¹⁸

Locating these moves within the context of a modern reconstruction of rhetorical theory or some other approach of informal reasoning enables the normative argument on behalf of literary belief formation to emerge: if we wish to sustain the belief that some domains of human experience can be rationally discussed and understood, and if we drop the idea that rationality in these domains can always take the shape of valid reasoning, then we *should* accept as sound (though not as conclusive proof) the patterns of nondeductive reasoning that close engagement with literature can suggest. Forgoing the demand for validity need not

¹⁶ There are also no inductive relationships between a statement of the type “Prince Mishkin brings out the best in those around him” and the general statement “Seeing the best in others brings out the best in them.” Novitz (1980) tried to defend a version of such inductivism, but later abandoned it (1987). I shall not repeat the arguments against such implication. For these, see especially Sirridge (1975) and McCormick (1983).

¹⁷ Aristotle sees the need for nonvalid practical reasoning regarding first-truths in his ethical work (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 75). The idea that philosophy needs literature for establishing first-truths has been suggested by Jesse Kalin (1976), most explicitly in his (1978).

¹⁸ Some (e.g., Mason, 1989, or Warner, 1989) would perhaps go further, saying that most of philosophy is like that anyway and that when one is cured of the illusion of quasi-geometrical reasoning one is able to see just how frequently philosophical moves are actually rhetorical. I think we can have a more discriminating view, one that accommodates the possibility for rigorous arguments and yet sees these as a very limited sphere within the philosophical domain.

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imply dismissing rationality. As long as we maintain the identification of argumentation with a set of legitimate means for making beliefs plausible (rather than means for conclusive proof), literature can well be a form of argument. And since “rhetoric” does not here merely denote belief-formation but is a framework for the justification of beliefs, the beliefs that emerge are candidates for what one *ought* to accept. “Candidates” is my preferred term, since being presented with a good argument—literary or nonliterary—does not automatically guarantee actual acceptance. That can only emerge after considering other, possibly opposing, good arguments.¹⁹

Linking philosophy and literature is thus not some closed endpoint but rather a method, a mode of philosophizing not necessarily limited to moral questions but potentially applicable whenever contingent claims or first truths need to be supported. Such broadening of the scope of linking philosophy and literature is one advantage of basing the conception not only on Aristotle’s ethical writings, emphasized in Martha Nussbaum’s neo-Aristotelian conceptualization, but also on his rhetoric. We can delineate four other gains. First, such a framework makes it possible to recognize that the patterns of argumentation so far suggested in the literature—examples, analogies, thought-experiments—are mostly nonvalid moves in the traditional sense. Second, it is possible to justify such moves as part of a theory of rationality. Third, recognizing the nature of the beliefs discussed in this way means that the claims in question are either contingent or first truths, or relate to some other content that can only be given limited support. Finally, we can specify an important *limitation* of this sort of inquiry: it is *not* philosophically justified when nonrhetorical means are available.²⁰

¹⁹ Jonathan Kertzer’s *Poetic Argument* (1989) is one attempt to identify literature with argument. But Kertzer’s suggestion avoids the question of normative vs. descriptive belief-formation that is so crucial for philosophical application, as does Zahava Karl McKeon’s *Novels and Arguments* (1982), which also employs a notion of argument that encompasses any communicative act (pp. 24–25). A beginning along the lines above can be found in Martin Warner’s essay “Literature, Truth, and Logic” (1999), which continues important earlier work of his on the ideal of geometrical reasoning within philosophy (in his *Philosophical Finesse*, 1989). The most elaborate position regarding the rhetorical interconnections between logos and pathos within the context of literature is that of Wayne Booth (both in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* and in *The Company We Keep*).

²⁰ These remarks do not exhaust the differences between Nussbaum’s approach and the one developed here. I discuss the difficulties I see in Nussbaum’s position in detail in my forthcoming essay, “Literature as Aristotelian Moral Philosophy,” to be published in a volume devoted to Martha Nussbaum in The Library of Living Philosophers series.

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THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ROLE(S) OF LITERARY EXPERIENCES

Yet it is possible to engage in rational nonvalid argument in numerous non-literary ways. So far, the need for such argumentation merely shows that philosophers require nondeductive patterns of argument, not literature as such. Tying literature to rhetoric in this way explains the links between philosophical readings of literary works and legitimate belief assessment. The aesthetic context itself is still an unnecessary addition. How, then, does the experience of *literature in particular* add to the nonvalid yet rational move that is being made when we are learning from a literary text?

The answer to this has two dimensions. The simpler of these involves the contribution of the suggestive capacities of literature.²¹ “Literary argumentation” is not merely legitimate nonvalid reasoning but, rather, reasoning conducted in a state of mind—which reading literature itself creates—in which contingent claims and nonvalid moves can be sympathetically entertained. Suspending disbelief (which is one aspect of the state of mind that good literature sometimes creates) can help us bridge (or ignore) the gap between justification and the nonnecessary conclusion we are expected to draw. Claims about love or parenting, presented later in this book, do not lend themselves to rigorous justification. Avoiding such domains is surely an option, while philosophizing about them invites suggestiveness. Proposing this is not dangerous, since advocating suggestiveness is not the same as introducing manipulation into philosophy. On its own, an involved, responsive state is neither rational nor irrational. Although it can function as illegitimate, manipulative brainwashing, it can also manifest a rational willingness to reconfigure perception so that contingent insights can be contemplated. The question of whether a specific process is one or the other cannot be decided without examining the specific context. Sifting such appeals to context will be taken up in the next chapter.²²

²¹ Yehoshua (2001) recently talks of the suggestive capacities of literature (though the older reference to the “willing suspension of disbelief” may already be alluding to literature’s suasive abilities). The idea can be tracked back to Plato’s attack on the poets.

²² There are various restrictions that can be applied so that “the appeal to context” does not preempt the approach into one that cannot distinguish between appeals to context that should be accepted and those that are to be rejected. More than an issue of setting criteria of relevance that could function as a normative guide to successful sifting of appeals to context, the broader problem is how to devise an error theory for reasoning not predicated on validity but on the particular coordinates of the situation. Only an error theory could

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But experience in general, and the experience of reading literature in particular, is connected with knowledge in deeper ways than that. Experience is unique in that there is an irreducible gap between what we experience and what we manage to communicate through a description of that experience. Many ordinary examples verify this (e.g., trying to describe a majestic landscape to someone who has not seen it). The indescribable, nonparaphrasable aspect is a form of knowing (“You have to see it to know what I am talking about”). This kind of gap or demand for actually experiencing something does not exist in the case of argumentational justification: if I grasp an argument, there is nothing additional I need to do in order to know what is being communicated. Literature creates experiences that empower and support particular beliefs, and the details and variations of this process will be shown later in the readings.

“Support” requires explication. Literary experiences do not constitute *reasons* for accepting certain implications, as false beliefs can be embedded in very powerful reading experiences. But literary experiences do have a positive (though not indefeasible) connection with knowledge. I will now characterize this positive connection in four ways. First, to miss such experiences while contemplating some beliefs can itself be a form of error. Returning to the example of natural scenery, think of an obtuse entrepreneur who, on the basis of the repeated testimony of others, genuinely believes that a certain landscape is beautiful and awe inspiring, yet follows a course of action that destroys it. Indifference to beauty can surely be at work. There may also be other overriding reasons against preserving the landscape. But sometimes one suspects a more cognitive error: a lack of understanding that could not be remedied by being exposed to more propositions, but might be corrected by being exposed to the beauty of the landscape. Some will maintain that this experience constitutes a *reason* to avoid destroying the landscape. I have no quarrel with that, since this already discloses an outlook that respects experiences as distinct anchors of knowledge. My grounds for avoiding calling this experience a “reason” is my desire to accommodate a deeper epistemological function that is at work here. For even if our environmentally obtuse person holds to the same propositional content before and after he was exposed to the landscape (and in this sense he did not acquire a new “reason” against destroying the landscape), there may still be a

postulate a meaningful difference between reasoning and rational reasoning that I take to be a defining distinction of philosophical method and of a credible notion of philosophical argumentation. The issue is taken up in the next chapter.

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difference in knowledge between the two states, a difference that need not boil down to anything he says or does.

Missing certain experiences can lead to or itself be a form of error or misunderstanding. This is the first characterization of the positive connection between experience and knowledge. A second way to characterize this linkage is to specify various changes in what the entrepreneur would now say or do in order to explain the different kinds of knowing. Knowledge is sometimes reducible to actual or potential behavior. Thus, conduct that has changed does not merely describe manifestations of knowledge, but modifications in the knowledge itself.²³ The third characterization of the epistemic difference that results from the experience of seeing the landscape is metaphorical: the entrepreneur now knows the same content in a “deeper” or more “powerful” or “vivid” way. Disappointing as such metaphors are, they are still informative and inescapable when one tries to characterize the intrinsic dimension of transformations in epistemic ‘leveling,’ to use another metaphor. Powerful and deep conveying of false beliefs is a possibility that complicates matters. But this danger does not alter the positive contribution such depth makes to the epistemic status of *justified* beliefs. There is nothing incoherent about a property that can entrench false beliefs and also deepen justified ones. Fourth, such experiences can be thought of as enabling conditions. Light, for example, enables clear vision, even though it is not itself a reason for believing anything particular about what is seen. Many things can still go wrong after one turns on a light. Enabling conditions promote knowledge, but do not thereby constitute reasons.

“Emotional involvement,” “empathic involvement,” “enhanced perceptiveness of the particular,” “conveying” as opposed to “describing,” “showing” as opposed to “telling”—such constructions and oppositions that explain the unique sort of communication and intellectual experience that some literature enables are all informative. But they are also far too general, and can therefore be used only as terms that signify rich domains that need to be carefully charted.²⁴ If one wants a general term

²³ I disagree with those who believe that *all* knowledge is reducible to behavior. But I see no substantial argument between my position and that which subscribes to the more extreme view.

²⁴ The formulation of the describing/conveying opposition in Shakespearean commentary goes back at least to William Richardson in *A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of Some of Shakespeare’s Remarkable Characters* (London, 1774; rpt. New York, 1966). The telling/showing opposition along with the preference for the latter is explicit in *The Rape of Lucrece*: “To see sad sights moves more than hear them told, / For then the eye

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here, “experience” is the least misleading and the one that focuses most clearly on the important aspect they all share: the describable and at the same time nonparaphrasable component that is being related to knowledge.

If my goal here was to present a theory of literature, it would have been necessary now to inquire what distinguishes the experiences literature provides from other experiences (and, more specifically, whether anything distinguishes literary experiences from other aesthetic experiences). I would also have to argue against those who reject the idea of aesthetic experience, claiming that no successful demarcation exists between these experiences and others. Important as such questions are, pursuing them for our concerns is not mandatory and is probably detrimental, as saying anything more specific about literature here would only pare down the possible consensus. Even if “aesthetic experience” is a myth, and nothing distinguishes literary from nonliterary experiences, this does not prevent regarding the knowledge that literature yields as a form of experiential knowing.

THE STRUCTURALIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

My argument so far is this: if the literary text and its reading are persuasive, a claim is not only communicated but also justified. Rhetorical, invalid rational reasoning and the role of experience form the two constituents of such justification. These constituents interlock: invalid-yet-rational reasoning is *embedded* within an experience, an experience that both accommodates the move psychologically and supports the belief epistemically by becoming what may be called a “ground” for it. This does not imply that upon reading the work one also immediately accepts what it may “argue” for. Even in conventional philosophy the existence of a justification does not entail acceptance.²⁵ Justification—turning a claim into a truth claim, a candidate for truth—differs from verification—accepting a claim

interprets to the ear / The heavy motion that it doth behold . . .” (lines 1324–26). John Roe (in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* edition of *The Poems* [Cambridge, 1992], p. 206) relates these lines to Sidney and follows Malone in tracing the tradition of preferring the visual back to Horace’s *Art of Poetry*.

²⁵ Lamarque and Olsen draw a relevant distinction here, in claiming that “thematic statements . . . can be assigned significance and thus be understood without being construed as asserted” (1994, p. 328, 384).

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as true—and it is the former process that literature facilitates. At the same time, if nonliterary evidence and counterarguments to the “literary argument” have been assessed and found to be corroborating the truth claim being advanced, the (mere) truth-claim can turn into a justified true belief.

These then, are the steps leading from literature to truth and knowledge. But since virtually all work on literature and philosophy (this book included) deals with moral philosophy rather than other branches of philosophy, “justification,” as I have been unpacking it, should be understood as being broader in application than just relating to truth. “Truth” is a rather strained and usually redundant notion within ethics. Truth enters ethics when assessing the morally relevant facts (obvious as well as tacit facts). But the moral reasoning conducted in relation to these facts is typically not assessed in terms of it being true or false. Consequentialism, for instance, is not assessed as a true or a false theory in ethics, but as being plausible or implausible, comprehensive or limited, workable or superficial, etc. We justify certain moral outlooks, and this implies that there is something that we wish to get right, but the moral stance we accept does not become true. Rather, we adopt a moral stance because it makes sense/ is rewarding/ is conducive to happiness/ accommodates general fairness/ encapsulates sensitivities we care about—it is under one of these senses (or something like them) in which we take a moral stance to be “right.” And so literary justification, while it may lead to truth as I have been arguing above, is primarily attuned to different modes of acceptance of the plausibility of claims.

Literary works make plausible certain beliefs and also support them through the experiences they create. In focusing on such moments, the following readings in this book unfold a multilayered concept of understanding. Charting various interrelations between beliefs and the carefully constructed experiences in which these are embedded exposes modalities of philosophical understanding and philosophical insight. I speak of *philosophical* understanding and insight, as the beliefs and the processes of belief-formation I shall be dealing with all relate to general and defining aspects of life and to living a life well.

Epistemological cartography of this sort makes for this book’s metaphilosophical argument: particularizing epistemological processes into numerous relationships between complex experiences and specific claims—more specifically: connecting particular projections, expectations, blind spots, points of alienation, moments of involved attentiveness, aporias, and dismissals, with the claims specific readers make in such contexts, suggests a conception of human understanding. This conception can be

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an alternative to the one presupposed in most current Anglo-American philosophizing, in which truth claims and argumentation are all that matter.²⁶ The alternative could show that contemporary philosophical method is not only stylistically dry—and, it is important to note, “dryness” can be merely a “stylistic” fault only relative to a certain, no doubt dominant, conception of understanding and philosophical communication—but it presupposes a misguided view concerning human understanding and what it should ideally include. Human understanding, when functioning at its best, is not limited to accepting only what can be conclusively verified empirically or deductively. It also embraces suggestive processes that embed contingent beliefs in experiences that give them sharpness and force. But if this is so, then philosophy as it is practiced, taught, and published in some quarters perpetuates a misconception as to the nature of rationality.

A philosophical reading of literature has an epistemological basis in two ways: in being knowledge yielding, and in being itself an inquiry into the structuralization of knowledge. By “structuralization” I refer to the manner by which the same propositional content can be entertained on different levels. Epistemic structuralization also presupposes a difference between knowing and not knowing (as well as a manner of error) that does not consist in the beliefs entertained but rather depends on undergoing (or missing) certain experiences. It is in this sense that the relations between philosophy and literature are epistemological rather than moral: it is less the moral (paraphrasable) content being justified, and more the manner of contemplation, support, and acceptance of this content that constitute literature’s unique contributions to philosophical reflection. And so, while the following readings will deal with attitudes and problems typically classified as moral, my primary concern is with the experience in which moral content is embedded; the argumentative move that underlies this experience and supports a moral claim; the

²⁶ The contemporary state of philosophy sometimes masks the fact that many philosophers have rejected the idea that only arguments matter. For connections between style and implicit epistemology in Plato, see my “The Face of Truth” (1999); for such connections in Nietzsche, see my “Seeing Truths” (1998). The same connections between epistemological and rhetorical concerns also animate therapeutic visions of philosophy. I am thinking here of the way in which arguments are subordinated to ethical therapeutic goals in Hellenistic thought as shown in Nussbaum (1994). The medical analogy, so central to Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics, implies that, just like a physician in relation to a patient’s body, philosophers must always note the makeup of the recipient’s mind rather than limit themselves to cerebral discourse.

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manner by which experiences transform the qualitative dimension of beliefs or what it might mean to hold a belief; the way by which all this sets in motion rich forms of reasoning. In short, my concern will be epistemological.

Since these literary experiences can be described (though not paraphrased), I am not now attempting to resurrect discredited modes of private knowing. At the same time, the emphasis on a process one has to undergo personally does diverge from the linkage between public verification and knowledge, a linking that is such a dominant strand of modernist epistemology. In the next chapter, I will suggest what went wrong in the modern account of rationality, specifically in its rejection of rhetoric.

METHOD

Talk of experience brings up questions of method. How do we find out what these experiences are? The following readings will deal with this difficulty in various ways. One possibility is to note the mode in which a literary work operates on the reader (in this case, me). For example, in the essay on *Macbeth*, I argue that the play creates a growing disconnection from the valueless world of its hero, while establishing a preference for values that other characters exhibit. I allude to other interpreters who responded similarly to the work (though repeatability is not necessary). Another way is to note the work's effect on another interpreter. Here, for example, is Wilson Knight writing on *Julius Caesar*: "There is an almost brutal enjoyment evident in our imagery of slaughter, wounds, and blood: yet is it so flamed with imagination's joy that there is no sense of disgust."²⁷ Knight is telling us how some aspect of that play makes him feel. Some may object that such methods are subjective. But interpretations are not only "reports" of experiences—though they can be partly that too. In the context of interpretive discourse, Knight's use of "our" is never simply descriptive. If Knight supposed that the highly complex reaction he is describing is what we feel anyway, it makes no sense for him to argue for it or for us to read his interpretation. Interpretive remarks such as Knight's or mine are rather *suggestions* as to how one should relate to a text in the most fruitful way. This is why the subjective nature of such remarks is unimportant: since interpretations are invitations to structure one's experience in a certain way

²⁷ *The Imperial Theme*, Methuen & Co., London, 1945, p. 45.

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(rather than descriptions of experiences the work universally creates), it hardly matters that the interpreter is the only person who has, up to this point, reacted to the work in such a way. Invitations are never evaluated in terms of being subjective or not, but according to whether or not they lead to a worthwhile way to spend one's time. Whatever constitutes a worthwhile interpretation—that is, a fruitful mode of relating to a work—is a complicated issue involving many considerations. But subjectivity is not one of them, and so that worry can be laid to rest (though this way of thinking about interpretation also shows why interpreters should avoid producing invitations that no one else can accept).²⁸

To return to my main point, while interpretive discourse regarding aesthetic experiences is never simply descriptive, interpreters making such remarks as to their own responses are still committed to the idea that the text has created such experiences in them. For example, it would count against Knight's interpretation if it were revealed that he himself never really felt the sort of "brutal enjoyment" he is describing. Interpreters can surely misdescribe their experiences, and this complicates matters. But the fact that interpreters can be wrong about these experiences does not prevent the possibility of them being right about them. By appealing to vulnerable observations of reading experiences, or by preferring one set of observations to another, a philosophical use of literature is not worse off than a scientist appealing to what she sees, or a historian relying on firsthand reports of some events rather than others, or a judge putting his trust in one testimony over another. I will also add that experiences need not be ones in which beliefs are simply created, but may also involve missing certain connections. The chapter on *Romeo and Juliet* discusses the significance of readers forgetting (and interpreters dismissing the fact) that Romeo is in love with another woman at the beginning of the play.

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM AND DIDACTIC CRITICISM

The centrality of experience enables literature to be philosophically relevant without being instrumentalized—a threat that has led to

²⁸ While I do not mean to compare this to other suggestions within reader-response theory, readers may wish to read this method against other modes of analyzing response in Shakespeare, such as that of E.A.J. Honigmann (1976), who tries to avoid subjectivism by noting the way Shakespeare attempts to create specific responses.

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controversies over endangering the autonomy of art by turning literature into a form of moral philosophy.²⁹ Philosophers of literature need not employ a didactic concept of literature (though, in the context of early modern literature, it has often been suggested—e.g., by Dickey, 1966, pp. 12–19—that avoiding the didactic dimension of texts is itself a vulgarization of them). We read literature much for the same reason that we engage in art in general: it provides us with unique experiences that can be described but never fully conveyed through paraphrase. Some of these experiences can and should be investigated as part of the sort of descriptive epistemology I outlined above. Such investigation does not instrumentalize literature. Rather, it is an inquiry into what makes our experiences with literature unique. And this can be done, I will try to show, without postulating a generalized notion of aesthetic experience or harping too much on its conventional constituents (beauty or disinterest). Instead, it can be done by concentrating on particular experiences with powerful literary moments and the way these interrelate with specific beliefs.



We now have our five-stage explanation. A fictional context provides knowledge through argumentational routes that several theorists have proposed. My addition to existing suggestions was to incorporate them into a broad context of rational justification. Theorists have delineated several unique aspects of aesthetic response. My proposed contribution to these suggestions was to connect them with the state in which contingent claims and first truths need to be contemplated, and to add the connections between such experiences and knowledge. Finally, inquiring into the ways claims emerge as part of an aesthetic response does not instrumentalize aesthetic creations. Rather, such investigation is an inquiry into our unique reactions to literature.

²⁹ Novitz (1987, p. 12), perhaps because he wants to allow literature to be knowledge yielding, finds it necessary to argue against aesthetically oriented views of literature. As does Nussbaum (1998) in her reply to Richard Posner (1997, 1998), who criticized her approach as involving such an instrumentalization of literature. On the issue of instrumentalization, see too the exchange between Wayne C. Booth and Richard Posner in *Philosophy and Literature* (1998), as well as Booth's contribution to ethical criticism in the special issue of *Style* (1998) devoted to the morality-literature connections, as well as *The Company we Keep*.