

Philosophy, Literature, and the Faith of the Ironist

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the dynamic relationship between philosophy and literature, using the conceptual frame developed by Richard Rorty. First, I'm interested in revisiting Rorty's distinction between writers who are preoccupied with self-creation, self-edification, and autonomy, on the one hand, and writers who are dedicated to the problems of common good, public deliberation, and solidarity, on the other hand. Second, I try to draw a map of the contemporary theorizations concerning the possible *loci* in the philosophy – literature dyad. Third, I tackle the theme of ironism by discussing the philosophical implications of Michel Houellebecq's last novel, *Soumission*. In this case, we get a glimpse of the fact that there may be literary works that are both useful for public purposes and still faithful to irony. Moreover, this example shows that the barrier between philosophy and literature is permeable enough to produce fruitful results.

Keywords: irony, philosophy, literature, self-edification, autonomy, conversation of mankind, politicization of epistemology

1. Introduction

Since the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty's ideas and argumentative framework constituted a core topic of discussion in the field of contemporary philosophy. One of the main themes of debate was the concept of *conversation of mankind* (created by Michael Oakeshott). In the context of Rorty's fruitful philosophy, a lot of scholars and public intellectuals felt the need to bring ongoing clarification in this sense. What is interesting to see is the fact that we must reshape this debate periodically, according to the developments in science and society.

As we have seen in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty creates a dichotomy between writers who are preoccupied with self-creation and autonomy of the individual and writers for whom intersubjectivity, social practices and community issues represent the key factors for intellectual work. The subsequent vocabularies seem to have almost nothing in common: while the vocabularies of self-edification are focused on those socio-linguistic cues that would help a person get a more comprehensive feel about herself or himself, the vocabularies of public deliberation help us draw a better profile of how we should live together. While the former may be provocative, dangerous, weird, publicly obscure or socially outrageous, the latter has to encompass structures that glue the social texture and offer insights about the forms of *undistorted communication* (Habermas 1990). Moreover, the private options can be the outcome of any process (intuition, whim, phantasms, daydreaming), while public arguments have to obey certain forms of reason.

Richard Rorty (1998a) asserts that he likes writers from both categories, so he tries to blur the lines that separate them. Evidently, it is impossible to reduce one category to the other, but we can start by acknowledging the fact that both are very useful. Derrida and Habermas constitute a radical example, because the philosophical distance between these two writers appears to be unmanageable. For instance, Habermas states that the philosophy of subjectivity has not been a proper direction of development, its demise being indicated by the fact that it proved to be politically worthless. The philosophy of subjectivity, he claims, ended up being rather a personal fight between skilful thinkers. Instead of trying to bring more light on the questions of poverty, oppressiveness or solidarity, such authors dedicate a lot of time and energy to either deconstruct a tradition that proved useful or venture on dubitable roads of language.

2. New facts and new conversations

The dynamicity of events is not the only reason for redesigning the shape of our conversations. As Rorty showed,

some of our cultural metaphors have been dried out of their energy and they are no longer useful. We have to search for metaphors which help us reach our private and public goals. And who is better suited for this task than the writer who is continuously preoccupied to find seductive images, new encompassing terms which replace the old ones, and creative narratives? Such a writer would have to acquire the type of freshness that is pervasive in Derrida's works, and constitutes the main point of Rorty's praise. The semantic strategy put together by Jacques Derrida and advocated by Rorty is to move away from the standpoint of fixed, essentialist meaning and instead head for uncharted territory. Fuelled by the flow of "candescent" imaginations (Rorty 1998b, 328), the writer makes his or her readers embark on an original, yet unexpected journey.

3. Philosophy and literature : A troublesome relation

Philosophy and literature are two close fields, even if they institutionally developed as different domains with different practices. Philosophers have used literary forms such as poems (Parmenides), dialogues (Plato, Augustine, Hume), essays (Montaigne), aphorisms (Heraclitus). Nietzsche preferred the literary expression for his philosophical ideas, while Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, gave their philosophical perspectives a parallel treatment in their literary works. Likewise, there are many literary authors that put in the centre of their texts a philosophical interrogation – Dostoyevsky, Proust, Borges, Calvino, Eco being just a few names of this category. Some thinkers acknowledge the complicity between these two genres, trying to negotiate their role and establish taxonomies of their relationships. Paul Virilio stated firmly: "it is my belief that philosophy is a mere subdivision of literature. To me, Shakespeare is really a great philosopher, perhaps above Kant and a few others." (Armitage 1999, 27) There is also the option of ignoring this "pseudo-issue" and considering them as separate domains. For Arthur C. Danto (1986), Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* is just a literary work and not a philosophical one, while Gabriel Marcel's *Journal métaphysique* is a work of philosophy. Thus, even if the

relations between literature and philosophy are historical, the institutions of philosophy and literature have developed apart, so a literary philosophy is no more possible in an age of professional philosophy (Danto 1984).

Roman Ingarden believes that the scientific and the literary works of art have different structures, even if both of them may be put under the umbrella term “literary works” in its broadest sense. Anyhow, their differences are irreconcilable: “when the work manifests no aesthetic values but does express important philosophical or psychological insights; it is still no work of art. And, conversely, it is a mistaken undertaking to examine and interpret literary works of art as if they were disguised philosophical systems. Even if literary works of art sometimes perform other social functions or are used in the performance of such functions, that adds nothing to their character of being works of art, nor does it save them as works of art if they embody no aesthetic values in their concretization.” (Ingarden 1973, 147)

Jean-Luc Nancy discussed the problem of style, because philosophy is generally seen as a discourse without style. The disjunction of philosophy from stylistic effects can be made only through knowledge of belles-lettres, thus literature can “either well subordinate philosophy to itself as a genre and bring to bear on it the only kind of judgment that does not arise from philosophical decision, or it can altogether exclude philosophy from its domain, from style.” (Nancy 2008, 17-8) Anyhow, philosophy and literature are connected by something which purportedly dissociates them – *Darstellung* (the exposition) is a literary and a philosophical issue (Long 2014). Deconstruction is also a favorite example that mixes two styles, the thetic and the poetic, the tropological and the propositional and in this vein it abolishes the distinction between literature and philosophy. The deconstructivist approach is situated in the exteriority of analytic and discursive requirements of philosophy or science, and pictures the writing as a rhetoric fictive construction. Nevertheless, the style is not a gratuitous ornamentation of an expression, but its substance; the literature is not only separate from philosophy, but poetry and politics aren’t too, the style becoming engaged: “it was normal,

foreseeable, and desirable that studies of deconstructive style should culminate in the problematic of right, of law [*loi*] and justice.” (Derrida 2002, 235)

Rorty also affirmed the possibility of a post-metaphysical culture constructed on the literary genres, the ironist privileging the novel. Seen as a hermeneutic method, the deconstruction still needs to preserve the distinction between literature and philosophy, but Rorty asserts that “all of us – Derrideans and pragmatists alike – should try to work ourselves out of our jobs by conscientiously blurring the literature-philosophy distinction and promoting the idea of a seamless, undifferentiated ‘general text’” (Rorty 1991, 86-7). The distinction philosophy – literature is reduced to a light contrast between familiarity and unfamiliarity of practices. The idea of the universal text may be criticized and introduced into a larger perspective of suspicion and displacements. Thus, science displaced religion, idealist philosophy displaced science, but these processes didn’t demonstrate that religion, science or “the metaphysics of presence” are outdated genres (Rorty 1982, 155). Nowadays, the literature is the general term that includes any kind of discourse that can touch the sensitivity, facilitate the moral reflection and expand the ability to raise key questions. The literary criticism also augmented its relevance, since it offers a constant revision of final vocabularies. The importance of the community remains clearly stated; philosophy is seen as a kind of writing and its tradition – “a family romance involving, e. g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida.” (Rorty 1978, 143) The reader’s edification implies rather a political project than an epistemological one; in this view, philosophy has to shape human solidarity and strengthen the liberal democracy, as good literature does (Misselhorn 2014, 107).

Habermas pointed out that the language has not only a poetic function, a world-disclosure capacity, but also a problem-solving ability. Even if diverse types of languages (scientific, philosophic, or everyday discourses) contain rhetoric elements, their resemblance to literature is still small:

“Significant critics and great philosophers are also noted writers. Literary criticism and philosophy have a family

resemblance to literature – and to this extent to one another as well – in their logical achievements. But their family relationship stops right there, for each of these enterprises the tools of rhetoric are subordinated to the discipline of a distinctive form of argumentation.” (Habermas 1990, 209-10)

Habermas thinks that these disciplines have different scopes and ways of obtaining and exposing knowledge, with different expert cultures. For Rorty (1989), the poeticized culture is useful against Habermas’s ideal of reconstruction of a new form of rationalism. The universal validity and the communicative rationality are, for Rorty, examples of “big ideas”; Habermas’s metaphysical views would be complemented with a dose of irony. Whereas Habermas reads Heidegger, Nietzsche or Derrida as bad public philosophers, Rorty reads them as good private philosophers. The dichotomy public – private creates a gap in the conversation between Rorty and Habermas.

Inside the literary theories, we can remark a similar concern about the complex relationships between the literary and the philosophical fields. Dominique Maingueneau thinks that even if those two types of discourse have a distinctive core, the productive analysis will find their conjoint pool. Moreover, philosophical and literary discourses are, in fact, “self-constituting discourses” that “take charge of what could be called the *archeion* of discursive production in a given society.” (Maingueneau 1999, 183) He believes that pure discourses don’t exist, the mixed ones being really present. The dominant position of an element or trait is the one that leads to a label or another. Thus, the philosophical discourse emphasizes the speculative reflexivity, while the literary one will give salience to the fictional reflexivity. Maingueneau (2004) also talks about the concept of *paratopia* that represents the authors’ paradoxical location between interiority and exteriority, between belonging and not belonging to the literary domain. Paratopia maintains strong ties with the indistinction of literary and philosophical genres, showing also the paradoxes which authors have to confront. Thus, even institutional theories of literature are unable to draw the line between these two fields. Moreover, the institutional affiliation is not

sufficient to produce works associated with that institution. Mikkonen (2013, 6) provides the examples of Foucault and Bataille, who stated that they didn't actually write philosophy, but their works were labeled as philosophical. The difference between "the philosophy as an academic discipline and philosophy as a broader activity which systematically explores fundamental questions concerning human existence, knowledge and values" (Mikkonen 2013, 7) is another criterion that can be at work here. Thus, in the narrow sense, literary works do not count as philosophy, while in the broader sense, literature may have philosophical value. Anthony Quinton made the distinction between "philosophy through literature" (the use of literary forms for a better presentation of the philosophical ideas), "philosophy in literature" (the existence of a philosophical theme of a literary work, and this theme represents also an important part of its aesthetic value), and "philosophy as literature" (when philosophical papers are read as literary texts). The literary authors are also divided in three main categories: "couturiers", "philosopher-novelists" and "philosopher-poets", and "philosophical novelists" and "philosophical poets". This distinction tells its own tale about the overlapping of these types and, consequently, of the two main domains, philosophy and literature.

Bence Nanay (2013) observed that, in fact, most of the contemporary philosophers accept that literature may be used for popularizing philosophical ideas, but it will be always discontinuous with philosophy, between them being an "impermeable barrier". Thus, he labeled this situation as the "Discontinuity Thesis" which he investigated in two conjoint ways: by "Don't Underestimate Literature" strategy and "Don't Overestimate Philosophy" strategy. The first one argues that literature can do what philosophy is generally meant to do, whereas the second one states that philosophy isn't all the time the exposition of logically valid arguments. The refutation of the Discontinuity Thesis doesn't imply that the postmodernist relativism would be accepted or that philosophy and literature would be only two different names for the same thing. On the contrary, Nanay tried to show that the frontier between these two disciplines is penetrable and this assumption doesn't affect

the recognition of their important differences. In other words, “philosophy is not as intellectually straight-forward as it is advertised to be and literature is not as intellectually impoverished as it is generally taken to be.” (Nanay 2013, 349) The pro-Discontinuity Thesis is based mainly on three arguments: philosophy is “the dispassionate quest for truth”, while “literature (a) is not a quest, (b) does not aim at the truth, and (c) is not dispassionate” (Nanay 2013, 350). The first strategy adopted to argue against the Discontinuity Thesis conducted to the analysis of the role of imagination (Hilary Putnam being here cited for the acknowledgement of imaginative re-creation of moral perplexities), of the capacity of both genres to change the perspectives of the world (Philip Kitcher and Stanley Cavell being representatives for this point), and the investigations of ways in which literature and philosophy put us in a position where we draw conclusions. The second strategy develops the analysis of what counts as philosophy, the psychology of philosophy, and the use of the pure logical inference model in the philosophical reasoning. In conclusion, if the Discontinuity Thesis is false, then “not only we can learn from literature, or from art in general, but we can even learn philosophy from it. In contrast, if we do accept the Discontinuity Thesis, then aesthetic cognitivism seems doomed. Second, if the Discontinuity Thesis is false, then philosophy has no excuse for ignoring literature – while philosophy can and does learn a lot from science, it can also learn from literature. [...] My aim was to show that philosophy should take the arts seriously, and, ironically, the main considerations in favor of this come from sciences. If we have reason to reject the Discontinuity Thesis, philosophers may be persuaded to read not only *Science* and *Nature*, but also Proust and Joyce.” (Nanay 2013, 358)

4. The ironist who is hated by everyone

Habermas is right when he asserts that the ironist’s strive for more and better irony gives us little help when it comes to public issues. But, Rorty thinks, this is not a sign that the philosophy of the subject has lost its vitality, as Habermas indicates. On the contrary, trying to get to forms of subtler irony is proof for the idea that the ironist continues to do his or

her job. The latter, Rorty argues, is to both enhance our feeling of social justice and make us aware of the suffering in the world, as the works of Nabokov have done in such a brilliant manner (Rorty 1989). The ironist guides us through the process of *unlearning*, clearing our minds of the residual clutter left over by worn out doctrines. Moreover, he or she constantly restates the theses of nominalism, as we, simple readers, are in danger of being intellectually trapped in an ideology which, sooner or later, will be pulling the strings of our social behaviour. Such a philosophical stance does not offer us clues in order to make the right choices when it comes to deliberative matters, but ensures that the field of possibilities is not limited by anything. This form of nominalism is by no means threatening or coercive, but enlightening and therapeutic.

As described above, the writer who embraces the cause of the ironist would be exposed to criticism concerning the lack of public relevance. The most talented writers have to face, nowadays, the public wrath when they either step over the line of social customs and political correctness or are perceived as not doing enough for the common good. Such is the case of Michel Houellebecq and of his latest novel, *Soumission* (2015). Houellebecq built up another provocative scenario that offended many readers and professional critics, and brought back his old monstrous *persona*. In *Soumission*, Houellebecq describes the fictional transformation of the French society and academia in the light of the political success of the Islamic party. As he has done in his previous books, he shows no mercy in depicting the Western world as a crepuscular form, which lost its vigour and its reason of functioning, desperately seeking for guidance, help and, last but not least, money. The main character of the novel is an anti-hero. Houellebecq uses the technique of *mise en abyme*, and creates an underground connection between Huysmans, François (the university professor in the book) and himself. In fact, the French writer gives us certain hints in order to walk the diegetic path of identifying François and Houellebecq himself: similar homes, similar habits, similar clothes and quite similar thoughts. This is not only the writer playing a literary trick, but also a warning and a nominalist interpretation of the self that implies that no one is safe, not

even someone that has grown to become sceptical or cynical as Houellebecq himself became. The novel contains a terrible turnover, and this constitutes its very philosophical centre. At first, we are acquainted with a (post)modern intellectual, defined by the lack of a personal metanarrative and by a general misanthropy: he has few personal relationships, he has no real friends, his love life is scarce and shallow, he shows no moral constraints when it comes to contacting and using prostitutes. François is *on the road* both career wise and personal life wise, but this road doesn't seem a very appealing one. His feeling of disorientation and the lack of meaning mirrors the traits of the Western society as a whole. The solution of hedonism proves to be an illusion, as Joris-Karl Huysmans testified in his writings: sooner or later, the bitter taste of nothingness would wipe away the sweetness of sensual pleasures. As the fictional political situation suddenly changes, the entire France changes too, the shockwave being rapidly transmitted all the way up to the university. The iconic Sorbonne instantly shifts its status: from a symbolic territory of freedom, debate and unbiased science, to an ancillary tool for Islamic theology. Our depraved and sophisticated anti-hero (mirroring, yet again, Huysmans's *Des Esseintes*) has to make a difficult choice: leave the University, keeping his faith in having no faith whatsoever and thus remaining autonomous, or continuing his academic career, but (at least officially) converting to Islam. The moral landscape described in the first part of the novel gradually gives way to the new reality and to the new distribution of power. The same goes for the university, and we see how scholars convert, driven by different factors: opportunism, interest, curiosity, political shrewdness or lust in disguise. Houellebecq is at his best when he insidiously implies that many of the vices of the past can still be present under the proper circumstances and with the suitable religious façade. People didn't change that drastically over a few months, but their hidden desires and plans have taken a different form. In the final pages of the novel, we see François contemplating the idea of religious conversion. In his daydreaming scenario, the bleak colours of the past are replaced with paradisiac images, the old uncertainties with a goal, a mission and a

meaning, and the girls dressed traditionally have become the promise of authentic love.

Houellebecq's use of irony meets, in my view, the requirements of Richard Rorty, and even goes further than that. First of all, the French writer constantly poses the question of identity, and we can find it developed in several fields in his older novels (science, libidinal economy or the art market). In *Soumission*, he takes things to another level by deconstructing our sense of autonomy: what are the limits of self-creation and self-edification when our vulnerabilities are put to the test? Can we hold on to our beliefs when stormy times arrive? As Houellebecq shows, a large majority of people – even from the academia – choose safety and survival at any cost, and redesign their inner self (self-deception being a major strategy) in order to adapt to the latest state of affairs. France (which may be used as a symbol for the whole Europe) became submissive without putting too much of a fight. The country of reason and polemics saw its weaknesses being exploited quickly, with very few individuals committed to forms of opposition.

Second, Houellebecq is not a writer for whom the literature encapsulates ready-made philosophical ideas that constitute conversational stoppers. In fact, his writings are almost every time forms of challenging the *status quo*, as Jacques Derrida's works are forms of challenging what we think we know about philosophy and its functions. Turning the modern Western conscience inside out, Houellebecq scrupulously indicates its flaws, its infelicities, its troubled past and above all, its naivety. His works are the works of a literary shaman committed to the goal of unlearning: our theories, to which we seldom bow down in idolatrous fashion, leave something behind every time. Of course, Houellebecq has chosen shock instead of care, has preferred to write shamelessly instead of using euphemisms, he went directly for a blunt provocation instead of leading us into meaningful meditation. It is difficult to picture him taking part seriously in a deliberative group or exchanging long chains of arguments with fellow writers or philosophers with the goal of clarifying, "once and for all", a certain matter. But what he surely does is wake us up before we start our search for *actual* arguments.

Third, Houellebecq has been accused, among other things, of being a nihilist. It is hard to produce a definitive answer that would cover his entire work, but in the case of *Soumission* what he really accomplishes is to show one possible course of history to which the present day nihilism of the Western culture could lead to. The shivers down our spine when we read the book are due to the unwelcomed feeling that the counterfactual frame constructed by Houellebecq might not be that far-fetched, after all. Moreover, he gives an example of the destructive force of nihilism, which not only behaves like an autoimmune disease inside its very own culture, but infiltrates deeply the life of simple persons, who find themselves alienated and with no life directions. Some of Houellebecq's critics have attacked him pointing to the lack of moral solutions in his works, or to his constant struggle to evade the paradigm of political correctness. Noticing his case, we could say, on a humorous note, that while the politicization of epistemology as discussed earlier might still leave open space for debates, the politicization of the literary critique seems apodictic.

5. Conclusions

A Rorty warned us that it is extremely difficult to paint an ironist with the colours of *agora*, undistorted communication and consensus. True enough, we could never pretend that Houellebecq belongs to the same family as Rawls, Foucault or Habermas. But this perception does not have to blind us and make us forget that in older times, a kingdom would not include only skilful workers, soldiers, scientific and administrative elites. In order to keep things balanced, someone had to play the fool. The archives of history don't tell us, unfortunately, how many fools were punished or killed for their insubordination or their boldness in talking about dangerous things. The jester not only entertained people, but also noticed the lies that people told, unveiled the frailty of our knowledge schemes, criticised the policies of the elite or ridiculed the founding myths of a community. The jester would have shouted both in the moment when we prove intolerant and in the moment of our deepest leniency. The jester would have preferred the pamphlet over the serious play and the paradox

over the carefully crafted arguments. A community needed, in the past, and still needs today both the seriousness of the public educator and the joyful nature of the ironist. We need the optimism and the commitment of the public intellectual focused on solidarity and his or her will to reduce sufferance as much as possible. We need praise, support and help in creating suitable spaces for our useful projects. But we also need someone to tell us when we fail. An honest ironist is a humanist.

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