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EXPLORING THE RELATION BETWEEN LITERARY WORKS AND READER RECEPTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR MORAL REFLECTION[1]

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Abstract: How can we, perspicuously, explain the relation between a literary text and its interpretation by a reader in a way that supports the hypothesis that literature matters for moral reflection? In this article, based on a critical examination of some anglophone authors, who are more or less engaged in investigations related to the analytic philosophy of language, and who address the relation between philosophy and literature, we propose a distinction between two types of relations: the relation between the literary work and its reception by a reader, and the empirical relation between the reception of the literary work and changes in the reader. For advances in moral reflection, this relation may not be an empirical one. Therefore, we propose a form of explanation for the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, involving the writer and their literary work, the reader and their interpretative role, and the shared background between writer and reader.

Keyword: Moral reflection, philosophy of language, narrative, literature.

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1. Why literature matters for moral reflection

It might be an exaggeration to agree with Iris Murdoch that "the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations" or even that, in this way, "it is and always will be more important to know about Shakespeare than to know about any scientist" (Murdoch, 2013, p. 33). However, Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of literature, which in this article we will consider more specifically in terms of its narrative possibilities, touches on something crucial for reflections on morality. Murdoch states in that same paragraph, this time with more precision than exaggeration: "Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them" (Murdoch, 2013, p. 33).

Words tell stories that, in turn, express visions of life. Martha Nussbaum asserts that narration itself, through the selection of literary genre, formal structures, sentences, and vocabulary, "expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communication are, of life's relations and connections" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 5). According to her, "certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist" (Nussbaum,1990, p. 5).

In this article, we propose to explore, based on a philosophical methodology aligned with analytical philosophy of language, issues related to the relation between literature and moral reflection. Thus, the philosophical discussion developed here is predominantly situated within the context of an

Anglophone philosophical tradition. Due to this delimitation of scope, this work should be understood as an attempt to contribute to the analytical philosophy of language. Consequently, literary or aesthetic theories concerning text reception and, potentially, readers' experiences are not addressed in this study, although we acknowledge that a comprehensive investigation on the topic should include such perspectives.

It is not difficult to find, among contemporary English-speaking authors who are occasionally or frequently engaged in philosophical studies of language, statements like those of Murdoch and Nussbaum, which highlight a certain importance of literature for moral reflection. For Arthur C. Danto, "(literature) seems to have something important to do with our lives, important enough that the study of it should form an essential part of our educational program" (Danto, 2010, p. 57). Cora Diamond suggests that we can learn, from the reading of literary works and the reflection they allow, "terms of criticism of thought applicable to discussions of practical issues and to moral philosophy itself" (Diamond, 1995, p. 377). In turn, Hilary Putnam affirms that, in some way, literature is related to "a kind of knowledge which is close to the centre of moral concern" (Putnam, 2010, p. 92).

Therefore, in this article, we will follow the interest of some philosophical authors in how the analysis of narratives favors moral reflection. We intend to offer, within the parameters of an analytical philosophy of language to which those authors adhere to a greater or lesser degree, a contribution that might make the relation between the literary work and its reception a bit more perspicuous. When Martha

Nussbaum suggests, for example, through an analysis of Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors*, that the author shows there is a "complicity between the consciousness of the reader (and the writer) of stories and the consciousness, the morality, of perception" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 255); or when Putnam argues that the novel "aids us in the imaginative re-creation of moral perplexities, in the widest sense" (Putnam, 2010, p. 87), it is reasonable to raise questions about the relation between the writer's intention and the reader's interpretation. Is there an empirical connection between moral descriptions in literature and the behavior of readers?

Or rather, and this is the central question of this article: how can we explain the relation between a literary text and its interpretation by readers in a way that supports the hypothesis that literature matters for moral reflection? Our approach to making this relation more unambiguous will involve distinguishing between two types of relations: the one between a literary work and its reception, and the one between the reception of a literary work and the change it would bring about in the reader. We will also propose an examination of Danto's mirror image – according to which each literary work is about the "I" that reads the text through identification with the subject of the text (Danto, 2010), and Donald Davidson's triangulation image, whose vertices – in the case of literary language: writer, audience, and common background (Davidson, 2005) – seem, in our view, to provide a form of explanation that meets the basic requirements for establishing a proficuous connection between literature and moral reflection.

2. How literature prompts moral reflection

If we view moral reflection as an investigative process seeking norms for action, the question of the relation between the literary work and its reader would concern how narratives provide judgments or practical answers for action in the world. In this context, the relation between writer and reader would resemble that between a sage and those seeking practical guidance on how to act prudently, according to duty, or by maximizing good consequences – thereby reflecting, respectively, the three main models of normative ethics: virtue ethics, deontologies, and consequentialisms.

According to Nussbaum, the question on how to live is the starting point for philosophical inquiry into the relation between literature and morality (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 245). Similarly, Putnam considers the question on how to live, approached as a practical rather than scientific investigation, central to moral reflection, as people reflect on their own character and often seek to justify their actions when criticized (Putnam, 2010, p. 83-85). However, both authors reject the notion that the relation between literature and moral reflection is one where literature serves as a practical guide for how to live. Nussbaum follows the critique that treats the literary work as aimed at the practical interests and needs of readers as something "naive, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 21). Similarly, Putnam argues that literature has long resisted being a vehicle for propaganda, morality, philosophy, or ideology, as literary texts often do not offer ideal ways of life or solutions but vividly and emotionally portray the challenges of envisioning a way of life

that is both ideal and viable across different times, societies, and perspectives (Putnam, 2010, p. 86-87).

However, the centrality of the question on how to live for moral reflection can be questioned. Cora Diamond observes that philosophers who relate moral philosophy or moral thought to specifying how to live well give prominence to principles of action, in that actions and choices shape a particular form of life, so that being able to lead whatever constitutes a good human life is being able to make good choices (Diamond, 1995, p. 373). For Diamond, this specification of the domain of morality in terms of action and choice is a limitation, and regarding the contribution of literature to moral reflection, she states:

> If we say that the sphere of the moral is not limited to action but includes thought and imagination, the moral significance of works of literature is not reducible to their connection, direct and indirect, with action, but includes also what kind of thought and imagination they express and what they invite (1995, p. 377).

Diamond follows Iris Murdoch's proposal to introduce the private domain of inner life into moral reflection[4]. In the case of literary analysis, such an expansion of the domain of investigation broadens the exploration of what has moral significance, such as how people speak and remain silent, how

[4] In "Vision and Choice in Morality", Iris Murdoch examines the behaviorist trend in the philosophy of her time, which treats the concept of "mind" in terms of observable actions, so that "the material which the philosopher is to work is simply (under the heading of behavior) actions and choices, and (under the heading of language) choice-guiding words with the arguments which display the descriptive meaning of these words" (Murdoch, 1956, p. 38). However, such a philosophical inclination excludes a conception of morality related to "inner life" and Murdoch advocates for including this domain in moral reflection, that is, "inner life" in the sense of personal attitudes and visions which do not take the form of choice-guiding arguments (Murdoch, 1956, p. 39).

they evaluate themselves, what they think funny, and what they continuously reveal through their reactions and conversations. In this sense, the moral interest in literature can also extend to the "inner life" that is displayed in gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, and styles of faces as morally expressive of an individual or of a people (Diamond, 1995, p. 374-376).

Nevertheless, even though there are differences in preferences regarding the scope of moral reflection – observable actions or inner life – all these authors we have mentioned emphasize that the philosophical interest in narratives does not relate to the possibility of literature suggesting, to readers, laudable behaviors or certain moral judgments as correct. The authors we have examined highlight the reflective possibilities that literary texts offer.

In contrast to a conception of philosophical text akin to the rigor and precision inspired by the methods and formal style of the natural sciences[5], Nussbaum characterizes literary texts as possessing a different kind of rigor and precision. What moral reflection seeks to cover, a certain domain of human life, demands, for Nussbaum, a different type of precision and a different standard of rationality (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 19-20). Similarly, Putnam, by epistemologically legitimizing literature as a vehicle for practical knowledge, recognizes this knowledge as involving our capacities of feeling and imagination (Putnam, 2010, p. 91).

[5] Danto explains that philosophy, as something that seems a singular crossbreed of art and science, seeks to resemble the latter in the sense of its transformation into a profession: "the imperatives that have governed the transformation of philosophy into a profession have stressed our community with the sciences (and) our tendency is to regard style, save to the degree that it enhances perspicuity, as adventitious and superfluous (Danto, 2010, p. 52-53).

For Nussbaum, there is an "organic connection" between form and content that challenges a certain trend in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, which treats style merely as decorative and irrelevant to the stating of content. The author seeks to recover a non-departmentalized conception of moral inquiry that the Greeks of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. possessed. For those Greeks, there were not two separate sets of issues in the realm of human action and choice: aesthetic issues and moral issues. Nussbaum, interested in the possibilities of literature to attend to particular people and situations rather than abstract rules, highlights the following aspects of the Greek tragedies of that period: the recognition of the ethical importance of contingency, the deep sense of conflicting obligations, and the exploration of the ethical significance of passions, all of which are deeply connected with the forms and structures characteristic of tragic poetry (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 4-15).

In an exemplary case of contemporary literature, Henry James's novel *The Ambassadors*, Nussbaum's analysis contrasts the importance of attention to particular circumstances (based on what she calls the "morality of perception") with the rigid adherence to abstract rules, respectively, through the characters Louis Lambert Strether and his fiancée, Mrs. Newsome (who asks him to travel to Europe to bring her son, Chad, back to the United States). Although Mrs. Newsome's words and behavior evoke strictness, her moralism is viewed as based on the idea of the dignity of agency: "to the noble and autonomous moral agent, nature has, and should have, no power to jolt or to surprise, and also no power to inspire delight and passionate wonder" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 250).

Nussbaum explains:

> It is because Mrs. Newsome is no mere caricature, but a brilliantly comic rendering of some of the deepest and most appealing features of Kantian morality, that the novel has the balance and the power it does. We see the Kantian attitude as one that gives us a special dignity and exaltation: we see it, too, as a deep part of our culture (2010, p. 250).

On the other hand, upon arriving in Europe, Strether adopts a new form of perception. He wants to "see" and becomes open to "adventure", assuming a mode of agency that is "porous and susceptible of influence" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 252); in his new moral stance, the norm is not to adhere to general rules but to improvise ingeniously in response to what is perceived as new (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 253). Strether, who is compelled to write about his experiences to Mrs. Newsome, ends up alarming her precisely because of the narrative nature of his letters, which contrasts sharply with her own moral perspective. According to Nussbaum, the morality of perception in Henry James's novel illustrates how "stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law", but as what they are, something that emerges from sensitive and emotional responses to the new (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 255).

Nussbaum relates literature to moral reflection, highlighting how the form of literary narrative prioritizes the perception of particular people and circumstances over abstract rules. She suggests a conception of ethical understanding that involves not only intellectual activities but also openness to perception and sensitivity. In this sense, for Nussbaum, certain literary texts are indispensable for philosophical

investigation. Thus, literature is important for moral reflection, a point where Nussbaum, Danto, Diamond, Murdoch, and Putnam converge, and with which we align ourselves. However, a common element in much of the discussion about the relation between moral reflection and philosophy is a certain vagueness regarding the reader's interpretation of the literary text. There is a somewhat generic way of writing about this relation that tends to appeal to the reader's capacities that might be prompted by literary works. Let us return to Nussbaum's reflection in the previous paragraph, where she states that stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars; or Putnam's assertion that practical knowledge involves our capacities of feeling and imagination. It seems that there could be a more perspicuous way to address this kind of relation.

From now on, we propose to deepen the investigation into the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, emphasizing both the interpretive role of the reader and the shared background between writer and reader.

3. Possibilities of explaining the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader

In the article "Philosophy and/as/of Literature", Arthur C. Danto follows Hegel's aesthetic thought, which holds that a work of art exists for those who appreciate it, and not for itself. According to this view, the work of art exists solely for individual appreciation and thus finds its completeness. In the case of literature, Danto argues that each work is about the "I" who reads the text and which identifies himself not with the implied reader for whom the implied

narrator writes, but with the actual subject of the text in such a way that each work becomes a metaphor for each reader. The metaphorical sense is explained by the immediacy of identification, where literature becomes a kind of mirror. Each work would show, with the benefit of the mirror, an aspect that we "would not know as ours", "an unguessed dimension of the self", transforming the reader's self-consciousness through identification with the image. In this sense, literature would be "transfigurative", in a way that "cut across the distinction between fiction and truth" (Danto, 2010, p. 63-64).

Danto's mirror image seems to us an attempt to explain, in a somewhat more straightforward manner, the issue raised by a range of philosophical works that point to the relevance of literature, as narrative, for moral reflection. Specifically, it addresses how to explain the relation between the literary work and its reception by a reader in a way that avoids the misleading conception that this connection is between a wise author and a reader seeking practical guidance or moral judgments. As we previously presented, a certain instrumentalization of literature, as a form of moral propaganda, tends to be rejected by authors who address the relation between literature and moral reflection. In this sense, Danto explains the relation between work and reception through the mirror image, in which fictional characters reflect aspects of the real reader's personality that are not yet recognized. Thus, it is not a conception of the relation between work and reception where one might expect the reader to be motivated to change specific behaviors or moral beliefs.

There is an epistemic advantage in this mirror image, at least in its attempt to explain the relation between work and its reception by a reader – something that is assumed but rarely perspicuously articulated in authors who both highlight the philosophical relevance of literary narratives and reject the hypothesis that literary texts would be relevant for causing behaviors or serving as vehicles for moral judgments. When Nussbaum, for example, asserts that by reading as "if for life", we bring our hopes, fears, and confusions to the text and allow it to "impart a certain structure to our hearts" (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 22), Danto's mirror image seems an alternative to explain, in a plainer manner than Nussbaum's assertion, how readers, identified with narratively developed characters, recognize previously unguessed aspects of themselves. Danto's explanation could cover not only moral reflections oriented towards action – i.e., investigations into possible ways of living well – but also reflections oriented towards the "inner life", in the terms of Murdoch and Diamond, where literature, in a mirroring manner, would present aspects of intimacy to be recognizable to its readers.

Nevertheless, the mirror image does not suggest an empirical connection between reading a work of art and an enhancement of self-knowledge; after all, this would merely be another way of implying a relation between literary work and its reception that involves adapting literature to a moralizing form of guiding actions. Danto uses the example of Don Quixote, the protagonist of Miguel de Cervantes' eponymous novel, to critically illustrate the idea that the reception of a work of art can lead to behavioral change through supposed self-knowledge enhancement. Cervantes' hero, an avid

reader of medieval chivalric romances, is transformed by literature into a wandering knight, perceiving his world as a realm of knightly opportunities, where windmills are seen as monsters and wenches as virgins. For Danto, such a misguided reception of literary works is akin to reading Cartesian meditations and arriving at the belief in the existence of an Evil Genius (Danto, 2010, p. 64).

Thus, we propose the importance of distinguishing between two types of relations: that between the literary work and its reception, and that empirical one between the reception of a literary work and changes in a reader. It seems to us that authors interested in the positive philosophical consideration of literature tend to focus on that first type of relation, often rejecting or not emphasizing the idea of the literary work as something that causes changes in the reader, which could influence action in the world or inner life

If the crucial relevance of a literary work as a piece of philosophical reflection were to positively influence its reader, the relation to be examined would be that between reception and change in the reader. However, an approach considering changes caused by reading a work of art would be an empirical one, where reading certain texts would have a reasonable probability of causing specific changes. We do not ignore the possibility or relevance of establishing this type of relation. For instance, neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf's work, which investigates brain changes caused by reading literary works, describes how reading literature fosters neurophysiological occurrences that promote the development of analytical and emotional skills (Wolf, 2016).

Therefore, we suggest that the philosophical interest in literary works as content for moral reflection, stems from the relation between literature and its reception by a reader, rather than from the empirical relation between reception and changes in a reader. We also propose, from now on, what appears to us an even more perspicuous way to present the relation between literature and reception, this time using Donald Davidson's triangulation model. As we have examined, Danto's mirror image is structured in terms of the literary work (written by someone) and its reader, with the "I" identified with the subject of the text. In its way, the triangulation model also includes these two components (writer and their audience) and, in an addition that seems to contribute to a clearer understanding of the relation between literary work and its reception, the component, or vertex, of the background shared by the writer and their audience.

In the article "Locating Literary Language" (2005), which addresses the interpretation of literary texts, Davidson adapts his concept of triangulation, developed in his semantic work, to the context of the relation between literary work and their audience. Let's first examine the concept of triangulation, as presented, for example, in the article "The Second Person", which discusses the central importance of intention in communication. Davidson defends the position that, for something to be said meaningfully, the speaker must intend to produce a certain effect on at least one hearer (or interpreter). In this sense, Davidson supports a conception of language that relies on social interaction, involving at least two individuals. Meaning, in the communicative context, thus depends on how the speaker intends for the meaning

she establishes for a certain stimulus in the world to be shared with the interpreter, so that mutual responses, through triangulation, attest to successful communication (Davidson, 2001, p. 112). Understanding between speaker and interpreter is therefore explained in terms of the triangulation model. In this conception, the image of the speaker and interpreter occupies two vertices, while the image of the shared stimulus in the world occupies the third vertex. In other words, as the author himself summarizes in another text, "triangulation consists of the mutual and simultaneous response of two or more creatures to distal stimuli and to one another's responses" (Davidson, 1991, p. xv).

Frequently, the concept of triangulation is used by Davidson to explain, from a conceptual rather than empirical perspective, the issue of language acquisition and its use. Specifically regarding the interpretation of literary works, Davidson asserts that the elements of the triangle remain: "there are the writer, his audience, and a common background" (Davidson, 2005, p. 177). In our proposal to find a perspicuous explanation of the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, it seems to us that Davidson's model, in comparison to Danto's, is more epistemologically advantageous because it also conceptually addresses the intrinsic social aspect of language in terms of that background, rather than merely stating a mirror relation between the writer's text and the reader.

According to Davidson, texts such as "proclamations, warnings, declarations of war, writs of habeas corpus, sales catalogues, and political broadsides" possess a good idea, on the part of the writer, of the audience's knowledge of the

common background. In contrast, a poet or novelist has potentially less guaranteed information about the everyday world of their audience (Davidson, 2005, p. 180). In this sense, the constitution of background – or, using the triangulation model, something in the shared world between the writer and their audience – could also be established by other literary works. After all, it is reasonable to assume that a novelist or poet presumes that their reader lives in a world where there are other novels or poems to be read. Therefore, literature itself provides an important part of the background shared between author and their audience. Davidson states: "Other books help constitute the world which completes the triangle of author and reader, just as prior conversations provide much of what speaker and hearer depend on for good communication" (2005, p. 180).

The perspicuous form we have sought, drawing from authors like Danto and Davidson, to explain the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, aims not only to present a structure that elucidates the components to be considered – which, in Davidson's case also includes the vertex of the background in the triangulation model. The relation between work and its reception by a reader, as a contribution for advancing investigations in moral reflection, also needs to be explained, from a conceptual perspective, not in terms of causing changes in a reader (something more typical of empirical research), but, according to Nussbaum, in terms of shaping public and private life.

Nussbaum highlights that economic theories provide conceptions of rationality; legal theories promote understanding of basic rights; psychology and anthropology

describe, respectively, life emotions and common forms of interaction; and even moral philosophy seeks to arbitrate moral disputes, such as those concerning medical care, abortion, and basic freedoms. However, literary theory remains silent in debates that shape public and private life (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 263).

We might consider Nussbaum's idea of shaping from the perspective of literary inventiveness, which provides, for a social context, descriptions of values such as emotions, beliefs, and desires. By reasonably extrapolating from Danto's idea that narrative, through the identification between reader and character, allows for the expansion of self-knowledge, we could also suggest that literary inventiveness provides, for public life, values that were previously unguessed as such. However, providing values for public and private shaping would not imply that literature has a mission or purpose to suggest moral adherence, whether theoretical or practical, to what it creatively describes. While literary works may inspire moral adherence or agreement with their ideas, this is something that falls outside the scope of an understanding of the relation between literary work and its reception which values a certain explanatory plainness that we aim to uphold in this article.

From the notion of common background as a component of triangulation, not only between author and their audience but, from a broader perspective, among language agents interacting in the world and seeking mutual understanding, we propose that values brought to light by literary works are also available, potentially, for moral disputes, which are only possible if speakers and interpreters agree that

they share, in the moment of interlocution, the meaning of a certain value[6].

There is a substantial body of philosophical literature, including some prominent figures cited in this article, that we believe rightly seeks to defend the relevance of philosophical works for moral reflection, without implying that literature is meant to bring about behavioral changes, shifts in self-perception, or alterations in worldview. However, the issue of the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, as something that contributes to moral investigation, seems to raise a philosophical problem about how this could be explained in perspicuously way. Therefore, we have aimed to suggest, in this article, two proposals based on a critical examination of some authors that address the relation between philosophy and literature. Firstly, we emphasize the importance of making the distinction between two types of relations: the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader, and the empirical relation between the reception of literary work and changes in the reader. Secondly, we propose a form of explanation for the relation between literary work and its reception by a reader which takes into account that interpretative procedures depend on a common social background between writer and reader. In this sense, understanding narratives is linked to a socially shared comprehension of the meaning of certain values, such that the creative presentation of these values helps to shape public and private life.

[6] Davidson argues that values are objective not in terms of a philosophical realism, but because their meanings are socially shared. In this sense, moral disputes only make sense in a social context where language users can understand what each other means (Davidson, 2004, p. 39-57).

Resumo: Como podemos, de forma perspícua, explicar a relação entre um texto literário e a sua interpretação pelo leitor, de maneira a sustentar a hipótese de que a literatura é importante para a reflexão moral? Neste artigo, a partir do exame crítico de alguns autores anglófonos que estão mais ou menos engajados em investigações relacionadas à filosofia analítica da linguagem, e que abordam a relação entre filosofia e literatura, propomos uma distinção entre dois tipos de relações: a relação entre a obra literária e sua recepção pelo leitor, e a relação empírica entre a recepção da obra literária e mudanças no leitor. Para avanços na reflexão moral, essa relação não pode ser empírica. Portanto, propomos uma forma de explicação da relação entre a obra literária e sua recepção pelo leitor, envolvendo o escritor e sua obra literária, o leitor e seu papel interpretativo, e o background compartilhado entre escritor e leitor.

Palavras-chave: Reflexão moral, filosofia da linguagem, narrativa, literatura.

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