

Eidos volume 4
no. 4 (2020)

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2020.0046

Maciej Bednarski
Doctoral School of Humanities
University of Warsaw, Poland
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4400-7223>
maciej.bednarski@uw.edu.pl

Moral of the Novel: Rorty and Nussbaum on the Ethical Role of Literature

Abstract:

This paper's aim is to provide a new interpretation of Martha C. Nussbaum's and Richard Rorty's views on the ethical role of literature. I pursue this aim in a threefold manner. First of all, I shortly discuss and provide a critique of previous comparisons by other authors. Afterwards, based on the presented critique of other comparisons, I present concise summaries of their respective views. Finally, I propose a double context for interpreting and assessing their views together. The main claim of the paper is the following: despite several differences in their philosophical underpinnings, Nussbaum's and Rorty's views on literature can be interpreted together using the context of John Rawls and Jacques Rancière. This interpretation consists of showing how uncovering a shared Rawlsian characteristic of Nussbaum's and Rorty's views paves a way for explaining how literature actually does ethical work, using some concepts of Rancière. Such a contextual reading allows for both a more thorough understanding of their respective projects and assessing their shared shortcomings.

Keywords:

Rorty, Nussbaum, ethics, literature, novel, Rawls, Rancière

Introduction

Can literature affect our morality? Is reading literature an important part of shaping us as citizens and as human beings? Ever since the *ancient quarrel* of philosophers and poets was introduced to us by Plato (one might argue about the foundational importance of this quarrel for philosophy in general), these questions were discussed and resolved in one way or another by many philosophers. Among the most famous contemporary thinkers that challenged the subject or even inscribed it into the core of their thought were Richard Rorty and Martha C. Nussbaum. Although developing projects as distinct (and from a strictly philosophical point of view, distant) from each other as it gets, their respective views on literature and its relation to ethics in general – and liberal democracy in particular – resonate together more smoothly and interestingly than expected.

The main aim of this paper is to argue for an interpretation of Nussbaum's and Rorty's views on the ethical role of literature that draws from the writings of John Rawls and Jacques Rancière. I pursue this aim in three steps that correspond to three questions: (1) what has already been written on the subject, (2) what are the essential views of Rorty and Nussbaum, and (3) how could we read and interpret them? In the first section of this paper, I shortly review and criticize the hitherto discussion on the subject. Such a review aims to provide a justifying ground for this paper, to direct its focus to some blind spots and to show that said discussion leaves a space for a new interpretation. In the second section, I present a concise exposition of particular elements of the respective positions of Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty.¹ This exposition serves to provide a focus on specific details of their views that unearth a deeper similarity between them. Finally, in the third and fourth section I propose an interpretation of their views using the context of Rawls' and Rancière's ideas along with some preliminary discussion of potential objections to it. This interpretation allows, as I argue, for both a more thorough understanding of their respective projects and for an accurate assessment of their shared shortcomings. Its main idea is that while the context of Rawls helps to show the common root of Nussbaum's and Rorty's views on the ethical role of literature, which consists in treating the novel as a way for supplementing and reversing the effects of the *veil of ignorance*, the context of Rancière helps to unearth and understand the perceptual-aesthetic mechanism underneath this supplement and reversal. It is precisely the Rawlsian-liberal common root in their ideas that creates space for using Rancièrean concepts in order to understand how literature can affect and effect our ethical thinking. This common root opens the issue of social perception that ties ethics and aesthetics and due to that opens the possibility of employing Rancière's framework. This also helps to answer more firmly the question of why the literature is so useful for ethical purposes according to Rorty and Nussbaum. Also, some further remarks on the ethical role of objects are stated – as the discussed views on the ethical role of literature could be extended to a wider class of (mediums?) objects and that would require a more general account.

1) I would like to thank the editor dr. Laura Mueller; and one of the anonymous reviewers for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* for their suggestions and insights that helped me improve this paper in a significant way.

This exposition is based on chosen works by them and it does not amount in any case to a complete exposition of their thought. For such a thorough review one can recommend a further reading. In the case of Rorty it is worth to mention Brandom's *Rorty and His Critics*, Guignon and Hiley's *Richard Rorty*, Voparil's *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*, Malachowski's *Richard Rorty* as well as *Rorty and Beyond*, edited by Auxier, Kramer and Skowroński. In the case of Nussbaum, however, it is not easy to find monographs summarizing and reviewing her impressive philosophical work. One can assume that Nussbaum, being an immensely prolific author herself, does not leave too much space and keeps her pace too fast for anyone else to endeavour on such a project. Nevertheless, one might recommend several interesting papers, including Biondo's *Is Martha Nussbaum a Political Liberal?* and Harpham's *The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum*. There are also two Polish books – one can refer to Urszula Lisowska's quite recent work in Polish, *Wyobrażenia, sztuka, sprawiedliwość. Marthy Nussbaum koncepcja zdolności jako podstawa egalitarnego liberalizmu* from 2017 and a little bit older *Rozum w świecie praktyki. Poglądy filozoficzne M. Nussbaum* from 2010 by Anna Głąb, which offer a quite exhaustive overview of Nussbaum's philosophy.

Reading as a Challenge

Though one finds more than a formidable amount of literature devoted to the views of Rorty and of Nussbaum separately², at the same time one faces a pitiful scarcity of projects taking them together in a serious manner. Among the works and papers discussing views on literature of these two together, one should mention the following: Peter Johnson's *Moral Philosophers and the Novel. A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*; Tracy Llanera's *Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty*; Simon Stow's *Reading Our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics*; and his *Republic of Readers. The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis*. Although there are several other works in which both Rorty's and Nussbaum's views on the ethical role of literature appear, they cannot be considered works focused on comparing them. This section consists of short remarks on these selected works in order to assess their scope, the blind spots and valuable points, to ultimately pave a way for this paper's proposed interpretation of Nussbaum and Rorty. I argue that hitherto discussion on the subject leaves space for a new comparative and contextual reading of these two philosophers.

Peter Johnson's book, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel: A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*, offers quite a comprehensive attempt at reading Rorty and Nussbaum's views. However, it still stops at reading them separately for most of the time and merely points out some similarities and differences. Johnson sees Rorty and Nussbaum as representatives of different approaches to the relation between moral philosophy and the novel. According to him, Nussbaum's approach can be summed up as a claim of indispensability of novels to ethics, while Rorty's approach would amount to a claim that novels are central to ethics, but the ethics as he envisions it (divorced from essentialism and foundationalism) is a project quite different from the traditional ethics we know. Perceptive equilibrium and liberal irony are in Johnson's view different ways of philosophical processing of the novel that, within specific limits, allow the novel to speak. He states that "there is the complaint that literature has been short-changed by philosophy. The novel is understood only through the categories that interest the philosopher."³ While offering a thorough elaboration of their respective views, he does not offer a robust way of interpreting the views of Rorty and Nussbaum together.

Tracy Llanera's paper, *Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty*, offers a short discussion of Iris Murdoch's, Martha C. Nussbaum's, and Richard Rorty's views on morality and literature. In such an offering it does not provide too much of an original thought regarding Nussbaum and Rorty. Despite the fact of Johnson's book being published 10 years earlier, Llanera at most times limits herself in this paper to arguing that "while they adhere to different philosophical traditions, they share a strong commitment to grasp the moral meaning of literature"⁴ and also that "their shared version of moral engagement through literature interlocks the individual's

2) It should be noted that despite Nussbaum and Rorty both being renowned philosophers with long career spans taking on the subjects of social justice, politics, and ethics, there was virtually no direct discussion between them apart from a rather short-lived discussion on the issues of patriotism and cosmopolitanism. What should be even more intriguing, Rorty practically never mentioned Nussbaum in his works, while most likely the only concrete example of Nussbaum mentioning Rorty is her paper *On Moral Progress. A Response to Richard Rorty*. However, this piece is a commentary on Rorty's lectures, and does not refer to his views. Despite the fact that the role of literature and its ethical-political dimension was a core issue in their respective landmark *oeuvres* – *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Rorty) and *Love's Knowledge* (Nussbaum) – that were published in a close time proximity, they did not engage in a discussion of each other's views. During the 1990s, Nussbaum published a paper entitled *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism* in a response to one of Rorty's essays in New York Times. It was later republished together with multiple replies from several prominent thinkers. None of them was Rorty, though.

3) Johnson, *Moral Philosophers and the Novel*, 14.

4) Llanera, "Morality by Words," 2.

sense of self and the world of others.”⁵ It would seem as if it was something that needed to be argued for instead of being treated as a starting point of the analysis. On the one hand, she does point to the private-public distinction as an important context of their views and she acknowledges the Aristotelian influence in Nussbaum. On the other hand, she ultimately accuses Rorty and Nussbaum of overestimating the value of literature, of moral elitism and of the fact that reading can also “incite evil.”⁶

Simon Stow, in his *Reading Our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics*, declares that the aim of his paper is to extricate valuable insights from Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s propositions and to jettison the problematic issues in order to present a more plausible account based on theirs. He points to the similarities between Smith’s *fellow feeling* and particularity stressed by Nussbaum on the one hand and solidarity and contingency stressed by Rorty on the other. But when Stow starts being critical of their views, he somehow misses the point and the proper context. For example, he bases his reading of Nussbaum exclusively on *Poetic Justice*, which is a venture of linking literature with the issues of economy and social justice (and was based on series of lectures targeting a law-based audience), and not on *Love’s Knowledge*, which contains Nussbaum’s main exposition of her views regarding the ethical role of literature. He states that Nussbaum and Rorty “read the novels that they identify as useful to liberal-democratic society and tell us what lessons the readers will or should derive from them.”⁷ This itself would not have to be an issue, however Stow interprets it as a dogmatic stance: “both Nussbaum and Rorty seem to suggest that there is but one valid interpretation of the text, and one lesson or set of lessons to derived from each novel.”⁸ It is, however, difficult to tell on what he bases such a view. There is no doubt that both Nussbaum and Rorty offer self-assured interpretations of their chosen novels, but it does not contradict their commitment to the deliberative ways of liberalism. Stow tries to combine their views with supply-side theory of the text and reader-response theory, but it is neither convincing (by means of locating expression of said theories in the texts of Nussbaum or Rorty) nor useful apart from his apparent aim to win a discussion with a straw man. It is difficult to understand the purpose of such a self-defeating critical remark: “it is not clear why Nussbaum and Rorty spend so long setting out their own readings of texts. Reading about reading is not the best way to enlarge our moral capacities: it is rather like expecting to benefit from watching somebody else exercise.”⁹ Stow seems to ascribe some sort of an authoritative approach in interpreting to Nussbaum and Rorty, but that is – based on what one might find in their own writings – a completely misguided stance.

Generally speaking, in his discussion he neglects several important characteristics of their respective philosophical thoughts. Stow’s monograph *Republic of Readers. The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis*, in which he devoted two chapters to discuss Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s views, confirms that, as in his paper, he is looking for a theory – a set of commitments, plausibly rooted in Kantian categorical imperative and specifically because of that he misreads them both. He assesses their views from a perspective of a *literary turn in contemporary political thought*. He also reads Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* as a work based on a metaphysical foundation; it is no surprise then that he writes about Rorty’s *theory* or about Nussbaum’s literary enhancement of traditional *Reason*. These are just not the thinkers that would yield to standard philosophical vocabularies.

What is the overall view on Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s ethical role of the novel that emerges from the texts shortly discussed above? It would seem that they do share a common starting point in that they would like

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid., 12.

7) Stow, “Reading Our Way to Democracy?” 413.

8) Ibid., 414.

9) Ibid., 415.

to enable the novel to speak and thus to allow its moral content to be grasped. They also share the idea that the novel is important or even crucial for maintaining and enriching democracy. However, they differ as to how this allowing of the novel to speak would exactly work and despite the fact that they display some similarities in regard to general philosophical coordinates (among them the importance they ascribe to particularity/contingency) they employ disparate conceptual frameworks to describe it. They come close together again when they are criticized: for being authoritative in their selections and interpretations of selected novels, for displaying a kind of moral elitism in their views, for instrumentalizing the novel for their purely philosophical purposes, as well as for not being theoretical enough or providing a proper theoretical framework. There are only a few common characteristics of their projects which we can extricate from the hitherto comparisons of Rorty and Nussbaum in regard to their respective ethics of the novel, and these few have not been thoroughly investigated. In sum, these two philosophers are interpreted as interested in the same problematic and the projects they develop do share some common features, but their core ideas have not been linked to each other nor have they been compared in order to point to some major difference. For the most part, as of yet, Rorty and Nussbaum have been interpreted separately. Thus, the above short review of hitherto discussion shows a space for an inquiry into the core similarities and differences of Rorty's and Nussbaum's ethics of the novel and an interpretation that would accommodate both of them.

An Ally in Solidarity

In this section, I provide a short comparison of Rorty and Nussbaum in regard to the most characteristic traits of their respective views, making use of the interpretational space left by the conclusions of the discussion in the previous section. This comparison allows me to gather together the Rawlsian root of their views in order to make way for the next section and the interpretation based on this root.

Rorty's and Nussbaum's views can be seen as, respectively, *solidarity under construction* and *literature as an ally and a friend*. For Martha Nussbaum the literature is the long-time neglected ally of philosophical, especially ethical, reflection. In her view, as displayed in *Love's Knowledge*, the relation between the form and the content is essential and a novel may serve some purposes better than a *tractatus*. For Rorty, discussing the relation between ethics and literature is not a matter of choosing between the literary and the ethical theory or of trying to reconcile them. In his views, it is all literature – as he expressed in quite a controversial paper, *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing*, philosophical writings are best to be interpreted as a distinct literary genre with its own, hermetic to many, tradition. In other words, then, Rorty sees philosophy as a part of literature (understood very broadly), Nussbaum sees them as separate projects that should work together. This difference between them is, among other things, due to the fact that Rorty is an anti-essentialist while Nussbaum is a soft essentialist. That is also why they approach the subject employing quite different conceptual frameworks – as for example at the core of her ethical investigation Nussbaum puts the concept of human capabilities, while Rorty writes about the solidarity and susceptibility to cruelty and humiliation.

Both of them see the place of literature as in or next to ethics. According to Nussbaum, literature helps us in our development as human beings. Novels, especially the process of reading them, supplies us with perceptions needed for the perceptive equilibrium and the dialectical process of searching for the best interpretation of what the good life is. But how does the novel affect our moral practice? According to Nussbaum it is by: (1) displaying the four tenets of Aristotelian conception (the non-commensurability of valuable things, the priority of the particular, the importance of emotions and the significance of random, external events); (2) drawing us into the community of readers performing the Aristotelian procedure (perceptive equilibrium which, as she argues, is more or less accepted by Rawls in his reflective equilibrium); (3) allowing readers to

immerse in the novel, to experience new things and reflect upon this experience. She points out, following Wayne Booth, that reading does something to us while we are reading, that novels shape our thoughts and desires. According to Rorty, literature helps us to build solidarity with others and to pursue private autocreation. The solidarity in a contingent world is something to be achieved, something that “is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created.”¹⁰ How can solidarity be built then? As Rorty writes, “this is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel.”¹¹ He points out that some novels are of great help when it comes to familiarizing ourselves with people we have never met and some are invaluable when it comes to re-describing ourselves. Works of literature are not only better when it comes to looking for a new way to describe ourselves or to shaping our individual sensitivity to others, but also when it comes to thinking in terms of how we should maintain our liberal democracies. In both cases, they point out to the importance of contingency or particularity of our ethical actions – this is also why for both of them the novel, given the easiness it has with displaying the particularities of life, turns out to be a better guide (and friend) than a work of theory. Rorty does not provide any description of the process of how the influence of literature really works. One might suppose that he could have envisioned reading as a process of stimulating the imagination combined with a reflection on two sets of questions: ones centered around the question of *who am I and who could I be?* and the others centered around the question of *to what should I pay attention in regard to other people?*

What is more, they both refer to how literature changes the way we *perceive* things. It is important that according to Rorty if a particular novel is helpful in building up our solidarity it is not because it expresses some universal essence of human beings, but because it enhances our “ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’.”¹² When Nussbaum writes about the importance of emotions, (that we learn of or experience while reading for example), in ethical reflection and emphasizes that they are not just occasionally useful for properly viewing the situation or some non-cognitive elements needed for virtue, she underlines that “the emotions are themselves modes of vision, or recognition.”¹³

Both philosophers stress the importance of the private-public distinction, though in quite different manner. In Rorty’s post-*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* imaginarium the public and private spheres are irreconcilable. Since our language is contingent and so are our vocabularies, then the same applies to these spheres which we try to describe in such vocabularies. This bears a significant consequence on Rorty’s view on ethics in which it is human solidarity that plays a central role. Nussbaum’s approach to private-public dichotomy is an example of what Leypoldt describes as “a middle way in her revisionist reading of canonical authors.”¹⁴ In a similar way as Aristotle, she does not treat this distinction as a sharp one, though she does not consider it obsolete. She stresses that an “ideal person of practical wisdom is no solitary Jamesian heroine, but a politically active citizen of Athens.”¹⁵ Therefore, when discussing the possible influence of literature on a person, Nussbaum discusses both the influence on a private individual and on a public citizen.

10) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, xvi.

11) Ibid.

12) Ibid., 192.

13) Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 79.

14) Leypoldt, “Uses of Metaphor,” 146.

15) Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 98.

When analyzing novels, both Rorty and Nussbaum seem to focus on what might be called, after Umberto Eco, *intentio operis*: they both seem to be convinced (at least to some extent) that their interpretations of James's *The Princess Casamassima* or Nabokov's *Pale Fire* are uncontroversial if not plainly true and valid. Both Rorty and Nussbaum are politically and socially progressive and reformist (which is expressed by their shared reluctance to the stipulations of the more revolutionary part of the left wing), whereas philosophically Rorty is a radical and Nussbaum is a revisionist.

Both Rorty and Nussbaum propose some kind of a twist on the classical theme of liberalism in political philosophy. In Nussbaum's case, she talks about *Aristotelian social democracy*,¹⁶ as she draws at large from Aristotle in her approach to ethics, that aims to combine elements of Aristotle's ideas with Rawls' take on liberalism. Rorty, on the other hand, develops a notion of postmodernist bourgeois liberalism, a liberalism that is free of a deep metaphysical need of justification and that thrives on the plurality of vocabularies that we develop in our practice and by reading literature. In a postmodern bourgeois liberal society suddenly not moral philosophers but literary critics are better moral guides. Their job is to read as much as possible and juxtapose, play off figures and tropes together. Such a process of expanding the canon of books is a task for the Ironist and it takes the place of Rawlsian procedure of reaching the reflective equilibrium.

As I point out in the above discussion of particular elements of Rorty's and Nussbaum's positions on the ethical role of literature, they are both, in some way, inspired by and rooted in the Rawlsian framework of liberalism. This feature of Nussbaum's and Rorty's ethics of the novel have not yet been discussed and investigated. They are both referring and responding to his procedure of reflective equilibrium and the central role that it plays in ethical reflection. They also both see the closeness between this procedure and aesthetic, the visual way of processing the social world. In other words, they are inclined to say that reading novels, quite literally, changes the way we see. Although they seem to slightly modify its characteristic from a theoretical tool to a practical one, from a strictly rational device to a mechanism that sometimes works in the background, it does provide a foothold for bringing out the common root of Rorty's and Nussbaum's views and interpreting it.

Reading Rorty and Nussbaum Against Rawls and Rancière

In this section I propose an interpretation of Rorty's and Nussbaum's views and argue for its usefulness in understanding and assessing them. As I point out in the previous section, there is a very interesting similarity between Nussbaum and Rorty that can serve as a point of departure for the interpretation I want to present in this paper. Despite some differences in how they read and what they draw from Rawls, both of their projects regarding the ethical role of literature seem to be undertaken as a response to Rawls's project of liberalism.

Rorty reads Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and his further works as written from a pragmatist position, Nussbaum reads him in a more traditional way. As we read in *Priority of Democracy to Philosophy*, Rorty argues that "Rawls shows us how liberal democracy can get along without philosophical presuppositions."¹⁷ Rorty's liberal utopia described in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is in close proximity to a society that rid itself of the ideology and which "takes reflective equilibrium as the only method needed in discussing social policy."¹⁸ The reflective equilibrium, however, as mentioned earlier in this paper, may be supplemented or even replaced by the literary critics and liberal ironist's quest of expanding the vocabularies by means of reading the books.

16) Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy."

17) Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 179.

18) *Ibid.*, 184.

Rorty finds Rawls as one of the thinkers that “helped undermine the idea of a transhistorical ‘absolutely valid’ set of concepts which would serve as ‘philosophical foundations’ of liberalism.”¹⁹

Nussbaum reads Rawls without any metaphysical interpretations that would necessarily bind him with some specific idea of practical reason. Quite the opposite, she emphasizes his Socratic-Aristotelian approach. Nevertheless, she criticizes him, as we stated earlier, for the “Kantian image of people, which stresses rationality and reciprocity”²⁰ and that “instead of picturing one another as rough equals making a bargain, we may be better off thinking of one another as people with varying degrees of capacity and disability, in a variety of different relationships of interdependency with one another.”²¹ That position resonates well with both her earlier account of Rawls that we find in *Love’s Knowledge* (as I discuss in this paper) – in which she presents her idea of perceptive equilibrium as not only an extended version of Rawls’s procedure, but an enhanced and modified one – as well with her later account that we find in her *Frontiers of Justice* from 2006.

The similarity of Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s projects of the ethical role of literature is based on the fact that both projects aim to answer, to complete, and to enhance Rawls’s project of justice as fairness, of liberalism in a contractarian version. This similarity is, however, more profound than just stating that both Nussbaum’s Aristotelian social democracy and Rorty’s postmodernist bourgeois liberalism are responses to Rawls. It goes deeper than that as both Rorty and Nussbaum propose concepts that are aimed at resolving the problem at the heart of Rawls’s project, mainly what can be called the *problem of the veil of ignorance*. In Rawls’s original position, such a situation in which “no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like”²² is supposed to exclude “the knowledge of those contingencies which sets men at odds and allows them to be guided by their prejudices.”²³ Rorty as well as Nussbaum object to this element of Rawls’s project, either by postulating that solidarity is to be built via familiarizing us with others (Rorty) or by proposing a method of perceptive equilibrium (Nussbaum). Both propositions are set against the effects of the veil of ignorance, as their main aim is to make people see more, see better. In their own specific ways, Rorty and Nussbaum argue that the ethical role of literature in a liberal society is to enable us to see more of such contingencies, to be able to reflect upon them, to understand such complex particularities and to be able to react to them. If we want to be better individuals and better citizens that take part in common deliberation on what the rules should be, we should direct our perception at these contingencies instead of bypassing them. One might say that these are exactly Nussbaum’s frontiers of justice – taking into consideration matters of sex, race or religion when deliberating on questions of justice and social institutions. The supposedly rational anonymization of the citizens is opposed (directly or indirectly) by both Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s insistence on the importance of all the contingent features that make up an actual human being. The Rawlsian veil of ignorance creates an invisible man, an artificial citizen that is made up of just his citizenship, his rationality and some common knowledge. The goal of literature as envisioned by them is (among other things) to make him visible again along with all his particular, contingent features. They want to make us see him and to inculcate the feeling that all-too-human contingencies should not be treated as something we can abstract from and away.

Such a visualization of our ethical reflection (in other words, making our visual perception ethical, making it the concern and the matter of ethics as well making ethics perceptual) is present in both Rorty’s and

19) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 57.

20) Nussbaum, “The Enduring Significance of John Rawls,” 7.

21) Ibid.

22) Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 11.

23) Ibid., 17.

in Nussbaum's works. Closing of the gap between ethics and aesthetics is an important role of the literature as envisioned by these two philosophers. Written works of art aim at unveiling contingencies of other people in order for us to become more understanding, more sensitive, more connected. Obviously, it has a slightly different character for Rorty, for whom such an unveiling does not discover anything that *was already there* but rather the contingent vocabularies of others, and for Nussbaum, for whom there are particularities of others immersed in universal human capabilities awaiting to be unveiled. Nevertheless, the main aim is to make us, readers, see others as "us," to include wildly different people in our society, in our norms. As both Rorty and Nussbaum claim, in such a process, no position and perception is excluded from revision. However, one might wonder whether, given their reformist approach, it is not tainted with some "fixed points of our considered judgments."²⁴ It might be that from the reformist approach (as an opposite of a revolutionary approach) they both display in a sort of fixed point in their own considered judgements. Having read Rorty and Nussbaum in the context of Rawls and showing how their conceptual inventions serve as answers to the perceived challenges of his theory, we might now turn for the second part of the proposed interpretation. Finding a Rawlsian common root in Rorty's and Nussbaum's writings allows us to see how their use of reflective-perceptive equilibrium brings ethics and aesthetics together and effectuates a visualization of our ethical reflection. This, in turn, enables to show how the ethical role of literature is engaged in Jacques Rancière's *politics of aesthetics*,²⁵ and ultimately to show how exactly the novel affects our ethical perception and reflection.

According to Nussbaum, in the process of reading "the (ethically concerned) aesthetic attitude shows us the way"²⁶ and according to Rorty, the moral-aesthetic distinction is of no use as we should "stop asking questions like 'Does this book aim at truth or at beauty? At promoting right conduct or at pleasure?' and instead ask, 'What purposes does this book serve?'"²⁷ They both come surprisingly close to what Rancière's politics of aesthetics, and what shall constitute a second context of the proposed reading of Rorty and Nussbaum. In his famous essay Rancière describes a notion of the distribution of the sensible as "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."²⁸ The way we distribute spaces, times and occupations determines who is included in our society and who is not – who is considered, *who is seen as* citizen and who is not, who can and should perform certain activities. Rancière states that "politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak"²⁹ – it is striking then to face the distance between this conceptualization, the visualization of politics (and ethics) and the Rawlsian tool of the veil of ignorance. As Rancière points out to the ancient quarrel, "the Platonic proscription of the poets is based on the impossibility of doing two things at once prior to being based on the immoral content of fables ... the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition space for 'fantasies,' disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities and spaces. The same is true of writing."³⁰ The literature here appears as something with an immense subversive potential that could break up the inherited or desired social order – an order that orders a specific, well-defined identity and task to every individual. Hence the similar double

24) *Ibid.*, 181.

25) Which is not to be confused with Benjamin's *aestheticization of politics* as Rancière notes in his other important work, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, and which has to be repeated here as this difference will not be discussed in this paper.

26) Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 48.

27) Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 142.

28) Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

29) *Ibid.*, 13.

30) *Ibid.*

base of the critique of writing we find in *Phaedrus*. As we have seen, Nussbaum does not dig as deep into this matter, at least not in an explicit manner.

According to Rancière, literature itself is linked to a democratic regime. The aesthetic regime of arts (which origin and rise were intertwined with the rise of the modern novel and the absolutization of literature, as Rancière describes it in *Mute Speech*) brings on equality of indifference in representing things in works of writing. With the rise of modern novel, classical principles of poetics (of fiction, of genre, of decorum and of presence)³¹ are being negated. The equality we mentioned means that literature is no longer bounded by said principles in regard to what may be represented and how – it opens the path for writing about the people that were – because of sex, race, religion, social status, and financial situation – previously excluded. As Rancière points out, the breakdown of the previous system of representation was a revolution that “first took place in literature: an epoch and a society were deciphered through the features, clothes, or gestures of the ordinary individual (Balzac), the sewer revealed a civilization (Hugo); the daughter of a farmer and the daughter of a banker were caught in the equal force of style as an ‘absolute manner of seeing things’ (Flaubert).”³² The interaction of a human being, of a political animal with literature, has such significance because he is, as Rancière formulates it, a literary animal who lets himself “be diverted from his ‘natural’ purpose by the power of the words.”³³ The circulation of fiction, of material rearrangements of graphic content that can be recognized as signs and images, of specific configurations of the visible and the sayable, is what can push these literary animals in a direction of change. When we read novels, something changes in the way we perceive our community – what is common to it, what is included in it, what is acceptable, and what is permissible. This way, novels are the instrument of change as they take part in the process of remaking our perception and of reassessing the present distribution of the sensible.

We might interpret then, despite the obvious differences, Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s projects of the ethical role of literature together. Such an interpretation consists of two parts. Firstly, we find a common denominator of both projects in the form of answering to Rawls’s method of grounding liberalism with the procedure of reflective equilibrium and the veil of ignorance. Rorty and Nussbaum view literature as a much-needed supplement to the Rawlsian method, that helps to overcome the *perceptual* difficulties posed by it. It seems that such a supplement can have the effect of reversing the veil of ignorance, even if it is not explicitly discussed in these terms. Secondly, Rancière’s concepts are, as it is claimed, helpful in extricating and naming the common idea of ethical-political role of literature that we find in Nussbaum’s and Rorty’s writing and naming it. Although Rancière’s philosophy seems to be quite distant from their respective philosophies, it provides us with useful concepts to name what they are aiming at, even if they do not or even would not use such a framework. They both see literature as an instrument of challenging the distribution of the sensible in liberal society. To some extent, then, when they are advocating the ethical importance of literature, they are doing politics of aesthetics and this politics is a response to a Rawlsian move of concealment. However, one must note that the way they perceive this challenge is rather a way for a progressive improvement than for a revolution. They do not envision any sort of a radical stripping of the veil, but rather a gradual process of ensuring the visibility of the Other.

At least two questions arise on the basis of the above interpretation. First one is related to the actual status of the supplement of Rawls’ reflective equilibrium. Is reading literature as envisaged by Rorty and Nussbaum in fact only (or merely) a supplement to the core of his liberalism or does it lead (according to this interpretation) to a reversal of one of its most crucial features, that of the veil of ignorance? Second one is linked to the

31) Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, 44.

32) *Ibid.*, 32.

33) *Ibid.*, 39.

other thinker I have referred to in this paper. Is it plausible to employ the concepts of Rancière (representing the political left) in order to interpret the views of Rorty and Nussbaum (both linked in one way or another to the liberal movement)? Given the limited space, I will only sketch the outline of a single answer to these questions – I believe that they can be answered together as the issues raised by these questions seem to be connected.

Although at first sight there seems to be a definite political distance between Rancière on one hand (seen as a solid left-winger) and Rorty and Nussbaum on the other (seen as unwavering liberals), I would argue against positioning the latter as just liberals. If we were to take Rawls as a point of reference when considering someone to be a liberal or not, they both seem to be placed at some significant distance. This distance is well grounded in their respective works (for example *Aristotelian Social Democracy* and *Non for profit* in Nussbaum's case, *Philosophy and Social Hope* and *Achieving Our Country* in Rorty's case) and it amounts to a much more left-wing take on the social and political matters than in the case of a classical liberal. Thus when we talk about *supplementing* Rawls' project we cannot escape talking about *reversing* some of its negative consequences (as diagnosed by Rorty and Nussbaum). Both thinkers develop a modification or a replacement of the Rawls' reflective equilibrium in order to combat the faults of the original position and the veil of ignorance, which have taken hold of social perception in liberal societies. It could be argued then that Rorty's and Nussbaum's views on the ethics of the novel aim at bringing the liberal position closer to the left. In general, one can consider their overall political philosophies as projects attempting to turn the liberal left. This would somehow place Rorty and Nussbaum between Rawls and Rancière and indicate the direction of their theoretical movement from the former to the latter. It would be then of no major conflict of origin to employ Rancière's concepts to interpret them. What is more, changing the perception of the social Other through reading literature and through that making the social perception more and more inclusive displays a great emancipatory charge Rorty and Nussbaum see in the novel. This point also brings them quite close to what Rancière himself writes about literature and its revolutionary potential.

Literary Liberalism's Shortcomings

We might call this common part of Rorty's and Nussbaum's views something of a sort of literary liberalism, be it Aristotelian and social or postmodernist and bourgeois. It is a view in which the liberal society develops and progresses by the procedure of deliberation on one hand and by enriching itself by reading on the other. Is it a plausible vision?

One obvious objection against such a project has been already voiced in some form – that the way Rorty and Nussbaum read their novels is a bit outdated, a bit dogmatic, a bit naive. As Dorothy J. Hale puts it, “while literary theorists pride themselves in pursuing ethics and estimating literary value in light of and in response to complex and difficult poststructuralist truths, Nussbaum in particular and moral philosophy in general seem to remain, as Andrew Gibson has said, ‘pre-Barthesian’.”³⁴ This distinction of being either pre- or post- Barthesian is used in order to point out whether one tends to tackle the matters of narrative theory or the literature at large in a way that acknowledges the problems of narration, representation and the overall unity of a written piece, or not. Gibson writes that “for all their knowledge of post-structuralism, Rorty and Nussbaum's effective sense of the novel and the ethics of fiction is rather pre-structuralist. The philosopher may feel that he or she is on new ground. Most literary theorists or critics will not.”³⁵ This pre-Barthesianism (or pre-structuralism) of Nussbaum is one of the reasons why she tends to be grouped together with Lionel

34) Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century,” 314.

35) Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, 9.

Trilling and F. R. Leavis – if only Harold Bloom was present, it would make the same line-up of literary critics that Rorty endorses in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. A very similar critique could be directed at Rorty. Gibson makes the following remark that cannot be missed, that “Rorty and Nussbaum are by no means ignorant of contemporary developments in literary theory. The reverse: they may have read, not just their Derrida and de Man, but their Brooks, Jameson and Ricœur. Nonetheless, in their own accounts of the novel, they appear to turn away from later theory to an earlier tradition.”³⁶ Their pre-Barthesianism would be a matter of fully aware choice then – what is more, it is a choice that, based on Rorty’s views, is not in any way less justified or less useful by default. One might even argue that in Rorty’s terms, being post-Barthesian would be rather a matter of private autocreation than that of public solidarity. It would be unjustified then to criticize Rorty and Nussbaum in their readings of particular novels for being dogmatic as they are no more dogmatic than any other critic presenting his way of reading. Their insistence (be it explicit or not) on a straightforward and unanimous readings of chosen novels is not caused by their ignorance of the subtleties or challenges of post-Barthesian literary criticism, but by their ethically and politically based assessment of its usefulness. However, this is reflected in their selection of novels to which they turn when in need of examples for their ideas: Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Orwell’s *1984*, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, James’s *The Golden Bowl* or *The Ambassadors* are quite coherent, in their conservativeness, choices of great and impactful works of literature. It is then a question of whether it is just a contingency (as Rorty most likely would argue) or there is some programmatic reluctance toward more experimental or contemporary written pieces. From a different point of vantage, Hale makes a case against this objection in her paper, as she discusses the similarities between (supposedly pre-Barthesian) Nussbaum and (supposedly post-Barthesian) Judith Butler as well as between Jamesian view of the novel and the new ethicists view. She argues that “it is the untheorized understanding of the form of the novel as inherently politicized that establishes a bridge between the poststructuralist ethicists and the ‘pre-Barthesian’ Nussbaum”³⁷ as both draw from the same source of James’s account of novel. In her discussion of the new ethical theory Hale states that it provides insight into how the aesthetics of the novel work “by showing how novel form positions the reader to experience herself as ‘free’ through her experience of being socially bound. The reader experiences the free play of her imagination as produced through a power struggle with a social other.”³⁸ What is more, she adds this experience does not amount to learning anything, as long as we understand *learning* in a standard way, but that it is something beyond knowing, but rather amounts to something that directly accesses and changes our intuition, the way we intuitively perceive our social selves and social others.

Another objection directed at the project of literary liberalism is that of the elitist approach. How often do we find time for a thoughtful lecture on a novel? How many of us have both time and a psychological comfort of indulging ourselves in such a leisure? How many people have the access to books, how many of them have the habit of reading them? One might argue that the propositions of Rorty and Nussbaum are postulates of the privileged white academics that cannot escape their own social bubble and the practices they base their projects on are not egalitarian after all. Is that so? One could argue that the practice of reading is nevertheless something quite ubiquitous – if not by choice than by formal education. One could argue that Rorty and Nussbaum see the foundation of their literary liberalism in some sort of a literary successor to Schiller’s sentimental education (to which Rancière points in *The Politics of Aesthetics*). It might be understood as a claim for a revival of the importance of reading within the institutions of education – of reading novels and discussing

36) Ibid., 8–9.

37) Hale, “Aesthetics and the New Ethics,” 318.

38) Ibid., 322.

them together. That would also find confirmation in later works of both Nussbaum (*Cultivating Humanity* from 1998) and Rorty (*Philosophy and Social Hope* from 1999).

The last and most likely the heaviest objection comes directly from within the heart of the respective projects of Rorty and Nussbaum. One might argue that the whole project that we call literary liberalism, the project focused on expounding and promoting the ethical role of literature, is itself falling prey to the contingency and particularity of which it talked. One might argue that the era of attentive reading of novels was a contingency that is almost past now and because of that this project is just a historical expression of an era that we have already said goodbye to or we are in the midst of saying it. The mass consumption of the products of cultural industry (be it books, audio-visual items or happenings) does not leave room for such a reflective practice of reading and befriending a novel. Although Rorty does make a remark that not only novels can be the source of the change of the way we perceive ourselves and others, but, the same way as Nussbaum, he ignores the importance of technology and the effect it has on the supposed readers. To oppose such a tendency and to revive the project of literary liberalism one would have to transform it into something more akin to Stiegler's organology – one could name it *retentiary liberalism* or *organological liberalism*. Under such a label one could investigate the way our distribution of the sensible is being changed and challenged (or maintained and solidified) by different tertiary retentions, especially the digital ones. It could also serve as a framework for a critique of Nussbaum's and Rorty's account of ethical role of literature as it would be linked to a critique of literariness in general and the digital turn. Thus, the discussion of the ethical role of literature would have to face the advent of the discussion of the ethical role of the digital (hyper?) text.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to discuss and compare Richard Rorty's and Martha C. Nussbaum view on the ethical role of literature and propose a reading that would set them in the double context of Rawls and Rancière. It has been argued that for Rorty and Nussbaum, literature serves a role of an *unveiler* that changes and challenges our perception of ourselves and others because of its ability to change and challenge the distribution of the sensible to which we are subjected as individuals and citizens. The ethical power of literature lies exactly in its ability to engage with our perception through the narrative work it performs on our imagination. In course of that work it transforms the grid of our social perception, unveiling what was previously seemingly absent. Furthermore, some withstanding objections to such a project of unveiling literary liberalism were discussed as the Rawlsian root of Rorty's and Nussbaum's literary liberalism may be criticized as not only being a contingent proposal but an already well outdated one. A closing remark was made that it might be necessary to update and rejuvenate this project by linking it to a strain of thought concerned with the current state and effects of technology, akin to that of Bernard Stiegler's.

Bibliography:

- Biondo, Francesco. "Is Martha Nussbaum really political liberal?" *Archiv für Rechts-und Sozialphilosophie* 94, no. 3 (2008): 311–24.
- Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. London: Routledge, 2002. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203007181>.
- Głąb, Anna. *Rozum w świecie praktyki. Poglądy filozoficzne Marthy C. Nussbaum*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2010.
- Guignon, Charles, and David R. Hiley, eds. *Richard Rorty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613951>.
- Hale, Dorothy J. "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century." *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 896–905. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.3.896>.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "The Hunger of Martha Nussbaum." *Representations* 77, no. 1 (2002): 52–81. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2002.77.1.52>.
- Johnson, Peter. *Moral Philosophers and the Novel: A Study of Winch, Nussbaum and Rorty*. Cham: Springer, 2004.
- Leyboldt, Günter. "Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty's Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making." *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): 145–63. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.0.0010>.
- Lisowska, Urszula. *Wyobrażenia, sztuka, sprawiedliwość. Marthy Nussbaum koncepcja zdolności jako podstawa egalitarnego liberalizmu*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2017.
- Llanera, Tracy. "Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty." *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 18, no. 1 (2014): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.13185/BU2014.18101>.
- Malachowski, Alan. *Richard Rorty*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315710822>.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. "Aristotelian Social Democracy." In *Liberalism and the Good*. Edited by Robert Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara, Henry S. Richardson. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . *Cultivating Humanity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghth8>.
- . "The Enduring Significance of John Rawls." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 47, no. 45 (2001): Section 2, B7–9.
- . *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Harvard University Press, 2009.
- . *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford University Press USA, 1990.
- . "On Moral Progress: A Response to Richard Rorty." *University of Chicago Law Review* 74, (2007): 939–60.
- . "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism." *The Cosmopolitan Reader* (1994): 155–62.
- . *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.
- . "Social Justice and Universalism: In defense of an Aristotelian Account of Human Functioning." *Modern Philology* 90, (1993): S46–73. <https://doi.org/10.1086/392123>.

- Papastephanou, Marianna. "Patriotism and Pride Beyond Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 4 (2017): 484–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1342684>.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
- . *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*. Vol. 19. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511804397>.
- . "Education as Socialization and as Individualization." *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999): 114–26.
- . *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin UK, 1999.
- . "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy." in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers 1*, (1991): 175–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173643.012>.
- . "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism." *The Journal of Philosophy* 80, no. 10 (1983): 583–89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2026153>.
- . "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida." *New Literary History* 10, no. 1 (1978): 141–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468309>.
- Stow, Simon. *Republic of Readers?: The Literary Turn in Political Thought and Analysis*. Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2012.
- . "Reading our Way to Democracy? Literature and Public Ethics." *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (2006): 410–23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2006.0041>.
- Voparil, Christopher J. *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.