

# *Love's Knowledge*

ESSAYS ON PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE



*Martha C. Nussbaum*

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MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

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“Narrative Emotions: Beckett’s Genealogy of Love,” *Ethics* 98 (1988): 225–54. (A French version was published in *Littérature* 11 (1988), 40–58.)

“Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration,” in *Reconstructing Individualism*, ed. T. Heller et al. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986), 257–81.

*For my mother and grandmother,  
Betty W. Craven and Qertrude J. de Quintal*

## Preface

This volume collects my published papers on the relationship between literature and philosophy, especially moral philosophy. It adds to the previously published material expanded and revised versions of three essays, two entirely new essays, and a substantive Introduction. The essays explore some fundamental issues about the connections between philosophy and literature: the relationship between style and content in the exploration of ethical issues; the nature of ethical attention and ethical knowledge and their relationship to written forms and styles; the role of the emotions in deliberation and self-knowledge. The essays argue for a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules. They argue that this conception, rather than being imprecise and irrational, is actually superior in rationality and in the relevant sort of precision. They argue, further, that this ethical conception finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical—and that if we wish to take it seriously we must broaden our conception of moral philosophy in order to include these texts inside it. They attempt to articulate the relationship, within such a broader ethical inquiry, between literary and more abstractly theoretical elements.

In their original places of publication, the papers were not accessible to non-specialist readers, since most of them appeared in journals and collections that do not have wide circulation. Some are difficult to obtain even for the academic reader. Equally troublesome was the question of disciplinary location. These papers cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. They also argue that certain important questions cannot be well addressed unless those boundaries are crossed. And yet ironically, because of the very separations they criticize, they have on the whole been separated from one another, appearing in publications some of which are read by philosophers, others by literary scholars. The present collection should remedy that problem, enabling readers of all backgrounds and interests to assess them as a group.

This project has close affiliations with much of my work on ancient Greek philosophy: especially with *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and with *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, based on the Martin Classical Lectures 1986, and forthcoming. The discussions of literary and ethical topics in these books are continuous with many of the arguments here. I have included in this volume two published articles on ancient Greek topics written at the same time as *The Fragility of Goodness*: “The Discernment of Perception” and “Plato on Commensurability and Desire.” These articles develop in greater detail than some

of the literary papers some important parts of the ethical conception that I am investigating in the collection as a whole. (The former has been revised and expanded for this collection.) “Transcending Humanity,” not previously published, links some of my work on Greek philosophy to the contemporary issues of this collection. Two earlier pieces on the connection between philosophy and literature in ancient Greek texts are not included: “Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1986–87): 25–53, and “Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom,” *Yale Classical Studies* 26 (1980): 43–97. I still endorse the arguments of these pieces, and hope to collect them in a different sort of volume at some point. But since they discuss ethical issues *in* the literary works without asking about the relationship of ethical content to literary form, they seemed less closely linked than the two included papers to the central argument of this collection.

Several recent articles on Greek topics that are very closely linked to the themes of this volume are not included because they will appear, in revised form, in *The Therapy of Desire*. These articles are: “Therapeutic Arguments: Epicurus and Aristotle,” in *The Norms of Nature*, ed. M. Schofield and G. Striker (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 31–74; “The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions,” *Apeiron* 20 (1987): 129–75; “Beyond Obsession and Disgust: Lucretius’ Genealogy of Love,” *Apeiron* 22 (1989); “Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1989); and “Serpents in the Soul: a Reading of Seneca’s *Medea*” forthcoming in a volume in honor of Stanley Cavell, ed. T. Cohen and P. Guyer. The Stoic piece develops at length the view of the connection between emotion and belief developed more briefly in several of these essays. The Seneca piece explores the relationship between love and morality, and has especially close links with “Perceptive Equilibrium” and “Steerforth’s Arm.” The Lucretius piece is closely related to “Narrative Emotions.” In an Introduction to a new translation of Euripides’ *Bacchae* by C. K. Williams, to be published in 1990 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, I develop further some of the issues about humanity and transcendence discussed in “Transcending,” and comment further on the relationship between Aristotle and Greek tragedy.

From my writing on contemporary issues about the relationship between philosophy and literature, I have omitted the reply to Richard Wollheim, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam that accompanied “Flawed Crystals” in its original publication in *New Literary History*. The main points are covered in the Introduction and in the endnote to “Flawed Crystals” here. I also omit my comments on Paul Seabright’s paper on *Portrait of a Lady* that appeared in the same volume of *Ethics* as “Narrative Emotions.” I plan to expand this into an independent paper. Several of my reviews and review articles have dealt with literary/philosophical questions. The only one of these that I have included here is a review article on Wayne Booth’s *The Company We Keep*—both because it is a rather self-sufficient article and because the book with which it deals is a major book that will be read for years to come.

I have written endnotes as well as an Introduction, because I felt that there were more issues requiring comment and clarification than could easily be covered in a cohesive Introduction with a single line of argument. The endnotes make many specific remarks about the relationships of the articles to one another, and direct the

reader who has not yet read the Introduction to some of the central theoretical issues that are discussed there.

All footnotes have been adjusted for uniformity of reference. References have been brought up to date where necessary.

*Providence, R.I.*  
*October 1989*

M.C.N.

## Acknowledgments

Since these papers have been written over a period of ten years, I owe thanks to many people and organizations. Work on various parts of this volume has been supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEH Fellowship, and a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford. The writing of the Introduction was supported in part by the World Institute for Development Economics Research, Helsinki, which provided an atmosphere that was marvelously secluded and free from distraction. Brown University generously supported the final preparation of the collection by assigning me a research assistant; and I owe thanks to Kurt Raaflaub, who, as Chair of the Classics Department, made that possible. Equally important, the University, by allowing me to function as a member of three departments—Philosophy, Classics, and Comparative Literature—has contributed immeasurably to the development of this interdisciplinary work.

The ideas in this collection have been developing for many years, as the Introduction relates; and I owe thanks to the following teachers who, early in my intellectual life, encouraged me to go on asking philosophical questions of works of literature: Marion Stearns, Marthe Melchior, Edith Melcher, Seth Benardete. The formal and public life of the project began with an invitation from the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association to present a paper on “philosophy and literature.” This was the incentive for the writing of “Flawed Crystals,” the earliest of these papers. And the excellent written commentary at that session by Richard Wollheim—followed shortly after by similarly stimulating written comments by Patrick Gardiner at the Oxford Philosophical Society—reinforced my conviction that there was an important issue here and that it ought to be pursued further. Warm thanks are due to Ralph Cohen, editor of *New Literary History*, who arranged for the publication of these exchanges in an issue devoted to “Literature and Moral Philosophy,” commissioning additional written comments from Hilary Putnam and Cora Diamond. Cohen has supported this work from its inception in many ways, publishing three of the papers, commissioning two of these, and giving me, throughout, the benefit of his insight and encouragement. Once begun, my work on these issues was further assisted by an invitation to participate in a conference on Styles of Fictionality organized by Thomas Pavel; by a second invitation from the American Philosophical Association (this time the Eastern Division), in response to which I wrote “‘Finely Aware,’” which had the benefit of a valuable written commentary by Cora Diamond, whose insightful writing on these topics has been especially valuable; and by the various other invitations from journals and collections in response to which the rest of the papers were written. (In that connection I would like to thank the Boston Area Colloquium for Ancient Philosophy, the Stanford

Humanities Center, the Aristotelian Society, the National Humanities Center, Lawrence Becker, George Boolos, Anthony Cascardi, Brian McLaughlin, and Amelie Rorty.) During the final stages of work on several of the papers, I had the privilege of delivering them as Luce Seminars at Yale University; I wish to thank Peter Brooks and the Whitney Humanities Center for this invitation and for the helpful discussions it promoted. Other portions of the book were delivered as Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol, England; and I am grateful to the Philosophy Department there for their warm hospitality. (See the separate Acknowledgments page.)

Many particular debts are expressed in the notes to the particular essays. But here, in addition to those mentioned above, I wish to thank several people whose support and conversation have been especially valuable at various times during my work: Julia Annas, Sissela Bok, Stanley Cavell, Denis Dutton, David Halperin, Anthony Price, Hilary Putnam, Henry Richardson, Christopher Rowe, Amartya Sen. And I am especially grateful to the many graduate and undergraduate students at Harvard, Wellesley, and Brown who have participated in the development of these ideas and whose comments, questions, and papers have been a most valuable source of insight.

My efforts to make these papers into a uniform collection were enormously assisted by Christopher Hildebrandt, Jonathan Robbins, and Gwen Jones, who spent many tedious hours checking references and changing the Henry James texts and page numbers to those of the New York Edition. Gale Alex impeccably typed several of the papers, and Ruth Ann Whitten resourcefully provided many kinds of assistance. To Angela Blackburn and Cynthia Read of the Oxford University Press I am grateful for their efficiency, warm support, and wise advice.

Half of the author's proceeds from the sale of this book will be given to the AIDS Action Committee of Boston. The other half will be given to the John J. Winkler Memorial Trust.

The READ-TUCKWELL LECTURESHIP was established by a residual bequest to the University of Bristol made by Alice Read-Tuckwell, who directed in her will that income deriving from the trust funds should be used to establish and maintain the lectureship and that the lecturer should deliver a course of lectures on Human Immortality and related matters, the course of lectures to be printed and published. The material in [chapters 1, 2, 6, 7, 14, and 15](#) was delivered as the fourth set of Read-Tuckwell Lectures in 1989, and other material was presented in an associated seminar.

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## **LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE**

“It isn’t playing the game to turn on the uncanny. All one’s energy goes to facing it, to tracking it. One wants, confound it, don’t you see?” he confessed with a queer face, “one wants to enjoy anything so rare. Call it then life,” he puzzled it out, “call it poor dear old life simply that springs the surprise. Nothing alters the fact that the surprise is paralyzing, or at any rate engrossing—all, practically, hang it, that one sees, that one *can see.*”

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*

Style for the writer, no less than colour for the painter, is a question not of technique but of vision: it is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us. ... And it is perhaps as much by the quality of his language as by the species of... theory which he advances that one may judge of the level to which a writer has attained in the moral and intellectual part of his work. Quality of language, however, is something the theorists think they can do without, and those who admire them are easily persuaded that it is no proof of intellectual merit.

Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

You may know a truth, but if it’s at all complicated you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie.

Iris Murdoch, *An Accidental Man*

He shook his head sadly.

“I glanced over it,” said he. “Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid.”

“But the romance was there,” I remonstrated. “I could not tamper with the facts.”

“Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes, by which I succeeded in unravelling it.”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*

# 1

## Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature

“Ma dî s’i’ veggio qui colui che fore  
trasse le nove rime, cominciando  
‘Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore.’”

E io a lui: “I’ mi son un che, quando  
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo  
ch’e’ ditta dentro vo significando.”

“And tell me if the man I see here  
is the one who published the new poem, beginning  
‘Ladies, you who have the knowledge of love.’”

I said to him: “I am one who, when Love breathes  
in me, takes note. And in whatever way  
he dictates within, that way I signify.”

Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXIV

How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?) Sometimes this is taken to be a trivial and uninteresting question. I shall claim that it is not. Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.

But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. Not perhaps, either, in the expository structure conventional to philosophy, which sets out to establish something and then does so, without surprise, without incident—but only in a form that itself implies that life contains significant surprises, that our task, as agents,

is to live as good characters in a good story do, caring about what happens, resourcefully confronting each new thing. If these views are serious candidates for truth, views that the search for truth ought to consider along its way, then it seems that this language and these forms ought to be included within philosophy.

And what if it is love one is trying to understand, that strange unmanageable phenomenon or form of life, source at once of illumination and confusion, agony and beauty? Love, in its many varieties, and their tangled relations to the good human life, to aspiration, to general social concern? What parts of oneself, what method, what writing, should one choose then? What is, in short, love's knowledge—and what writing does it dictate in the heart?

### A. Expressive Plants, Perceiving Angels

He chose to include the things  
That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony.

Wallace Stevens  
“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”

In his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James describes the author's selection of appropriate terms and sentences, using two metaphors. One is a metaphor of plant growth. Focusing on his theme or idea, the author causes it “to flower before me as into the only terms that honorably expressed it.”<sup>1</sup> And elsewhere in the prefaces, James frequently compares the author's sense of life to soil, the literary text to a plant that grows out of that soil and expresses, in its form, the soil's character and composition.

James's second metaphor is more mysterious. The fully imagined text is next compared (in its relation, apparently, to whatever simpler, more inert, less adequate language may have been, before its invention, on the scene to cover the subject) to some creatures of the air, perhaps birds, perhaps angels. The novelist's imagined words are called “the immense array of terms, perceptual and expressional, that, after the fashion I have indicated, in sentence, passage and page, simply looked over the heads of the standing terms—or perhaps rather, like alert winged creatures, perched on those diminished summits and aspired to a clearer air.”<sup>2</sup>

These two metaphors point to two claims about the writer's art that seem worth investigating. To investigate and defend them is a central purpose of these essays. The first is the claim that there is, with respect to any text carefully written and fully imagined, an organic connection between its form and its content. Certain thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life, reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms. Just as the plant emerges from the seeded soil, taking its form from the combined character of seed and soil, so the novel and its terms flower from and express the conceptions of the author, his or her sense of what matters. Conception and form are bound together; finding and shaping the words is a matter of finding the appropriate and, so to speak, the

honorable, fit between conception and expression. If the writing is well done, a paraphrase in a very different form and style will not, in general, express the same conception.

The second claim is that certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. With respect to certain elements of human life, the terms of the novelist's art are alert winged creatures, perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy.

But to understand that metaphor fully, we clearly need to connect it with the first. For if the novelist's terms are angels, they are also earthly and of the soil of finite human life and feeling. In the canonical medieval conception, angels and separated souls, lacking immersion in earthly ways of life and the body that is a necessary condition for such immersion, are able to apprehend only abstract essences and general forms. Lacking concrete sensuous imaginings, they cannot perceive particulars. On earth, they have only an imperfect cognition, as Aquinas says, "confused and general."<sup>3</sup> James, here, alludes to that conception and inverts it. His angelic beings (his words and sentences) are beings not without but of the imagination, "perceptual and expressional," drawn from the concrete and deeply felt experience of life in this world and dedicated to a fine rendering of that life's particularity and complexity. His claim is that only language this dense, this concrete, this subtle—only the language (and the structures) of the narrative artist, can adequately tell the reader what James believes to be true.

The essays in this volume examine the contribution made by certain works of literature to the exploration of some important questions about human beings and human life. Their first claim is that in this contribution form and style are not incidental features. A view of life is *told*. The telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections. Life is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something. This "as" can, and must, be seen not only in the paraphrasable content, but also in the style, which itself expresses choices and selections, and sets up, in the reader, certain activities and transactions rather than others.<sup>4</sup> The responsibility of the literary artist, then, as James conceives it and as this book will conceive it, is to discover the forms and terms that fittingly and honorably express, adequately state, the ideas that it is his or her design to put forward; and to bring it about that the reader, led by the text into a complex artistic activity "in his own other medium, by his own other art," is active in a way suited to the understanding of whatever is there for understanding, with whatever elements of him or herself are suited to the task of understanding. And we should bear in mind that all writers about life are, in James's view, literary artists, except those too inattentive to care at all about their formal choices and what these express: "The seer and speaker under the descent of the god is the 'poet,' whatever his form, and he ceases to be one when his form, whatever else it may nominally or superficially or vulgarly be, is unworthy of the god: in which event,