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Review Of "The Common Life: Ambiguity, Agreement, And The Structure of Morals" By B. Zwiebach

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Review

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ANALYSES ET COMPTES RENDUS

Anthony J. CASCARDI (ed.), *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Baltimore : The John Hopkins University Press, 1987, 333 p.

Suppose one took seriously either Platonism or Cartesianism in their purest and most codified forms. Understanding of proper conduct either in life generally (as Plato holds) or in science more narrowly (as Descartes holds) is seen as fully achievable, through proper dialectical or meditative attention to the Good or to God. Philosophy itself then appears as the autonomous discipline of maintaining this attention and securing this understanding, uncontaminated by the contingencies of either historical fact or individual desire. History and literature are seen as subordinate disciplines, concerned respectively with what has accidentally happened and with which writings have chanced to please us. Philosophy as the systematic discipline of wisdom can on its own tell us how best to get on with things.

Now suppose instead that the Platonic and Cartesian systems, along with their competitor kin, have fallen under suspicion. Historically, reflective people have not agreed that any one of these systems embodies a secured understanding of wisdom. The very articulation of philosophical systems itself comes to be seen as an activity shaped by historical contingences and the idiosyncratic desires of their creators for reknown and authority. Philosophical thinking is no longer regarded as the natural product of reflective intelligence. The very idea of a universally apt and secured understanding of wisdom is now regarded as a fantasy.

In this latter situation, what are we then to make of philosophizing and its products? Demarcation disputes between philosophy and literature become inevitable. Are philosophical texts now simply to be read as literature, with canny critics now uncovering for us their pleasures, their contradictory rhetorics, and the forces of their authors' secret desires? Or may the procedures of literary critics still be subjected to philosophical scrutiny, themselves assessed as objectively wise or unwise? What would now count as seriousness in the study of texts and in the conduct of life?

The essays collected in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* represent widely varying efforts to articulate and sustain answers to these questions. Each contributor recognizes that our historical situation is one in which wide confidence in any particular version of philosophy as an autonomous, self-founding

discipline of wisdom is unlikely to be forthcoming. The contributors offer what the editor aptly calls various “revisions of foundationalism,” in which suspicion of the autonomy of philosophy has led to the thought that “literature and philosophy are not separable enterprises” (xvi-xvii). These various revisions of (foundational) philosophy, and hence replottings of our possibilities for seriousness, fall into two rough groups.

1) *Postmodernist Textualism* : In the wake of the apparent collapse of systematic, autonomous philosophy, there is a natural temptation to take philosophical texts as objects of literary criticism. If wisdom is not formulable or teachable, then texts that claim to formulate and teach wisdom must instead do something different. Perhaps they express unrealizable fantasies of authority, or perhaps they reflect and perpetuate material class ideologies, or perhaps they simply reflect the incoherencies and indeterminacies that must (it might be argued) trouble any effort at assured expression, so long as the formulation of wisdom is not possible. Philosophical texts are then seen as objects for unmasking and diagnosis, psychoanalytic, material historical, or deconstructionist, depending on the variety of critical intelligence that is favored. The interest of philosophical texts resides in how they fail to be philosophy, in one way or another.

This position is taken up, in varying styles and with varying urgencies, in six of the thirteen essays of the volume, those by Harry Berger, Jr., Dalia Judovitz, Peter McCormick, Berel Lang, David Halliburton, and Mary Wiseman. The argument for this position is initiated, as seems appropriate, through the critical reading of the texts of philosophy that have been most seriously taken to inaugurate autonomous and disciplined courses of philosophical investigation, the central texts of Plato and Descartes. Thus Harry Berger, Jr., reads Plato as a kind of arch-deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, whose dialogues are marked by an overriding awareness of, in de Man’s phrase, “the fundamentally ‘rhetorical nature of literary language’” (95). As Berger reads them, Plato’s dialogues continually depict an ineliminable partiality of understanding displayed by Socrates’ interlocutors, a partiality that testifies to the general in formulability of wisdom, by Socrates, by Plato, by us as readers, or by anyone who seeks after a systematic discipline of wisdom. Contrary to both analytical philosophers, who concern themselves with a fiction called ‘Plato’s metaphysical system’ that they abstract from the complexities of the text, and contrary to Straussians, who still see in the dialogues dramatic closures involving scenes of the transmission of a secret wisdom, and contrary even to Derrida, who is held to have reified Plato as the author of a coherent metaphysics of presence, Berger holds that the dialogues are fully literary, where this means that they display “the structural inadequacy and ethical dangers inherent in any method of teaching ... committed to the dramatic or logocentric level of discourse and grounded in the speaking presence of institutional actors” (96).

Similarly, in commenting on both Plato and Descartes, Dalia Judovitz observes that “the difference of style haunts the very definition of philosophy as a discipline proper” (49). When Plato and Descartes seek to mark absolute differences of style between philosophy, with its seriousness and concern for metaphysical and moral discovery, and literature, with its excessive projections and playfulness, they are in fact then betrayed by “the metaphorical and rhetorical intervention of poetry at the very heart of philosophy” (49); the texts of philosophy are founded on fictionalizing inventiveness and rhetorical maneuver, not wisdom and discovery. (Berger sees Plato as knowing this and celebrating it, while Judovitz sees Plato and Descartes as seeking and failing to repress this fact.) Hence criticism focusing on rhetoric, or deconstruction in the style of de Man, becomes the appropriate mode of the reception of these texts, and of philosophy in general.

This sort of stance is carried on by Peter McCormick, who echoes Judovitz in arguing that philosophy cannot be distinguished from literature either as containing specific linguistic markers or as stemming from a distinctive, nonfictionalizing speech act. If neither semantics nor speech act theory can distinguish philosophy from literature, then the only hope of discovering a fundamental difference lies in seeing philosophy and literature as subserving different functions, as having, as McCormick puts it, distinctive “implicit epistemic markers” associating philosophical texts with rationality and discovery and literary texts with inventiveness and play (66). McCormick then suggests that there is more promise in abandoning this enterprise of drawing distinctions and instead accepting philosophy as a subgenre of literature than there is in attempting to rehabilitate the discredited idea of universally acceptable norms of reasons that the enterprise of drawing functional distinctions presupposes.

Berel Lang endorses this suggestion, arguing that postmodern criticism has succeeded in discrediting the idea of norms of reason and in discovering particularized desires and rhetorical strategies at the roots of philosophical texts. “[T]he supposed will for truth or wisdom in the history of philosophy is revealed [in the postmodern diagnosis] as no more than a disguise for nostalgia, a form of wistfulness and, finally, of self-deception” (319). Yet Lang remains curiously guarded about what might best replace the traditional ambition and practice of philosophy. One strategy would be simply to embrace discontinuities and inconsistencies in our thinking and writing, or at least to rank the traditional virtues of consistency, coherence, and plausibility much lower than the postmodernist virtues of playfulness, wit, and irony. Lang worries, however, that this postmodernist stance is both itself covertly philosophical, in suggesting that there is a right ranking of the virtues, and unserious, in denying us the possibility of reasoned self-responsibility. Yet the traditional terms of seriousness remain, for Lang, beyond rehabilitation. And so, poignantly, he is left recommending vaguely

described efforts to speak and write “out of context” and out of “philosophical wonder” at the present (330).

David Halliburton and Mary Wiseman each urge on us more particularized styles of post-philosophical, postmodernist criticism. Halliburton’s model of writing is a highly deontologized and poetic construal of Heidegger’s later writings. Both writers and human persons are seen as complex ‘functions,’ in mutually constitutive interaction with such things as audience, work, and world functions. Simplifying Halliburton’s baroque extravagances, the suggestion seems to be that persons, world, and posterity groundlessly make one another at all times, so that we might best be served by entering into these makings as magisterially and poetically as we can, maintaining our Heideggerian historical remembrances all the while.

Mary Wiseman in contrast takes her image of writing from Barthes. The use of language is similarly construed as a scene of self-constituting play, where “the structured and structuring subject” (297) emerges, but self-satisfaction and originality are here to be prized more than remembrance. We must often, as Barthes urges us, attempt “to escape, evade, or ‘cheat’ the tradition” (295), which is composed of the expressions of the desires of others that have now become accreted, ossified, and inhibiting for us. Yet in cheating tradition we must match the successes of its creators in expressing and satisfying their desires, so that tradition can serve as a sort of model for us even while we are overcoming it. Here Barthes’ program is distinguished from that of Harold Bloom, which it otherwise seems to resemble, in seeing the desire for pleasure rather than for either authority or wisdom, as the motivating force in the continual contestation of tradition.

Various difficulties seem immediately to trouble these postmodernist textualist stances. Who is to write this newer, anti-philosophical criticism, and with what authority? If this kind of criticism is somehow rationally necessitated through a secured understanding of the natures of philosophy and of writing, then, as Lang notes, postmodernism seems to share in the traditional enterprise, which it otherwise professes to unmask, of grounding (critical) practice in knowledge, of replacing informal know-how with a rationally mandated methodology of reading. Alternatively, if both criticism in general and the more particularized models of textual analysis that are put forward stem instead only from contingent and unconstrained performances, then it is hard to see why we ought to take them seriously, unless we just happen to resonate to one or another of them. And here the very variety of the Derridean, de Manian, Heideggerian, and Barthesian critical performances suggests that there is at present no particular style of textualist criticism that naturally engages anyone other than the faithful. Halliburton and Wiseman in their enactments of critical performance seem especially to slight this issue. Berger and Judovitz suggest reasons for their conceptions of criticism, but thus claim for their critical stances the traditional authority of reason of which they are otherwise suspicious. McCormick and Lang are

evidently aware of this difficulty, and as a result they are quite abstract and diffident in their suggestions about the futures of philosophy and criticism.

In virtue of these difficulties, we might be better advised to abandon all variants of postmodernist textualism and instead to entertain the idea that some modes of philosophical and critical practice might reasonably be regarded as more fully in the service of the acquisition of truth and the development of wisdom than their competitors. The difficulty in this thought is how to make it plausible while still accommodating the genuine historicist worries about variations in conceptions of truth and wisdom, and of reason and value, that have motivated the postmodernist textualist stances. In what way might we now take seriously the idea of a discipline of wisdom ?

2) *Historical Rationalism* : If one holds the view that reasoned seriousness, based on achieved partial understanding of persons and value, in various practices is still possible, then one will be inclined to acquiesce in Arthur C. Danto's functional demarcation of philosophy and literature. In literature, he writes, "each work becomes a metaphor for each reader, ... giving me to myself for each self peering into it" (18, 19), so that we may metaphorically see ourselves as Anna Karenina or Don Quixote, together with all their contingencies of desire, culture, and relationship. Philosophy, in contrast, "is supposed to reveal us for what we are. ... This revelation is not metaphorical, however, which is why I cannot fully acquiesce in the thought that philosophy is literature. It continues to aim at truth, but when false, seriously false, it is often also so fascinatingly false as to retain a kind of perpetual vitality as metaphor" (23). The discourse of philosophy, in sometimes partially embodying essential truths, must be taken to proceed in part from reason, however it may be shaped by historical contingencies.

Seeing philosophy as distinctively aimed at truth and proceeding in part from reason need not presuppose that there are a priori knowable methodological rules, uncontaminated by historical contingencies, for acquiring truth or being rational. Each member of the second group of contributors to *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* acknowledges the influence of the contingencies of history and of individual desire on conceptions of truth and reason, yet each simultaneously persists in the effort to sort these conceptions into the more and less reasonable. In the absence of a priori knowledge of the proper respective methodologies of philosophy, literature, and criticism, however, these contributors take this enterprise itself to be a criticizable, desire-marked, and yet reasonable response to the histories of the practices of philosophy, literature, and criticism. Their general theoretical conceptions arise out of and are responsive to distinctive modes of practice, within which they have their intelligibility, rather than out of a founding, self-validating, intellectual intuition. As Alexander Nehamas writes, "it is a fruitless task ... to try to determine the nature of a discipline independently of its actual practice and in the hope that this nature will

itself determine the practice" (283). And yet conceptions of natures, and of the practices appropriate to them, can still be philosophically assessed for reasonableness. In holding this conception of the possibility of engaged, a posteriori, reasoned assessment of practices, these contributors share a commitment to the thesis, articulated in the general introduction by Anthony J. Cascardi, that "antifoundationalism does not necessarily issue in skepticism, nihilism, or the anxieties of indeterminacy" (xv).

The contributors to *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* who take up this historicist rationalist stance, differ, however, both in taking different practices as the primary objects of their scrutiny and criticism and in how they specifically conceive the place of general theorizing in relation to practice. Stanley Rosen, Denis Dutton, and Alexander Nehamas are principally concerned with the practices of literary criticism and more generally of critical reading of both literary and philosophical texts. Stanley Rosen nicely articulates the general historicist stance and concern with wisdom in practice that these contributors share, as he attacks the idea that we need a methodology of reading or a set of a priori knowable rules for reading that are fixed in a self-founding theory of interpretation. The various new methods of reading that are put forward by the committed textualists (Berger, Judovitz, Halliburton, and Wiseman, and behind them de Man, Derrida, Heidegger, and Barthes) are thus stigmatized as subjectivist impositions divorced from a flourishing traditional practice of interpretation. "The obsession with method [that is now common among literary theorists] is a sublimated form of the desire for the absolute" (214). Instead of a new method, what we need is a recovery of "the pretheoretical talent of natural reason (sometimes called *phronēsis*)" (239) as it has been expressed within traditional practices. (The textualists would replay that there is no such unified tradition of interpretive practice to be recovered.)

At this level of abstraction, Rosen's account of contemporary interpretation theory's refusal of a possible recovery of reason expressed in practice is an attractive and plausible diagnosis of its ills. Whether this recovery can genuinely be achieved and sustained, however, will depend on how we are or are not able to see concrete and specific continuities throughout the history of interpretive practices. Both Denis Dutton and Alexander Nehamas attempt to point to such concrete continuities in the practices of reading in general. Dutton argues that we generally do receive and understand literary works (together with artifacts in general) as products of intentional acts. And not only do we in fact do this, we furthermore have good reasons for doing this. Though what can be intended is itself shaped by prevailing conventions, it does not follow that all interpretation depends upon an unconstrained choice of conventions on the part of the reader. Instead, "we will allow in court only the meanings that the words might possibly have had [for the author who intentionally produced them]" (216). We read by attending to the conventions of usage that might historically have been intention-

ally used by authors (sometimes in novel ways). Intentionalist criteria thus establish “categorical frameworks for understanding” (199), and it is natural and reasonable to make use of them. This argument seems entirely sound. The only objection to which it is open is that there are no stable and univocally intelligible conventions of use to be intended by anyone. Language, a textualist might urge, inevitably makes the coherent expression of intendings impossible. But it is hard to see how this textualist response could be meant seriously.

Alexander Nehamas’s essay both complements and opposes Denis Dutton’s, as Nehamas focuses on the difference between being an agent or author, a self-conscious center of meaning and intending, or one who creates an artifact, and a mere historical person, a writer, or an unself-conscious efficient cause of physical events. Nehamas argues compellingly that there is a definitional connection between works and authors : it is agentive *authors*, not mere efficient causes, to whom we attribute *works*, those collections of marks that we regard as created artifacts possessing significance. Somewhat perversely, Nehamas then suggests that it is our free interpretive activity that creates both author and work out of mere historical writer and insignificant mark. Here one wants to object that ordinary, materially located *persons* are themselves agents and authors, and that, using the resources of a language, they create significant marks that stand as works and call for our interpretation. Kafka, one might say, would have remained an author, albeit an unknown one, even if his writings had never come to light and been read and interpreted. One further salutary effect of Nehamas’s essay, however, is that he calls attention to the interest that literature has for us in making manifest possible characters for agentive persons, in showing us various ways in which we might specifically express and develop our own self-consciousness and senses of value as persons, not mere things.

This theme of how possibilities of character are marked out for us by literature lies at the hearts of the remaining essays in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, those by Martha Craven Nussbaum, Charles Altieri, Anthony J. Cascardi, and Arthur C. Danto. Martha Craven Nussbaum argues that “our ethical task” in attempting to live coherently, expressively, and well resembles “the task of the literary artist” in attempting to fashion a coherent narrative account of the best possibilities for certain protagonists and of how their capacities may help or hinder them in realizing them (169). Perhaps, she suggests, there is even “more than analogy” here : the skill of envisioning possibilities and capacities for protagonists that novelists must employ are the very skills we must have if we are to live well. Exemplary exercises of this skill will have an improvisatory quality, in being responsive to particular desires, situations, needs, and relationships in and among individual persons, fictive or real, yet at the same time will be constrained by what Nussbaum calls the *standing terms* of morality, by principles of duty and responsibility that may properly receive general articulation through abstract philosophical reflection. “Perception

without responsibility is dangerously free-floating, even as duty without perception is blunt and blind" (178). Instead what is needed is a "Loving dialogue" between perception and principle (178). The possibility and importance of achieving such a loving dialogue are illustrated through a careful reading of a late scene in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, in which Maggie Verver and her father, Adam, "give one another up" (170) into their respective marriages, because that is best thing that is then possible for her, and so for him. It is not possible to scrutinize here the details of Nussbaum's compelling account of this achievement. It may well be arguable against this account that this achievement is too little and too late, in arising out of and reinforcing well-established manipulative relations with others, relations that might and ought to have been avoided much earlier. (A reply to this criticism would then be that our best achievements must always be flawed in ways that resemble the failings of Maggie's and Adam's.) But even to take up this line would be to support, not undermine, Nussbaum's general conception of the proper relations between perceptions and principles, and between literature and moral philosophy, for this line of criticism would acknowledge that "the moral role of rules themselves ... can only be shown inside a story that situates rules in their appropriate place vis-à-vis perceptions" (184), showing us how they may be acknowledged and creatively used in particular situations in furtherance of living well. Here philosophy, with its concern for principles, and literature, with its concern for particulars, are convincingly argued to be well practiced in continuous relation to one another, even if they remain distinct.

This theme is continued in the essays of Charles Altieri and Anthony J. Cascardi, with Altieri emphasizing the contingency and performativity of the act or process of achieving understanding and living well, and Cascardi emphasizing the stable content of any such achievement. Altieri thus focuses, as the editor observes, on the dynamics of "individual 'alignment' with those goods that require universal acceptance" (133), plausibly arguing that such alignments can never be perfect or completed. This in turn leads him to prefer an Aristotelian conception of multiple and shifting ethical virtues to a Kantian morality of universal principle. We should attempt, he thinks, to make our valuing and acting articulate, legible, beautiful, sublime, or "noncategorically intelligible" (150), rather than above all dutiful. But it is perhaps arguable, as Nussbaum suggests, that there remains a fundamental place in our lives for the standing terms, the Kantian principles of duty, even if Altieri is also right about the nonclosing and performative character of our specific valuing and acting.

Along these lines, Anthony J. Cascardi is concerned to show, and to mark out how literature helps to show, the place and worth of something like Kantian morality in human life. Kant himself, it is argued, failed to establish this, in distinguishing and separating phenomenal nature and causality from noumenal freedom and morality. Kant's late efforts in *The Critique of Judgment* to lead us, through the experiences of beauty and sublimity and through reflection on them,

to see phenomenal nature as itself an expression of a supersensible, noumenal reality, thereby healing the breach between them, do not carry us far enough. This insight remains, for Kant, something achieved in the mind alone, something aesthetically subjective, not something certifiably stemming from the way things are. We need, then, a more authentic and natural way of locating morality in nature, in relation to natural human desires and passions. Cascardi then takes as an emblem of the natural reconciliation of passion and morality the faithful marriage of Leontes and Hermione that is achieved, after the overcoming of Leontes's unnatural jealousies, at the end of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Moral lawfulness and naturalness here coincide, as passion is directed to its best objects, in "their (re)creation of the conjugal" (128). One might, with Altieri, wonder how conclusive such an achievement can be – notice Cascardi's careful "(re)" – but its value as an object of aspiration is here compellingly portrayed.

These essays of Nussbaum, Altieri, and Cascardi stand together at the forefront of the most exciting, important, original, and serious recent work both in post-foundational moral philosophy and in literary theory. This work is nicely juxtaposed in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* with the more skeptical essays of the postmodernist textualists. In surviving textualist criticisms, while still taking historicist worries about the influence of contingencies on all reading, writing, imagining, and thinking into account, they show (as Danto suggests in his meditation on *its* practice) that philosophy, as the disciplined effort to understand the nature of things thence to live fitly and well, is possible – not in pure autonomy, not in analysis or the theory of reference, not in the theory of criticism prior to practice, but in relation to serious attention to narratives of the pressures of the particular on understanding, valuing, and acting.

Richard ELDRIDGE.

Keith SEDDON, *Time, a philosophical treatment*, Croom Helm, London, New York, Sydney, 1987, 166 p.

Le temps est à la mode en cette décennie finissante. Après la *Société belge de Philosophie* les 11 et 12 décembre 1987, c'est l'*Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française* qui y consacre son XXII^e congrès du 29 au 31 août 1988. Dans ce contexte, le petit livre de K. SEDDON nous apporte le rafraîchissement d'un vent du large, et plus précisément d'Outre-Atlantique. Quoi de plus éloigné, en effet, de l'heideggero-manie continentale, que la réflexion quasi-thérapeutique ⁽¹⁾ de notre auteur sur les problèmes du temps ?

Le livre reprend, de façon parfois un peu superficielle, l'analyse de la plus grande partie des problèmes temporels qui ont retenu l'attention des philosophes

(1) '*Treatment*', nous dit le Webster, signifie entre autre, et c'est dans ce sens qu'il doit être entendu dans le titre de K. SEDDON, '*management in the application of remedies*'.