

Love's knowledge :
essays on philosophy and literature

LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE

Essays on Philosophy and Literature

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

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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.

List of Long and Short Titles

"Discernment" "The Discernment of Perception: an Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Morality"

"Plato on Commensurability" "Plato on Commensurability and Desire"

"Flawed Crystals" "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy"

"'Finely Aware'" "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination"

"Perceptive Equilibrium" "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory"

"Perception and Revolution" "Perception and Revolution: *The Princess Casamassima* and the Political Imagination"

"Sophistry" "Sophistry About Conventions"

"Reading" "Reading for Life"

"Fictions" "Fictions of the Soul"

"Love's Knowledge" "Love's Knowledge"

"Narrative Emotions" "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love"

"Love and the Individual" "Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration"

"Steerforth's Arm" "Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View"

"Transcending" "Transcending Humanity"

Fragility The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

The essays in this collection have been previously published as follows:

"The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1985): 151–201. (The present volume contains a revised and expanded version.)

"Plato on Commensurability and Desire," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 58 (1984): 55–80.

"Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 25–50.

"'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. A. Cascardi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 169–91. (An earlier and briefer version was published as "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 [1985]: 516–29.)

"Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. R. Cohen (London: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1989), 58–85. (An earlier version was published in *Logos* 8 (1987): 55–83) (revised).

"Perception and Revolution; *The Princess Casamassima* and the Political Imagination," in *Method, Language, and Reason: Essays in Honour of Hilary Putnam*, ed. G. Boolos (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

"Sophistry About Conventions," *New Literary History* 17 (1985): 129–39.

"Reading for Life," *The Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 1 (1988): 165–80 (revised).

"Fictions of the Soul," *Philosophy and Literature* 7 (1983): 145–61.

"Love's Knowledge," in *Perspectives on Self-Deception*, ed. B. McLaughlin and A. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 487–514.

"Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," *Ethics* 98 (1988): 225–54. (A French version was published in *Littérature* 71 (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.

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*

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

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.

Winner of the
1991 PEN Spielvogel-Diamondstein Prize for the Best Collection of Essays

Love's Knowledge

"To move with authority over so wide a range of intellectual history, the author must be an unlikely combination: an acute and sensitive critic of ancient and modern literature, a professional philosopher and a trained scholar of ancient Greek. In this case skepticism can be dispensed with; Martha Nussbaum is all of these things."

BERNARD KNOX, *Washington Post Book World*

"The best modern discussion of the ways in which what we call philosophy and what we call literature interrelate. . . . Anyone who wants to think about how literature and philosophy can serve each other should not just read this book but study it and return to its complex arguments again and again."

WAYNE C. BOOTH, *Philosophy and Literature*

"It is Martha Nussbaum's striking and profound idea that questions of style and substance are so intricately bound up with one another, that if the deep questions of moral life are in issue, they can be but inadequately dealt with through philosophical writing as currently practiced. . . . So she has put together a wonderful book about meaning, writing, knowledge, and human truth."

ARTHUR C. DANTO, *Columbia University*

"With this volume Martha Nussbaum gives new meaning to the word 'interdisciplinary': No mere dabbling in closely aligned fields, the essays presented here are based on her considerable knowledge and understanding of classics, philosophy, and comparative literature. . . . Her assertions are balanced, insightful, and infused with subtle humor."

The Bloomsbury Review

"*Love's Knowledge* is an important book, one that should reshape our thought about ethics. . . . [It] is written with grace and clarity; it is, indeed, illuminated by love—love of the texts and authors that Professor Nussbaum writes about, and loving attention to what our lives, including our moral thoughts and feelings, are really like."

CORA DIAMOND, *University of Virginia*

About the Author. Martha Nussbaum is University Professor and Professor of Philosophy, Classics, and Comparative Literature at Brown University.

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will benefit the AIDS Action Committee of Boston. Another portion will be given to the John J. Winkler Memorial Trust.

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ESSAYS ON PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE



Martha C. Nussbaum

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