Acknowledging Separateness: Iris Murdoch and Richard Wollheim on Literature and Philosophy

PAOLO BABBIOTTI & FRANCESCA SCAPINELLO

Abstract: This paper is a contribution to the debate on the relationship between literature and philosophy. It challenges Nussbaum's (1983) and Murphy's (2024) worries that philosophy doesn't deal adequately with morality, drawing on Richard Wollheim and Iris Murdoch. Instead of finding in a more literary writing (Nussbaum) or in the concept of 'bifocality' (Murphy) the solution to philosophy's limits, it resorts to Wollheim's idea of 'commentary' and to Murdoch's uses of literary examples to argue for a distinction between literature and philosophy. It further shows that such separateness enables a vital dialectical exchange between the two fields.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, Richard Wollheim, literature, philosophy

Introduction

In the 1983 first issue of the journal *New Literary History*, a significant discussion took place on the relationship between literature and moral philosophy, involving both literary scholars and contemporary philosophers. The central piece of the volume, around which much of the discussion revolved, was Martha Nussbaum's "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" (Nussbaum, 1983). Recently, this debate has gained renewed interest thanks to Ruth Murphy's article, published in the *Winter Issue* of 2024 in the same journal, titled "'*Let me look again*'. The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40" (Murphy, 2024). We think that Murphy's article stands out for at least three reasons. First, it provides a concise yet insightful summary of key moments in a debate that might otherwise seem dated, clarifying the positions of its protagonists. It also refers to other subsequent moments where the relationship between literature and moral philosophy was explored in Anglo-American journals. Second, it explicitly inserts Iris Murdoch into the discussion. While Murdoch was briefly mentioned by Nussbaum in a footnote of "Flawed Crystals"— and integrated only in Cora Diamond's article for the same issue of *New Literary History* (Diamond, 1983)—Murphy takes this suggestion further, treating Murdoch as a fundamental voice in the debate. This innovative move is something we also aim to revisit in our article. Lastly, it develops the concept of "bifocality" to articulate the connection between literature and moral philosophy. By "bifocality," Murphy refers to a dual perspective that characterizes certain genres, particularly written testimonies, and that reconciles philosophy and literature. As a paradigmatic example, Murphy analyzes *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi, showing how it can be both considered a literary work and a text of moral philosophy.

While recognizing its merits, we also believe Murphy's article does not address certain key aspects of the 1983 debate, particularly Richard Wollheim's objection to the overall plausibility of considering literature as moral philosophy. What worries Murphy is finding a way to bring literature and philosophy closer, against those who believe such a rapprochement is structurally impossible (like,

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 2025 [38-48]

for instance, Paul Voice in his article "Why Literature Cannot Be Moral Philosophy"; see Voice, 1994, and Murphy, 2024). Now, Wollheim's reply to Nussbaum is subtler than limiting to say that literature simply is not and never will be moral philosophy. We believe that his position shows well not just the distance but also the possible interpenetration between literature and philosophy. Confronting this duality—which can be expressed in many ways, as Murphy also recalls: i.e, concrete and abstract, near and far, particular and universal—Wollheim is not so worried. He tones it down. He shows us how it is possible for these two fields to interact while maintaining their differences, without necessarily trying to unite them—or to identify particular literary styles or genres that merge them. What is more, we believe that Iris Murdoch, at least in part, shared this attitude. Her philosophical work can be interpreted not only as an expression of bifocality, but also as exhibiting a serene acceptance of the separation between philosophy and literature. A separation neither dramatic nor tragic, but necessary to make the two fields interact fruitfully.

In our article, we will begin in Section 1 by recounting the origins of the 1983 volume of the *New Literary History*, recalling how it is an extension of the debate held in 1981 at a meeting of the *American Philosophical Association* dedicated to "Philosophy and Literature," at which Martha Nussbaum presented her paper on Henry James. In the course of this section, we will investigate Nussbaum's concern about the possible unification of philosophy and literature and then we will see, in the final part, how Murphy took up that concern and attempted to solve it through the concept of "bifocality" and resorting to Murdoch's conceptions of attention and "fabric of being."

In Section 2, we will reconstruct Wollheim's critique of Nussbaum, and we will see how Wollheim reflects on the value of the commentary: rather unsurprisingly, philosophy can fruitfully engage with literature by commenting on it. This does not mean that philosophy will use literature merely as a large repository of examples, but rather that philosophy can integrate its reflections by allowing itself to be dialectically influenced by literature. Indeed, philosophy can extrapolate certain questions from literary texts and then attempt to answer them, without knowing in advance which questions and what answers—moral or otherwise—may emerge. This shift of attention aims to show a way in which philosophy can maintain a certain distance without rejecting its intermingling with literature. Finally, we will close this section by showing how an analogous philosophical outline—rooted in commentary and in fruitful collaboration between philosophical reflection and literary sources—can be found in Iris Murdoch as well. Murdoch has many times focused on how philosophy, including moral philosophy, can be contaminated by literature, without, in doing so, becoming like literature or adopting a double (or bifocal) perspective. Here too, we see a dialectical movement aimed at finding new questions in literary texts and then attempting to remain with them, to answer them in a philosophical way. This process involves an attention to determinate questions with a philosophical interest, which can guide us through the richness of the literary works under examination.

I

From March 26th to 28th, 1981, the 55th annual meeting of the *American Philosophical Association* takes place in Portland, Oregon. In the program for Thursday, March 26th, 1981, under the "Invited Addresses," we find a session entitled "Philosophy and Literature." The speaker is Martha Nussbaum, the commentators are Richard Wollheim and Guy Sircello, and the chair is Arnulf Zweig. Nussbaum is 33 years old and has been teaching at Harvard University since 1975. In a 2008 interview with Jeffrey J. Williams, Nussbaum reveals that it was thanks to a co-taught course with Stanley Cavell that she discovered a way of teaching that resonated with her:

> Cavell communicated the idea that when you go into that classroom in front of five hundred undergraduates who don't care about Plato's *Symposium*, you have to dig into yourself and figure out what's really important to you about Plato's *Symposium*, because it's only if you do that that you'll have any hope of getting to them. I just thought one night, What do I really care about? (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 73).

What is interesting is that, in 1975, Nussbaum doesn't have a clear answer to this question. What she realizes instead, interrogating her own interests, is that she wants to force herself to teach at least one "non-philosophical" course a year. Hence she opts for a course entitled "Philosophy and the Novel." Since then she begins working on "the Henry James stuff" (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 74), which will eventually appear in *Love's Knowledge* (Nussbaum, 1990). It is 1981, however, the fundamental year for the development of this new, "non-philosophical" interest. Let us read Nussbaum's own recounting:

> The American Philosophical Association asked me to give one of what they call 'invited papers.' They said it could be anything you want, so I thought, Okay, so far I've been known as a classical philosopher—the *De Motu* book had come out, parts of *The Fragility of Goodness* were circulating, but if I'm ever going to strike out and establish that I think about a wider range of texts and issues, now's the time to do it. I'd been lecturing on Henry James in the class, so I thought, Alright, I'm going to do a paper on *The Golden Bowl* (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 74).

We decided to quote a few excerpts from this interview (which we will reference again) because, before reporting some of the main points of the theoretical position put forward by Nussbaum in "Flawed Crystal: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," it is good to grasp the scope she herself assigned to this undertaking. Her article is conceived as a challenge to an academic philosophical community that regarded an interest in Henry James, and in literature more broadly, as "non-philosophical."

Nussbaum seizes the opportunity and presents her reading of *The Golden Bowl*. At the time, her attempt to read the novel is certainly subversive in its form—indeed, in the same interview, Nussbaum admits that if she had written her dissertation with the same "poetic voice," she would never have gotten a job (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 73); as it was just as subversive in its content, since it urged her contemporaries not merely to take literature seriously (which they certainly did outside the university), but to take it seriously *within* the academic sphere: the goal was to no longer see literature as merely a "sort of orchard full of juicy examples" (Adamson, 1998, p. 89, and see Murphy, 2024) for philosophy—especially moral philosophy—but rather as an integral part of the philosophical enterprise. In what sense? As Nussbaum explains in 2009, the issues raised by "Flawed Crystals" can be summarized as follows:

> The first [issue] concerns the need for moral philosophy to recognize ways of thinking and imagining that do not focus exclusively on general principles. My own turn to James was part of a defense of an Aristotelian perception-based approach in ethics, and my claim was that we cannot see what such an approach offers … without detailed investigations of the role of perception and particular vision in individual lives. Philosophical articles cannot, all by themselves, offer us such investigations, although they can helpfully comment on them. Novels such as the novels of Henry James are such investigations. Their form … is not incidental, but essential to their ethical contribution. For that reason … no work in the form of a philosophical treatise could make a complete statement of the case for Aristotelian perception-centered ethics (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 762).

One interesting aspect of the reconstruction Nussbaum provides of the central moments of "Flawed Crystals" is that she acknowledges both a limitation and an impossibility within philosophy: a limitation, because moral philosophy needs to turn to something beyond general principles, or else it risks being disconnected from human life; an impossibility, because what Nussbaum here calls "the philosophical treatise" can never fully succeed in defending the perception-based ethics derived from literary works (such as Henry James's). How, then, does Nussbaum attempt this task in "Flawed Crystals," even knowing that she cannot fully carry it out? By using a philosophical writing style that is permeated by James's prose—a style that, we might say, imitates it, seeking to capture certain aspects of its way of proceeding. In particular, Nussbaum lingers on the second part of the novel, devoted to Maggie Verver and her plan to win back her husband: first James and then Nussbaum present this plan in all its nuances and complexity; following first one then the other, the reader is invited to expand their own "moral imagination."

The exercise in style Nussbaum did 40 years ago could be revisited, according to Ruth Murphy, through the concept of "bifocality." From the very outset of "'*Let me look again*'. The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40" Murphy introduces the concept of "bifocality" as "a style of writing that responds to the moral demands of a lived reality in both a philosophical and literary way" (Murphy, 2024, p. 21). It would be a way to resolve both the "far-sightedness" of philosophy, in "in its dissociation from lived experience," and the "near-sightedness" of literature, "in its attachment to it" (Murphy, 2024, p. 26). She thinks that it is in particular in testimonies—understood both as a literary genre and as a discursive category—that we can achieve this kind of double vision. Why? "Because testimony incorporates both the literary and the ethical, and precisely through and from this convergence derives its moral charge" (Murphy, 2024, p. 27). In testimony we have thus the merging of the literary and the ethical (that is, the philosophical part: philosophical ethics).

Even though testimonies are Murphy's elected genre or category for seeing bifocality in action, we claim that the spirit of bifocality—or, at least, the spirit of its introduction as a concept at all—is also to be found in Martha Nussbaum's attempt to bridge philosophy and literature. However, Nussbaum's writing would be an approximation of bifocality, or rather, bifocal only in its form, as also Iris Murdoch's writing in *The Sovereignty of Good*, according to Murphy, is. Indeed, much of the former's writing is resting on fiction (Nussbaum, 1983), and of the latter on thought experiments (Murdoch, 1970), rather than on personal experience, directly or indirectly (Murphy's relevant example here is Hannah Arendt's documentation of Adolf Eichmann's trial). This is how the distinction between form and content in "bifocality" is framed:

> Bifocality tends to encompass both form and content. Content can be deemed bifocal when it draws on both a particular historical event and on the conception of this event as a moral breach in a collective ethical sphere. Form is bifocal when it combines elements of literary and philosophical languages to derive an ethical message. That the characteristics of literature can ethically enrich philosophy has already been shown by Murdoch, Nussbaum, and many others (Murphy, 2024, p. 33).

Both Nussbaum's and Murdoch's works ("and many others," including Cora Diamond's), for Murphy, exhibit bifocality in their form, but they would also go some way to underpinning a bifocal framework as such. Specifically, the resonances Murphy sees between Murdoch's work (she is Murphy's main philosophical interlocutor in her essay) and a bifocal framework are (a) Murdoch's emphasis on the notion of attention as a way of "'staying with' a given reality," an act that involves "looking again, with the distance of space and time" (Murphy, 2024, p. 33), and (b) the relevance of the notion of the "fabric of being," which Murdoch brings into philosophy for referring to the constitution of our moral lives (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 21-22). What the M and D example in *The Sovereignty of the Good* shows—in describing how a mother, M, changes her negative view into a positive view of her daughter-in-law, D—is that the ethical transformation takes place when M pays attention to the modes of existence of D: the change is internal, it happens within the intricate "fabric of being" of M, and it involves the re-direction of attention towards D.

"Fabric of being" is thus a metaphor Murdoch employs to describe the complex internal processes that are at play in our moral life. Processes that, for Murdoch, should deserve our deepest attention. Attention is another central concept to Murdoch's understanding of morality which she inherits from Simone Weil. In *The Idea of Perfection*, Murdoch defines attention as expressing "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 33), and takes it to be the characteristic trait of a moral agent. For to pay attention, in a Murdochian framework, is to acknowledge the true reality object of attention, that is, it is to see the object without imposing an egoistic and self-referred view on it. Through attentive looking, the subject gets rid of its "fat relentless ego" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 52) and thus is able to fully and realistically appreciate what stands in front of it. It is for instance only when M "looks again" that she realises who D is—and perhaps also learns something else about herself too: moral change happens internally through attention. (Murdoch, still after Weil, calls this process *unselfing*: in *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts*, it is

described as the action of giving "attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 82); in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, unselfing is explained from the perspective of the lover who "learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 17)).

The relevance of attention within a bifocal framework is further cashed out by Murphy through a parallel with Primo Levi's notion of the "gray zone," which indicates the range of situations in which it is not possible to give a definitive moral evaluation (Levi, 1986). This is because these intermediate moments—between the black of total evil and the white of total good—call for what Murdoch referred to as "secondary moral words" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 22; see also Williams, 1985) like courage, resentment, envy, love: they bring complexity in assessing our reality, oftentimes leading to the practice of attention as the only possible moral resolution. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi gives an example of this kind of dynamic which is centered on the feelings of shame: as a concentration camp prisoner, he found a liter of water and, after painfully pondering different scenarios (i.e., to drink the water all by himself, to share it with a close friend, to tell the discovery to every prisoner), he decided to reveal it only to his friend Alberto. Levi later discussed his decision with another fellow friend and prisoner, Daniele, who ended up knowing what he did, and he couldn't help but feel shame. Levi dealt with shame even many years after the deportation, in a situation of peace, and even after the death of Daniele. The only thing that Levi could do, and did, for all that time, as the writing of *The Drowned and the Saved* testifies, was to keep interrogating his actions and the systems of value through which we judge them, showing a deep form of attention to them.

Thus, the practice of attention, if we take Murphy's reading of Murdoch, is connected to Levi's "gray zone" because they are both linked with a specific "domain of subtleties and struggle" (Murphy, 2024, p. 41), while, more in general, encouraging the exercise of the moral imagination. It is at this juncture that literature and philosophy are portrayed as necessary conditions for bifocality. Following Murphy, literature is, unlike philosophy, able to grasp the nuances of everyday life (the Murdochian "fabric of being"), even though it risks getting lost in them. But philosophy, unlike literature, is able to deal with reality at a distance (Murphy, 2024, p. 26), in abstraction, at a general level. Combining both literature and philosophy, bifocal writing (expressed, for instance, in the form of "Flawed Crystals" and the M and D example, and in the form and content of *The Drowned and the Saved*) brings together universality and particularity, abstractness and concreteness, distance and proximity.

What we would like to question now is this very strive for unity: do we always need to worry about the limits and separateness of literature and (a certain kind of) philosophy? Isn't there also another way of engaging with both fields that doesn't even try to merge them?

II

We argue that there is another way. Even though it is a way that does not spring from worries or concerns, but rather from toning down the fact of the separation between literature and philosophy. However, it tames it without throwing away the interest in this discussion. We don't know how Martha Nussbaum's presentation on James was received in 1981 session; she doesn't talk about the questions from the commentator Guy Sircello and the chair Arnulf Zweig (in her interview, she only mentions a very long question by the philosopher and logician Ruth Barcan Marcus, Nussbaum, 2009, p. 760). Instead, she focuses on the role of the other commentator, Richard Wollheim. We think that the spirit and the letter of Wollheim's reply is able to achieve this undramatic but sympathetic response to the separateness of literature and philosophy and we aim to explain why in the course of this section.

However, let us read directly from what Nussbaum recalls of their exchange in the APA meeting:

> Luckily, the commentator was … Richard Wollheim … a very great philosopher but also a kind of renegade character, with an autobiographical novel that talks about things like his love affairs and his divorce. Wollheim had a very different view of *The Golden Bowl* from mine, but he took the whole project of bringing these novels into philosophy seriously. Instead of just being standoffish, skeptical,

> or scoffing, as so many people would have been, he got right into it, and he put himself on the line. He said, 'Maggie Verver is not an example of the moral imagination; she's possessive; she's a predator'—things that I now think are true, but I didn't think so at the time. We had a wonderful exchange (J. J. Williams, 2009, p. 74).

After that session, the editor of *New Literary History*, Ralph Cohen, becomes interested in that exchange and decides to publish it in the journal in 1983, also involving other philosophers such as Cora Diamond, Patrick Gardiner, and Hilary Putnam. In recalling this 1983 issue of *New Literary History*, Ruth Murphy, in her article, makes no reference either to Wollheim's role in the story or to his critique of Nussbaum's presentation. We can thus proceed to analyze the disagreement between the two—a disagreement that, let us emphasise, arose within a shared framework of sympathy for the endeavor of bringing moral philosophy and literature together. Their shared sympathy did not prevent criticisms, but rather encouraged them (provided they were not "standoffish or scoffing"), especially when they are motivated by a profound and engaged reading of *The Golden Bowl* such as Wollheim's—a reading that Nussbaum herself, as she revealed in her 2008 interview, came to accept in part and, in 2009, even characterized as "in many ways superior to my own" (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 759).

Wollheim's response, which was published in the 1983 issue of *New Literary History*, is entitled "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and the Plausibility of Literature as Moral Philosophy." Perhaps it is not so strange that it is the only text in the volume whose title closely resembles Nussbaum's title: the words remain the same up to "and," then Wollheim introduces a modification; as though signaling that both texts arrive at different conclusions from the same material, the same flawed golden bowl.

From the very beginning of his article, Wollheim expresses a certain difficulty: on the one hand, he considers it inadequate to emphasize uniquely the areas of disagreement with Nussbaum; on the other hand, he thinks that presenting his own interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* together with something like "a general theory of the novel," while also responding to Nussbaum's issues, would not be feasible. Wollheim's solution to this impasse—drawing the Freudian lesson for the theory of the mind—is to "resort to compromise" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 185). In his brief reply, he confines himself to three things: (1) putting together a few interpretive observations about *The Golden Bowl*; (2) connecting them to a "highly schematic picture of the novel"; and (3) showing how these observations can be useful to moral philosophy. (In truth, Wollheim also alludes to a fourth thing, which he doesn't develop and is not relevant for this paper, since it refers to a more general theory of expressiveness.)

Wollheim's text is already highly condensed and schematic, so it is very difficult to compress it further without sacrificing intelligibility. Nevertheless, what we deem essential is that Wollheim offers a reading of *The Golden Bowl* that directly contrasts with Nussbaum's. Let us firstly resume very briefly the scheme of the novel. *The Golden Bowl* is divided in two parts: in the first, we see the marriage of two couples, the Prince or Amerigo and Maggie Verver, Charlotte Stant and Adam Verver (Maggie's father); in the second part, we see how Maggie succeeds in pushing away Charlotte from her and her father's lives once she discovers that Charlotte and the Prince were having, in the first half of the novel, an extramarital affair they both valued and saw as extraordinary—yet thought to be viable with their respective marriages.

Commenting on the second part of *The Golden Bowl*, Wollheim writes: "In reclaiming her husband, Maggie seeks revenge upon his mistress, and the retribution that she exacts is in accord with what we may think of as the law of primal sadism: the *lex talionis*" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189). But how does he arrive at this interpretation? By reading *The Golden Bowl* step by step and, above all, through a dialectical process that sees the text first as Story, then as Narrative, and finally as Fiction. These are Wollheim's highly schematic terms of art. In his view, each phase elicits different reactions.

Let us begin with the possible reactions triggered by the stories in *The Golden Bowl*. One central story is the extramarital relationship between the Prince and Charlotte Stant. This relationship can

be regarded as incompatible with the marriage between the Prince and Maggie (as the character Fanny Assingham believes), or it can be seen as wholly compatible with it—something that even arises to compensate for certain shortcomings in marriage itself (as the Prince and Charlotte believe in the first part of the novel). Which stance should we adopt? According to Wollheim, neither. Because it would be premature to settle for this level of interpretation. One must transcend the simple Story, move to the Narrative and make a "shift of attention," mobilizing the imagination. By doing so

> Our viewpoint changes: we identify now with one character, now with another… Accordingly, the novel as Narrative is similarly able to recruit identification in the reading of the text, and it therefore seems that the only responses that we should take account of are those which have been enriched in this way (Wollheim, 1983, pp. 186-187).

What kinds of reactions emerge when we view the text not merely as Story but as Narrative? To put it briefly, during our reading we let our imagination roam free: first we identify with one character, then with another, as the Narrative unfolds—sometimes with Maggie's plan, sometimes with the Prince's perspective, sometimes with Charlotte's exuberance, and so on.

Yet Wollheim argues that we must transcend the text as Narrative and move toward viewing it as Fiction. In a nutshell, we must not overlook the fact that these various identifications are in some sense "constrained by [the author's] intention" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 188). And it is at this level that, for Wollheim, the most interesting questions arise: "[Now] we might ask why James insists that we don't identify with Charlotte in the course of assessing Maggie. Is it simply that he wishes to protect or exculpate his heroine?" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 188). This is the fundamental question worth asking, and one that James, as a novelist, appears to want us to ask. And it is again at this level that Nussbaum's and Wollheim's answers diverge: the former seems to say, "Yes, in assessing Maggie, it is crucial not to consider Charlotte's point of view—however painful that may be. This avoidance is necessary for Maggie's liberation, for separating herself from the image of being the perfect, good (but unloved) wife and a good daughter." The latter, however, interprets Maggie's plan as a revenge against Charlotte, a person who has committed a double crime against her: "Charlotte took something away from her that belonged to her—*that* Maggie can right by taking it back. And Charlotte did so by exploiting Maggie's innocence. She deprived Maggie of knowledge, she immured her in her ignorance" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189). For Wollheim, we can thus read Maggie's plan as a genuine vendetta, with all its darker sides:

> Maggie pursues her revenge by deepening the silence until finally the distraught Charlotte, mocked by her torturer, hallucinates triumph, and the Prince, in the comfort of his own little prison, pronounces the woman whose company he had once, and not so long before, preferred to anyone else's, 'stupid' (Wollheim, 1983, p. 189).

That covers the first two points of Wollheim's response (pertaining to his interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* and the "highly schematic picture of the novel"). In the final part of his reply, Wollheim addresses how these preliminary observations about literature in general, and a novel like *The Golden Bowl* in particular, can be helpful to moral philosophy. For the aims of this paper, we are not especially interested in Wollheim's view of the formation and development of morality (for an in-depth look, see Wollheim, 1984). We are interested in drawing attention to a crucial aspect that any moral philosophy must confront if it wishes to learn from literature. According to Wollheim, any text of moral philosophy must necessarily offer a commentary on the literary work under analysis; and such commentary must take into account the "highly schematic picture of the novel" and remain somewhat faithful to the author's intentions. Wollheim writes: "it seems to me that the most powerful considerations for thinking that literature is an essential element in the formulation of moral philosophy also show how crucial it is to have the commentary as well" (Wollheim, 1983, p. 190).

What does this fact imply? Certainly, it implies that a literary text does not speak on its own and that, no matter how we might encourage a rapprochement of literature and philosophy, it will inevitably require a mediation. Does this mean that Nussbaum's original interpretation in *Flawed Crystals* is invalidated? Not at all. Her reading serves as a commentary, drawing on certain elements of James's text (above all, the gradual effacement of Charlotte) and interpreting them in the way most congenial to her. Wollheim extracted the following question from James's novel: "[Now] we might ask why James insists that we don't identify with Charlotte in the course of assessing Maggie. Is it simply that he wishes to protect or exculpate his heroine?". The question remains alive, it is Nussbaum's and Wollheim's respective answers (at least in the 1980s) that differ.

This fact underscores a very general characteristic that can help distinguish literature from philosophy: in literary texts such as novels—and, more specifically, in *The Golden Bowl*—certain questions are raised (for instance, "Is Charlotte Stant abandoned?"). Henry James does not explicitly answer this question (nor does he explicitly formulate it); in his text, however, one can extract elements that support either a more positive response (like Nussbaum's, which claims that Charlotte is indeed abandoned but is nevertheless taken into account in Maggie's thoughts) or a more negative one (putting an emphasis on how Charlotte is not only forgotten but also punished). What is more, the interesting fact is that the philosophical game thrives on the neatness of such answers: without Nussbaum's initial *Flawed Crystals*, Wollheim's subsequent *Flawed Crystals* might never have existed. The contradiction, as in a dialectical process, stimulates philosophy; while it remains contained and implicit within the literary work itself.

This is by no means to say that literature can never speak for itself and that philosophy must come to rescue commenting on it. What we can learn from Wollheim's reply is that philosophy, in its commentary, cannot think of itself as the ventriloquist of the literary work, just like that, immediately, but must as it were lay its card on the table: that is, philosophy must admit that it will start from its own interpretation or commentary. It follows that different comments will conflict with each other, as philosophy doesn't always start from the same assumptions. Anyway, what Wollheim makes us see is that this (the conflict) is not something we have to worry about, as long as the dialogue between differences is constructive.

Perhaps surprisingly, given Murphy's reliance on Iris Murdoch, we would like to put forth the idea that Murdoch too doesn't always have the urge to find a resolution between literature and philosophy. Rather, there are some resonances with Wollheim's understanding of philosophy as a commentary and as a re-orientation of attention. In this way, a different scruple entertained by Murdoch would concern the maintenance of the dialogue between literature and philosophy, rather than finding a genre or a style of writing which combines the strengths of both.

We can start by asking: how does Murdoch interrogate literary works? A first example is to be found in this passage from the paper "Art is the Imitation of Nature" delivered in 1978 at a symposium on British writing at the University of Caen and collected in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997):

> What do we think about Hamlet? What do we think about Fabrice del Dongo, or Madame Bovary? Or what about D. H. Lawrence's treatment of Clifford Chatterley compared with his treatment of Mellors? Does Tolstoy meanly abandon characters such as Sonia and Karenin? Does Henry James abandon Charlotte Stant? Here, I think, we naturally envisage a relation between the author and his character as if the character could turn round and say to the author, 'You have been unfair to me.' Can Mauriac get away with a character as incoherent as that of his Thérèse? Is Fanny Price in Mansfield Park really a rather nasty girl or is she a nice girl? We believe that Swann loved Odette but do we believe in the same way that Marcel loved Albertine? *As a method of criticism such speculations may seem simple-minded and perhaps old-fashioned, but this is the natural beginning of criticism*. This sort of natural reflection about stories and about novels can reveal to us how clearly the author's moral attitude is exhibited, even if he wishes to conceal it, in his attitude to his characters, in what some critics call 'the placing' of his characters (Murdoch, 1997, p. 254, our emphasis).

Here Murdoch does something similar to what Wollheim did in replying to Nussbaum: extracting questions from the novel considered as fiction. Other occurrences where Murdoch raises similar questions can be found in, for instance, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), where Murdoch reports, agreeing with it, Simone Weil's criticism of Mauriac's novel *Thérèse Desqueyroux* "for its failure to portray evil justly." The problem there is that the author didn't show how far goodness and self-deception really are—that is, he didn't properly represent the relation between sin and grace, turning it into something "sloppy and sentimental" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 103). Or when, in objecting against the structuralist turn in literary criticism, she remarks that "people argue about whether D. H. Lawrence was unjust to Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and how far this affects our judgment of the work; or about whether the hero of Henry James' *Ambassadors* as a righteous man or a self-deceiving fool" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 205). It is true that for Murdoch such questions are only picturing what morality is in a partial way: asking about obligations and rules isn't enough in grasping the facts of morality, which for her encompass aspects of vision and of inner change. However, posing such questions "is the natural beginning of criticism," and the criticism might not be the one that the literary works immediately seem to call for. At the same time, Murdoch also reminds us that a "prime difficulty in human life" is that "we must have stories (art forms), but stories (art forms) are almost always a bit or very false" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 105). If we listen to both Murdoch and Wollheim, the beginning of an answer to such difficulty can be given by philosophy: what do we have to pay attention to?

What we would like to suggest is a shift of emphasis: it is true that Murdoch advocates for a philosophy able to speak meaningfully of our everyday experience and to deal with our "fabric of being." This is not to say, however, that philosophy should have the same function as literature. Indeed, Murdoch uses the comparison with the ways in which literature manages to grasp our complexity to illuminate the faults of *certain philosophical approaches*. For instance, in the sixth chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, "Consciousness and Thought I," Murdoch explores different ways of conceptualising the notion of "the self." There she shows a general contrast between some philosophers' accounts of it and its "ordinary-language meaning." Murdoch finds faults in how philosophy describes the self, reporting a lack of reference to everyday experience, thus leading philosophical systems astray from a truthful investigation on reality. Where philosophical pictures fail, Murdoch says, novels manage to take seriously "personal morality in a non-abstract manner as the stuff of consciousness" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 169).

The novel Murdoch takes as an example is *The Golden Bowl*, specifically the passage where Maggie comes to the realisation that the Prince, her husband, is, and has been for a while, romantically entangled with Charlotte, an old friend of hers and recently also her father's wife. What Murdoch highlights is that we understand the description James gives of Maggie's internal reckoning because our "fabric of being" is *like* it. However, what is most striking of Murdoch's use of this passage is her reason for bringing it into her argument: "Problems are set up in philosophy with ulterior motives. I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being" (Murdoch, 1992, p. 171). Murdoch's interest here doesn't have to do with making philosophy like literature, that is, with diminishing the distance between the two. In other words, Murdoch doesn't seem to be concerned with philosophy being different from literature. The point for her is, rather, to have a more realistic philosophical picture of the self, so that (her) philosophy can work better. It is certainly a problem worth discussing, for Murdoch, whether a certain conception of the self (like the ones Hume, Husserl or Sartre, among others, propose) is to be entertained; still, it remains a problem to be discussed in the field of philosophy. Murdoch's critique of philosophy, which at times figures as the denouncement of the lack of a proper conception of the self (i.e., Murdoch, 1992, Chapter 6), is not necessarily an allegation against its abstractness, or distance from particulars. Indeed, philosophy was described by Murdoch as a "two-way movement" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 1) between empiricism and metaphysics, where abstrac-

tion and distance play an important role both in the "piecemeal analysis, modesty and common-sense" (what she calls, rather idiosyncratically, "empiricism"; Murdoch, 1992, p. 211) and in the creation for theoretical syntheses and "lofty and intricate structures" (what she calls "metaphysics"; Murdoch, 1992, p. 211).

However, if even Murdoch, in the end, takes a literary example to respond to a philosophical problem (in this case, the workings of consciousness), are we then back to the idea of literature as a "sort of orchard full of juicy examples" that philosophy can use at its discretion? Not really. It is true that in the Murdochian "two-way movement" there is no talking of the role of literature, and this fact could give the misleading impression that philosophy could make sense of things and then search for the right example, or illustration. But for Murdoch this is wrong. The way James writes about the self is more realistic than, e.g., Husserl (Murdoch, 1992). But this does not mean that only in literature, or in a literary philosophy, we could ever aspire to talk about such things. The point Murdoch seems to make is different from Nussbaum's "Flawed Crystals": philosophy—even when it wants to achieve a more realistic picture of the self, or of moral concepts—doesn't always and necessarily need to merge with literature. That is: Nussbaum's worry about philosophy's inability to go beyond the general principles is already softened by Murdoch's understanding of philosophy as dialectically articulated. In a sense, here Murdoch reminds us that philosophy doesn't have to do everything: it has its limits and only when acknowledging them it can dialogue with literature.

Murdoch—this other Murdoch at least—seems rather to go in the direction of Wollheim's focus on the centrality of the commentary. Philosophy can elicit important aspects, such as implicit assumptions, of one's discourse, especially in relation with literature: literary works lead the philosophers to asking new questions, to finding answers to such questions, and to contesting other's answers to the same questions. This game is not played in order to achieve only a better comprehension of the literary work under examination: philosophers can often make us look in different directions (*their* direction, e.g., "I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental mode or form of moral being"), thus orienting our lingering in a literary work through the lenses of a specific philosophical discussion.

But this fact does not mean that the literary work becomes just an excuse for this very philosophical discussion, or becomes something that is treated instrumentally, without a respect of its own inner workings and rules. The discussion is yes philosophical—it tries to deliver answers to questions, moral or otherwise, extrapolated from e.g., a novel—but it would not be possible without letting the novel be exactly as it is, without letting it unfold as it was structured by its own author to unfold. Thus the spirit of our article can be condensed in a very simple reminder: the philosophical questions and answers would not be possible if the contamination with the literary enterprise becomes too strong, or too radical: the dialectic between the specific philosophical interest (that it is to emerge from the neatness of a philosophical question and answer) and the literary source would cease to exist, or become unrecognizable. We would lose something that is valuable, even if not that exciting, when refusing to acknowledge the separateness of philosophy and literature.

University of Turin, Italy
University of Lisbon, Portugal

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a postdoctoral research project at the University of Turin, PRIN 2022 (Unione Europea - Next Generation EU, MIUR – Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca), with the title "Towards the History of a Heterodox Tradition in Analytic Philosophy: Transformative, Humanistic, Conversational" (Prot. 2022XS25NZ), and by FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, I.P. with the scholarship UI/ BD/ 154631/2023 and in the scope of project UIDB/UIDP00310/2020 with DOI identifier 10.54499/UIDB/ 00310/2020.

Works Cited

Adamson, Jane. "Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus moral philosophy." *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.

Diamond, Cora. "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is." *New Literary History*, 15, n. 1 (Autumn 1983): 155-69.

James, Henry. *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.

Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. Ann Goldstein, trans. Michael F. Moore. London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015, vol. 3.

Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970). London: Routledge, 2001.

Murdoch, Iris. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin, 1992.

Murdoch, Iris. *Existentialists and Mystics*. London: Penguin, 1997.

Murphy, Ruth. "*Let me look again*'. The Moral Philosophy and Literature Debate at 40." *New Literary History* 55, no. 1, (Winter 2024): 21-46.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy." *New Literary History* 15, no. 1, (Autumn 1983): 25-50.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Ralph Cohen and the Dialogue between Philosophy and Literature." *New Literary History* 40, no. 4, (Autumn 2009): 757-765.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Voice, Paul. "Why Literature Cannot be Moral Philosophy." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 83-84 (October 1994): 123-34.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). London, Routledge, 2011.

Wollheim, Richard. "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and the Plausibility of Literature as Moral Philosophy." *New Literary History* 15, no. 1, (Autumn 1983): 25-50.

Wollheim, Richard. *The Thread of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Williams, Jeffrey J. "The Capability of Philosophy: An Interview with Martha C. Nussbaum." *The Minnesota Review* 71-2, (Spring 2009): 63-86.