

**Lyra Ekström Lindbäck, *Iris Murdoch and the Ancient Quarrel:
Why Literature Is Not Philosophy***

External Evaluator's Report

– Rick Anthony Furtak, Colorado College

First, a general question that has implications for the entire project. In a 1977 interview published as "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee," which is cited by Lyra throughout her thesis, Murdoch endorses "an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style." She adds that, by contrast, "good literature does not look like 'analysis' because what the imagination produces is sensuous, . . . mysterious, ambiguous, [and] particular." But it would seem that the cost of maintaining this rigid distinction between a highly analytic philosophical style and a literary mode of expression is that one must conclude that, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche is not a philosopher, while Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are not actually novelists. Yet if we define philosophy more broadly to include, say, Nietzsche, then it becomes more difficult to segregate the literary and the philosophical. How can we resolve this?

On pages 15–16, Lyra gets a bit carried away and claims that what she intends to "quarrel with" are "sophistic interpretations," as if anyone holding a different theoretical view must be a mere sophist. Does she really wish to defend this claim, or might she modify it?

I would invite Lyra to speculate about a question that is bracketed here: what would it mean to view philosophy from a literary perspective? Why not consider philosophical writing, in any or all of its diverse forms, to be itself a variety or varieties of literature? She admits on page 28 that this question is "largely unexplored" in her dissertation, and I don't mean to imply that it

ought to be, but given its closeness to the question of whether literature is philosophy it may be rewarding to reflect upon.

Page 45: "Kierkegaard intentionally dissolves the distinction [between philosophy and poetry] in his own work in order to rob the reader of any other authority than that of divine grace." Why is it that a dissolution of the boundary between poetry and philosophy has this consequence? I don't immediately grasp how it relates to the issue of authority.

Sartre, on page 56, is quoted as saying that "every text possesses a meaning, even if that meaning is far removed from the one the author dreamed of inserting into it." ("Dreamed" is put to curious use here, since it appears to mean "consciously intended" and is being contrasted with the unconscious.) And Murdoch, on page 77, is cited to the effect that "Art is cognition in another mode." Might Sartre's point about the creation of literary texts be recruited to clarify the nature of this "other mode" of cognition that literary art is?

In reading *The Black Prince*, why should it not matter "in the slightest" whether Bradley really loves Julian? Are we not, when reading Proust, at least curious about the question Marcel keeps asking himself, namely whether he loves Albertine?

During her discussion of Sartre's *Nausea*, Lyra cites one of my favorite passages (and a rare concrete example) in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Yet I'd like to hear more about what she thinks it shows about the rainbow as appearance. I've always understood this image as illustrating the nature of the thing-in-itself, as opposed to phenomena.

"Finite, temporal existence never becomes fully intelligible for the one who exists," claims Kierkegaard. Is this true? And could Lyra sum up how the question of how to understand finite existence bears upon the difference between literary fiction and philosophy?

Is philosophy such an odd unnatural activity as Murdoch insists? Are we not creatures who long to understand, and is not the sustained attempt to do so continuous with ordinary, everyday attempts to figure things out? For similar reasons I disagree with Murdoch's exclusionary claim that, if one is not doing philosophy *well*, one is not doing it at all. Aren't children philosophical, naturally perhaps, in the sort of questions that they ask?

Among the most important formulations in this dissertation, in my opinion, is on page 116: "A poem put in other words is not the poem, but a philosophy explained differently [and capably] is the same philosophy." Although some readers – including I myself, at some times – will resist accepting this fully, its cogency cannot be denied. Moreover, it provides a criterion to distinguish the poetic/literary from the philosophical/theoretical: insofar as Nietzsche is untranslatable, he is a poet or a literary artist. To the extent that his ideas can be explained in different words, he is a philosopher. There is more to be said about the poetic philosopher or philosophizing poet than Lyra says here, but I expect that she would say it well.

She does talk to some degree about Shakespeare's poetic drama, yet here she seems to want to separate a pure, non-conceptual "aesthetic state of mind" (page 142) from understanding the meaning of the words in a play. Yet, even if sound and sense can be intellectually sorted out and differentiated, it seems to me important that, in our actual experience of hearing poetry, we take them in all at once, not in a "layered" manner. That would suggest an entanglement of these faculties, if not strictly speaking an identity between them.

While their experiences are different, both the astronomer and the untutored youth share a profound feeling when looking at the moon, which may overflow their attempts to understand. Likewise, a literary work of art communicates through feelings rather than concepts. If this is the claim Lyra wishes to make, then she might want to avoid or edit out a recurring tone that is more

along the lines of Nietzsche's famous early essay "On Truth and Lies" – one whose conclusions he later reconsidered. The tone is one of suspicion or distrust of conceptualization altogether, as if by naming a leaf as "leaf" we have thereby misconstrued it. Running parallel to this is the worry that philosophical content in fiction can only taint it.

Throughout Lyra's discussion of Cavell (alongside Coleridge), she relies upon his nuanced analysis of *Othello* to tease out the way that fictional characters can be significant to us precisely because they are both believable and unreal, thus engaging the capacities of moral imagination that are pertinent to our interaction with actual others. It seems unfair, then, when around page 170 she disdains Cavell, blaming him for reducing literary fiction to having instrumental value and offering flights of fancy from direct human encounter. Some tempering of her stance is called for, I think, and the whole business about the character Othello needs some sorting out.

Fourteenth, on pages 179–181, Lyra makes an acute observation about love, although not by that name, when she says that the unknowability of the other could be "a source of delight at the inexhaustibility" of a person. When she cites Nussbaum on the Greek notion of tragedy, I'm sure that Martha says what Lyra quotes her as saying, but it can't be on page 24 of *The Fragility of Goodness*, because that is a blank page. So the reference needs to be tracked down. Finally, it is simply untrue that tragedy is "generally considered" a dead genre: a large fraction of novels and films, especially the award-winning ones, are tragic in the sense of having unhappy endings.

The critique of Nussbaum is entirely fair, including the appeal to biographic details, but some of the Murdochian rebuttal seems far-fetched. For instance, on page 200, Lyra recruits the scant evidence that Murdoch admitted imagination and emotion into philosophy as if it sufficed to disprove Murdoch's own claims that philosophy must be written in an austere, impersonal, and "hard" style. This returns us to my very first question. Murdoch clearly wants to endorse the ideal of philosophy as cold and scientific. This cannot be explained away.

In Lyra's provocative reading of Plato and Socrates on finitude and eternity, she slides a bit when employing the *Apology* to show a Socratic uncertainty about what death will bring. This is not a refutation of all the evidence in the *Phaedo* indicating that Socrates has a firm idea, if not an absolute certainty, about the survival of his psyche after his bodily death. The two dialogues are inconsistent on this point.

We enjoy art more than we enjoy philosophy, Murdoch says (see page 217), "because it [art] disturbs us." Why? This does not seem to be adequately explained.

Okay, so maybe we do not always – or often, even – make the transition from "finely aware" to "richly responsible," as Nussbaum contends that we do. But does not attention to particularity such as immersing ourselves in a literary narrative, or a poem, have the effect of rendering us more "finely aware" at least? In some cases, if not all?

Page 239: "In this kind of inspiration, . . . there is no way of deciding what is mad and what is divine." In its Platonic context, and its context in Lyra's thesis, I think she means to say that we cannot distinguish what is *divine* madness from what is mad and *not* divine.

But surely we are each revealed, in our temperament and identity, when we love. Why is loving attention, according to Murdoch, in opposition to our idiosyncratic selfhood, which seems to be reduced to mere selfishness? How can she justify this moralistic imperative to get the self out of the way for the sake of clear vision? Lyra notes that art is revelatory *because* it "refuses us the distance of a dispassionate observer," which seems to me right but not at all Murdochian.

Does the following passage turn literature into a mere instrument? "My readers," says one narrator, would be "readers of their own selves, my book being merely one of those magnifying

glasses of the sort the optician at Combray used to offer his customers; my book . . . would be providing them with the means of reading within themselves. With the result that I would not ask them to praise me or to denigrate me, only to tell me if it was right." And does this also seem to describe a way of reading that is objectionably ego-centered?

Finally, and 22ndly, let me offer a few brief thoughts about the thesis as a whole. It is extremely well thought-out and elegantly articulated. Indeed, even where I am not completely persuaded I find myself moved to think somewhat differently. It takes up a topic important to everyone who reads and/or writes philosophy and/or literary works of art, which touches on our very self-understanding. Furthermore, it engages in debates that are by now ancient, and in the process it succeeds at developing a unique and admirably unfashionable standpoint. It will make a fine book in the near future. For the present moment, it deserves a "high pass" or whatever is the highest status a PhD dissertation can receive. I look forward to the defense, as an opportunity to talk more in detail and in depth about all of these matters.