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The Power of Literature: Philosophy Beyond Authorial Aims

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Abstract

The distinction between literature and philosophy can be articulated in various ways. One of the central issues of this distinction revolves around the nature of argumentation. While literature engages with fictional people and events, philosophical claims require rational justification. Thus, it is easy to assume that argumentation is something that concerns philosophy, but not literature. This thesis proposes a broader understanding of argumentation, building upon Cora Diamond's suggestion that literature has a power akin to philosophical argumentation. Even if literature does not conform to the rigid requirements of rational argumentation prevalent in contemporary academic philosophy, I argue that literature demonstrates a capacity for argumentation. This capacity, however, does not entail extracting explicit argumentative structures from narratives. Rather, the argumentative power of literature is discerned through its ability to illuminate overlooked moral aspects of reality. By viewing literature as a form of argumentation in a broader sense, I assert that its argumentative power is inherent to the text, i.e. independent of the authors' presumed intent to convince their readers. Focusing on this inherent power reveals an intersection between literature and philosophy, underscoring the relevance of literature to moral philosophy.

In the latter part of this thesis, I conduct close readings of two novels—*Elizabeth Costello* by Coetzee and *Kaputt* by Malaparte—to illustrate how this broader conception of argumentation manifests in concrete cases. Both novels illuminate the intimate connection between narratives and meaning-making, elucidating how the traumas we encounter can shape the stories we construct, our understanding of ourselves, and the world.

Keywords: philosophy and literature, Cora Diamond, argumentation, difficulty of reality, literature and morality, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Kaputt*

Main Goals

This thesis attempts to answer two main questions: Does literature have the power to argue? If so, what does this power consist of? After showing that literature has the power to argue and to convince us, we ask further: How can this power be understood outside the terms of the author's intention?

When clarifying how literature convinces its readers, we proceed against the background of O'Neill's rigid view of arguments. She holds that we can only be convinced by a rational argument based on an objective factual foundation.[1] To challenge her view, I use Diamond's "Anything but Argument?"[2] which was meant as a reply to O'Neill. There, Diamond shows that there are other ways of convincing, one of them being literature. She highlights the ability of literature to make us see things differently, from a different perspective, which in turn can challenge or even change the way we think. This reveals that literature has the power to convince us. Notably, the argumentative power of literature does not depend on whether an argument is present in a narrative or a poem. The power of literature, we argue for here, is inherent to the literary texts.

The question of where the argumentative power of literature emerges from brings us to the second question this project deals with. It arises in response to my worry that it is too tempting to understand the convincing power of literature as something that was placed there by the author, supposedly having the intention to convince us of something specific, like holding a particular view of something (being true, right, false, or perhaps even dangerous). Such a view then portrays literature as a tool of its author, limiting its power to convey what the author wants the readers to think. This is where Diamond's distinction between novels with an aim and without an aim becomes helpful; it makes it possible for me to distinguish between the instrumental reading of literature, which sees it as the author arguing through the text, and the other possibility, which focuses on what *the text* has to *say*. I am suggesting that to examine this literary power, we must not regard it as an instrument of its author. Instead, we must explore how the text itself portrays the fictional world together with the lives of fictional characters. By observing the lives fictional characters live and how they understand the world around them and themselves, we can then find much more than when we search for the message from the author.

[1] Onora O'Neill, "Review: The Moral Status of Animals," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 7 (July 1980): 446.
[2] Cora Diamond, "Anything but Argument?," in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Representation and Mind (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 291–308.

The answer to both main questions connects to a broadened conception of argumentation, similar to the one suggested by Alice Crary[3] and Martha Nussbaum.[4] A conception broad enough to encompass the power of literature as a way of arguing and convincing others. It follows from this broad understanding of argumentation that our understanding of rationality is also widened. Rationality is not considered as opposing emotions and sympathies, the capacities of the heart. Rather, the capacities of the heart and the head are both considered to be a part of who we are as humans. Hence, it is recognised that our feelings must also accompany our thinking.[5] Nussbaum's view of emotions as reflecting what we find valuable is discussed in the second chapter, and it helps to clarify why the opposition between feeling and thinking that O'Neill was suggesting doesn't hold.

While discussing the possibility of literature arguing and rationality being broadly understood is the main topic of the two first chapters, chapters III and IV explore how the literary power manifests in concrete works of literature. In Chapter III, we read *Elizabeth Costello*[6] and analyse the responses to this novel in *The Lives of Animals*.[7] That allows us to pinpoint how the approach that views a narrative as a way for the author to display their opinions and sway the readers can distort what the narrative is actually about. We show that when we do not see the narrative as the author's agenda, as a novel with an aim, we can access how it portrays reality, which can, in turn, illuminate some moral aspects of our own lives, relations and values.

Similarly, in Chapter IV, where we explore *Kaputt*,[8] we run into the instrumental reading of this novel. Again, we reveal how the instrumental reading, in this case claiming that the aim of the novel is to save the author's reputation, ignores essential aspects of the narrative. We demonstrate how approaching the narrative as a representation of a world where fictional characters live their lives opens a different perspective that helps us understand not only the characters but, overall, the difficulties connected to living in a war and the shapes our coping with horrors might take. Attending

[3] See, for example, Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Alice Crary, "J. M. Coetzee, Moral Thinker," in *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, ed. Anton Leist and Peter Singer (Columbia University Press, 2010), 249–68.
[4] See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2007); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Martha C. Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," in *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*, ed. Robert C. Solomon, Series in Affective Science (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 54–105.
[5] Cf. Diamond, "Anything but Argument?," 298.
[6] J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).
[7] J. M. Coetzee and Amy Gutmann, eds., *The Lives of Animals*, University Center for Human Values Series (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999).
[8] Curzio Malaparte, *Kaputt*, trans. Cesare Foligno (New York: New York Review Books, 2005).

to the world *Kaputt* portrays, a world that opens and closes some possibilities to its characters, as Hanna Meretoja proposed, makes it possible for us to attend to the characters' point of view, their understanding of the world and also of themselves.[9]

Thus, the power of literature in both novels is best revealed if we focus on the complexity of the lives of fictional characters, explore how they are feeling and what worries and scares them. It is not a manifestation of the author's aim, which allows us to enter the perspective of the characters and see the world from their point of view. This is achieved by the text itself, by how it invites our thinking, feeling, and imagination into the narrative. The power of literature explored here depends on our ability to understand not only the complexity of reality but also the complexity of ourselves. Only if we accept that we are not entirely rational creatures, who base their decisions on highly rationalised judgments led by principles, can we recognise that literature, like philosophy, has the power to lead our thinking in ways that we can follow or refuse.

There were two questions I tried to answer in this dissertation. The first one concerned whether literature has the power to argue and convince, and the second explored the possibility of interpreting works of literature and their eventual philosophical importance in a way that does not require that we are able to tie a specific philosophical "thought content" to the author's intention. After proposing a broader understanding of what can count as an argument, we saw that literature could be understood as having argumentative power, the power to challenge and alter what we think and, therefore, contribute to our understanding. The second question directly follows because if we accept the power of literature to convince, then, when looking at works of literature, we might conclude that it is the authors who are trying to convince the readers of something. Yet, we demonstrated that this is not the only way novels can be interpreted. On the contrary, searching for the authorial intention can mislead us and make us limit the question a novel can answer only to what the author wanted to convey to the readers. Only if we let the novel speak for itself and not for the author can it open a broader horizon of meaning.

[9] Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*, Explorations in Narrative Psychology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15.

Thesis Overview

Chapter I

O'Neill and Diamond on Forms of Convincing

The main focus of the first chapter is the conflict between O'Neill and Diamond regarding the correct ways of how convincing (in philosophy) might proceed. Here, I reveal why I am more sympathetic to Diamond's view, which considers literature to be one of the ways we can be convinced.

We start by examining O'Neill's view, which represents those who hold that convincing can proceed by rational arguments only. O'Neill expresses her opinion in criticising Clark's book *The Moral Status of Animals.*[10] I identified four main problems she finds in Clark's book: (1) Clark's conception of human-animal kinship; (2) Clark's emphasis on appealing to the heart of his readers; (3) the lack of arguments – mere assertions and visions presented; and (4) the issue of metaphysical grounds. O'Neill claims that Clark offers a mere vision, not an argument, because his theory lacks factual evidence. Therefore, she holds that Clark will not succeed in convincing his opponents. O'Neill asserts that Clark presents his project in a flawed way since he offers no metaphysical foundation or theoretical framework, and she even claims that he doesn't use any rational arguments to support his statements. In O'Neill's opinion, Clark offers mere visions, mere appeals to the hearts of the readers, which cannot rationally convince anyone.

O'Neill emphasises that this is not how a philosopher should proceed. The emphasis on rational argumentation being the only way of convincing also echoes in her criticism of using literature in philosophical writings. Since she claims that if we use literature in philosophy, its use must be backed up by an explicitly stated theory. Otherwise, we will have no idea what the point of the text actually is, and thus, the text will not inform our moral understanding of anything.[11] In O'Neill's view, there is no possibility for literature or any other way of convincing that does not proceed through rational arguments and universal principles to be philosophically relevant and, therefore, to be able to convince others rationally. The only thing such strategies might achieve is persuasion.

In the second part of the first chapter, we follow Diamond's objections against O'Neill's rigid view of argumentation and philosophy. Diamond shows that it is not the case that we come to hold all our beliefs and opinions as the result of rational evaluation of principles by bringing moral imagination to our attention.[12] Diamond further argues that O'Neill is not aware of the limitations of rational argumentation. She proceeds to explain that, just like we cannot rely on arguments convincing

[10] O'Neill, "Review: The Moral Status of Animals"; Stephen R. L. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
[11] Onora O'Neill, "The Power of Example," in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 168.
[12] Diamond, "Anything but Argument?," 294.

everyone (be it because some people might not understand our arguments or because they refuse to entertain what the arguments are proposing), in the same way, it will not always be arguments that convince everyone.[13] In the end, the conflict between O'Neill and Diamond reveals that they both hold two very different conceptions of human nature. The different conceptions of human nature imply which of our capacities will be seen as those of utmost importance, which gives rise to the very different conceptions of what philosophy is and how argumentation must be done.

Diamond helped us to pinpoint that O'Neill is convinced that people, in order to believe something, must operate within rational systems. These systems would present the right metaphysical foundation for further argumentation, requiring a systematic generality beyond all our actions and thoughts; it then follows that the philosophical relevance of such thoughts and actions that cannot be grounded in any generalisable system is dismissed. Diamond notes that the requirement for a universal system, which is the foundation of the correct way human beings think, represents a central difference between Clark and O'Neill.[14] Moreover, these kinds of systems are far from reality in terms of how we handle encounters with others, how we think of them, and even of ourselves. That is where Diamond reflects on the importance of the capacities of the heart. As she explains, in her view, morality is tied to the "capacity for attention to things imagined or perceived: what I think it would be fair to call a loving and respectful attention."[15]

Her emphasis on attention connects to the crucial role of our imagination. Diamond clarifies that literature engages our thinking and feeling, allowing it to make us see the world differently. By focusing on disagreements where arguments run into their limits, where the claims of our opponents are too alien for us to even entertain them, appeals to moral imagination might help us to see eye to eye. This might be more fruitful than only relying on appeals to facts, for, as Diamond argues: "facts cannot show us what we need in order to respond well to the world."[16] Unlike facts, when guiding our attention and imagination, literature is able to challenge our understanding. It invites us to think and feel well differently, while facts are, in this sense, neutral. Thus, literature can "develop the heart's capacities that are the basis for the moral life by deepening our emotional life and our understanding of it."[17] It gives the readers an angle from which to observe what is described. By providing descriptions and eliciting feelings it invites the reader into a moral view that is being introduced.

Diamond is bringing our attention to the complexity of the different ways we might express why we think something is so and so (even in philosophy): "I claimed that there are various ways of going on beyond mere saying, and that, besides argument (which is one such way) there were such things as

[13] Ibid., 292.
[14] Ibid., 305.
[15] Ibid., 306.
[16] Ibid., 301.
[17] Ibid., 299.

the telling of stories."[18] I agree with Diamond that convincing can also be done by using stories, movies, and other forms of art, just as it can be done by showing how some conclusions follow from premises. There are different contexts where we aim to convince, these make some ways of convincing more appropriate than others. However, nothing in the correctly structured argument ensures its being true. Moreover, its being true does not guarantee it being convincing; similarly, nothing in a touching narrative could assure that it motivates us to do what is morally right. Our reason and heart can both be corrupted or educated and can be made to consider different responses to the world.

Chapter II

Novels with an Aim: Martha Nussbaum's Noble Vision of Literature

In the second chapter, Nussbaum helps us see how our moral development connects to our engagement with literature. Literature, according to Nussbaum, presents a unique chance for us to relate to another person by guiding our perception into the lives of fictional characters. Nussbaum highlights that the engaging style of literature makes it easy for us to access the experience of the characters as if it were our own or someone's close to us. Literature then allows us to access the experiences of others imaginatively, and by getting to know what they are going through in great detail and seeing the world from their point of view, we learn to be more compassionate and attentive to others. She insists that the moral development that literature aids in not only guides our perception but also teaches us the right kind of attention to pay to others so we can become the people on whom "nothing is lost."[19] Nussbaum holds that by our perception being guided to understand others in this profound way, we become more sympathetic, sensitive, and compassionate. Nussbaum expects that our engagement with literature (as we will later note, she has a special kind of literature in mind) will prevent us from prejudice and obtuseness; instead, it will lead to an enriched view of reality, making us flourish morally. Contrary to philosophy, Nussbaum claims, literature is more effective because its topics and style are closer to our everyday lives.[20] However, that doesn't mean that we should only read literature and not papers on moral philosophy. Nussbaum argues for a unity between the two, she claims that philosophy can be helpful in extracting what we can learn from literature and

[18] Cora Diamond, "Introduction II: Wittgenstein and Metaphysics," in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Representation and Mind (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 27.
[19] Martha C. Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 156; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 162.
[20] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 5.

deepen our understanding of what novels provide us. Yet, for philosophy to be able to speak to our morality, it must be humble enough to realise that it needs the valuable material literature provides to represent the situations we encounter in our lives.[21]

Nussbaum also supports a wider conception of rationality as she opposes the view that emotions are mere whims with no rational foundation.[22] Nussbaum's rehabilitation of emotions helps to clear literature from the objections that it is a mere appeal to our emotions. She reveals that emotions mirror the way we understand the world around us and reflect what we believe and what we find valuable.[23] Thus, emotions we feel reflect our thoughts, beliefs, and values and, therefore, are part of our rationality. The rehabilitation of emotions clarifies why it is important to focus on the moral training of emotions, as they are part of our morality, too. This further supports the relevance of literature for convincing, as it can target our imagination and prompt us into different emotional responses.

For Nussbaum, the crucial task of imagination is to draw us into another person's experience and transfer this experience over to us as if we are experiencing whatever is to the fictional characters. This further connects to her choice of novels, where there is a moral exemplar present. Moreover, Nussbaum considers the moral exemplar to be pivotal for the capacity of literature to *argue*.[24] This also sheds light on her choice of novels, as she always picks those that include an attentive character or the attention of the narrator that serves as the example for the readers to follow. That brings with it also the need for selectivity and picking only those novels that contain a moral example.[25]

However, we objected that the need for selectivity is not necessary. With Diamond, we emphasised that learning about the different lives of others is also valuable, regardless of whether their examples are worth following or not. Yet, they can teach us about the different shapes our being human can take.[26] Even though Mitchell Green was quite suspicious of literature that portrays bad characters in a good light, we argued that since we approach literature from our lives, with our values and our understanding, we are in control of what we let the narrative question and how we will react to the

[21] Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible," 161.
[22] For example, Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 25; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 56.
[23] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 28; Nussbaum, "Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance," 188.
[24] Martha C. Nussbaum, "James's *The Golden Bowl*: Literature as Moral Philosophy," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 140.
[25] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Updated edition, The Public Square (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 109.
[26] Cora Diamond, "The Importance of Being Human," in *Human Beings*, ed. David Cockburn, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 29 (Royal Institute of Philosophy Conference on Human Beings, Cambridge [England]: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43.

fictional characters in it.[27] Thus, the risk of bad empathy is less threatening than Nussbaum and Green might think. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that just like literature might make us morally better people, it can also corrupt us.

The need to defend literature from the instrumental view, which sees it as a means of expressing the author's convictions, arises again in this chapter. I find it problematic that Nussbaum asserts that it is the intention of the author that, in the end, what morally educates the readers. I object to the view of the connection between the author and the possible moral flourishing since this view ends up making the power of literature into an instrument of the author.

Another issue I address is that Nussbaum's interpretations of different novels show that she operates with a specific image of what the reader is supposed to learn from a novel. Having this concrete image of what values a novel must promote limits what novels Nussbaum will find as being able to teach us something morally significant. Thus, the aim of novels, in her view, is merely didactic; it consists only in presenting an exemplar that is worthy of following. While what values are good and which are bad seems never to be open for literature to challenge. I am very sympathetic to how Nussbaum explains the connection between morality and literature, yet the requirements she places on both the novel and the author obscure this connection and make it weaker.

Chapter III

Novels Without an Aim: Reading Elizabeth Costello

The need for narratives not to be understood in an instrumental way echoes even through the last two chapters. In the third chapter, we read Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*.[28] We also discuss how this novel is perceived in the reflections in *The Lives of Animals.*[29] Where it becomes evident in these reflections that the character of Costello, the main character of the novel, is often identified with Coetzee's opinions, therefore serving as a tool for Coetzee to express his stance on the suffering of animals. Costello then becomes Coetzee's "spokesperson" and a tool for him to put his arguments against animal suffering forward.

[27] Mitchell S. Green, "Learning To Be Good (or Bad) in (or Through) Literature," in *Fictional Characters, Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature*, ed. Garry Hagberg, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 293.
[28] Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*.
[29] Coetzee and Gutmann, *The Lives of Animals*.

We propose a different view of *Elizabeth Costello,* which doesn't see the novel as an expression of Coetzee's arguments (held, for example, by Stephen Mulhall,[30] Diamond,[31] Niklas Forsberg,[32] Jeremy Wisnewski[33]). In this reading, the author's aim, the authorial intention beyond the text, is not the guide for interpreting the text. As Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen and Tony Andersen note, a text can also be read as presenting "various ethically important aspects of life and various possible ethical positions and conflicts which challenge our ethical assumptions, and which add to our ethical thinking exactly because of their literary form."[34] Therefore, our reading considers not only what Costello says but also her life and relationships with others while focusing on how various moral difficulties are addressed and dealt with by the characters. This makes it possible for us to see how deeply Costello is affected by the fact that there are animals suffering and, at the same time, there are people who know about this, but don't feel as horrified as she does. Therefore, it is hard for Costello to see the reality of animal suffering and the reality of the somewhat peaceful lives of others as going on simultaneously, as being the same reality. In this light, we don't see Costello as presenting an argument, be it her own or Coetzee's, we see Costello as struggling with the "difficulty of reality" to borrow Diamond's phrase.[35]

Jonathan Lear explains that what happens to Costello differs from her criticising cruel animal treatment based on a moral principle that condemns inflicting harm on sentient others. Lear highlights our tendency to condense our morality into objective principles, which involves the danger of blinding us to many important features of our reality. Our blindness, he notes, more often than not, is deliberately done for the sake of convenience.[36] Living every day, every minute of our lives, with full awareness of what happens in slaughterhouses, laboratories, prisons, and wars makes it impossible to focus on our lives. That is why, Lear explains, we resort to moral principles, which do not bear with it the full dimension of reality but rather present the issues we might encounter in a

[30] Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 2009).
[31] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, ed. Stanley Cavell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
[32] Niklas Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).
[33] J. Jeremy Wisnewski, "The Moral Relevance of The Moral Relevance of Literature and the Limits of Argument: Lessons from Heidegger, Aristotle, and Coetzee Lessons from Heidegger, Aristotle, and Coetzee," in *Fictional Characters, Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature*, ed. Garry Hagberg, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 139–52.
[34] Anne-Marie S. Christensen and Tony S. Andersen, "H. C. Andersen, Literature, and Ethics: New Perspectives on Old Stories," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 11, no. 2 (2019): 199.
[35] Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality," 44.
[36] Jonathan Lear, "Ethical Thought and the Problem of Communication," in *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature*, ed. Anton Leist and Peter Singer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 70.

highly abstract context.[37] Lear and Diamond both recommend that instead of drawing our attention to objective principles, we attempt to fully grasp the reality of what is happening and to attempt to understand the "difficulty of reality."[38]

Subsequently, I advocate that literature exposes the complexity and messiness of our reality, which we also need to embrace in philosophy and not simplify it. We need to accept that there might be no clear and right answers for how to react and what to think. However, that does not have to scare us. It is our attempt to understand the complexity, without the need to simplify it, that counts. Our effort to understand others as well as ourselves as imperfect and inconsistent people is morally and philosophically valuable. And the way literature invites us to recognise this complexity by offering us a new perspective is a way in which it can be considered to provide arguments.

With Martin Gustafsson, we discuss the difference between just agreeing with a premise and realising something fully, between a simplified version of reality and a complex one.[39] It helped us realise that our ignorance simplifies our view of the world to make our lives easier. However, Costello is unable of this ignorance and is fully aware of the hidden dimension of animal suffering. We concluded that the deeper understanding, realising something fully, is not a matter of learning a new fact or a rational principle, but rather of seeing a fact we already knew in a new light and letting it shape our lives. As Gustafsson pointed out, there is a possibility of a deeper understanding that might strike us as surprising; this understanding is not a matter of gaining a new piece of knowledge, but of realising what something *really means*.[40] For what it means to embrace something fully, literature might be helpful as it can make us see how different aspects of our reality manifest in the lives of different people and how they find them meaningful.

It is the depth that literature is able to help us see things differently, which then gives it the power to convince us. Our reading of Costello allowed us to see how the power of literature deepens and enriches our understanding of reality, how it can bring up some hidden aspects of it, and, therefore, to speak to how we understand others and ourselves. We recognised that more than a clear-cut conclusion and an orderly argument, an attempt to describe reality can be more meaningful. Literature represents reality in a way that resembles the messiness and unclarity of our lives. Hence, literature does not argue by providing us with empirical facts, but by bringing our attention to what we might (willingly or unwillingly) ignore.

[37] Ibid., 83.
[38] Ibid., 86; Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality," 44.
[39] Martin Gustafsson, "Berkeley at Vesuvius," *Wittgenstein-Studien* 4, no. 1 (January 2013): 27–44.
[40] Ibid., 36.

Chapter IV

Novels Without an Aim: Reading Malaparte's *Kaputt*

In the last chapter, we continue to explore literature from the point of view of the broad conception of argumentation. Here we focus on *Kaputt* by Curzio Malaparte.[41] *Kaputt* is a story, somewhat fictional and somewhat autobiographical, from the Second World War. While introducing the novel, we note the criticisms of *Kaputt* from William Hope and Dan Hofstadter, who claim that *Kaputt* represents an attempt of its author to save his reputation after being an ally of the Nazis in the war.[42] The main implication of their reading is that the narrator is unreliable and that the story as a whole aims to portray Malaparte, the author, in a good light. Since both are inclined to read *Kaputt* as Malaparte's way of clearing his name, it is apparent that they are reading *Kaputt* as a novel with an aim.

Like in the previous chapter, I show that reading a novel as the expression of the author's aim limits what the novel can tell us. Thus, I challenge the reading by Hope and Hofstadter, who see *Kaputt* as offering a flattering picture of the real-life author. The reading I propose brings to our attention passages of *Kaputt* that reveal that the main character does not consider the war to be an entertaining spectacle; he is not a detached observer, but that he is, in fact, deeply affected by all the horrors he witnessed.[43] These passages show Malaparte, the character, as not being in full control of the stories he tells. It is revealed that he shares his stories almost unintentionally. The need to share them is stronger than him, he craves to be listened to and to be understood, which reveals him as vulnerable to the horrors around him. I argue that this supports a different picture of the main character and the novel than Hope and Hofstadter propose.

Our reading of *Kaputt* reveals a similarity between the two main characters of the novels I examine in this dissertation, Elizabeth Costello and Malaparte. Both of them struggle with making sense of the horrors that surround them. Therefore, we can see both characters struggling with the difficulty of reality. Malaparte is haunted by the cruelty of the war, which also shows in his stories. However, unlike Costello, Malaparte is lucky enough to be heard by others who acknowledge what he went through. As Hanna Meretoja notes, storytelling constitutes a special kind of closeness: "[s]haring experiences through storytelling often allows us to make sense of them in ways that make them

[41] Malaparte, *Kaputt*.
[42] William Hope, "The Narrative Contract Strained: The Problems of Narratorial Neutrality in Malaparte's *Kaputt*," *The Italianist* 19, no. 1 (June 1999): 191; Dan Hofstadter, "Afterword to *Kaputt*," in By Malaparte, trans. Cesare Foligno (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 434.
[43] See Malaparte, *Kaputt*, 15–60.

bearable for us."[44] Thus, Malaparte's stories can also be seen as his way of trying to make sense of what he witnessed. This "trying to make sense" points out a central contrast to the readings that picture Malaparte as being fully clear about what is going on, his own involvement in it, and the effort to make himself look good despite his actions and failures to take a stance. Nil Santiáñez observes that the act of telling the cruel stories "becomes itself a cruel act akin to the brutal acts mentioned by Malaparte, as well as the cruelty that he attributes to Germans throughout the novel."[45] But if it is true, as I argued above, that Malaparte is unable not to tell these stories, then we have little reason to assume that he is deliberately passing these stories on in an act of cruelty. Instead, the character of Malaparte is revealed to be unable to escape the cruelty the war brought upon the world. In the twisted world of the war, even the act of sharing stories becomes tainted by cruelty.

It is indubitable that Malaparte is drawn to suffering and cruelty, unable not to notice them or not to talk about them. His motives for doing so might be understood, as we sketched above, as trying to feel like a part of the human community, to be heard and understood (not to end up in the same position as Elizabeth Costello). Still, it can also represent him trying to make sense of what is happening through recounting it in his stories. The reality of *Kaputt*, the reality of the character of Malaparte, is what we, as readers, are invited into. This reality is hard to grasp. Santiáñez highlights this difficulty well when he says that "war writing stands between the visible and the invisible, the sayable and the unsayable, memory and forgetfulness."[46] However, *Kaputt* is a brave attempt to say as much as possible about the reality of a war. It points out what might be invisible to those who focus only on facts and the accurate reproduction of what happened.

Reading Hofstadter's afterword to *Kaputt* shows that the blurring between fiction and reality worries him. However, the proposed reading of *Kaputt* is not endangered by Malaparte not portraying the events of the war accurately. Focusing on the facts only hides the dimension Meretoja characterises as "the understanding of how literature provides interpretations of actual (past and present) worlds through its own literary means and how it can *enrich and expand our sense of real worlds as spaces of possibilities*."[47] Therefore, we can also read *Kaputt* as inviting us to entertain the perspective of the character of Malaparte within the horizon of his world, which shows us how his actions and thoughts can be considered meaningful.

[44] Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 117.
[45] Nil Santiáñez, *The Literature of Absolute War: Transnationalism and World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 50.
[46] Ibid., 236.
[47] Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 15.

Moreover, although Malaparte doesn't seem to feel guilty or responsible for what is happening, the way *Kaputt* leaves the question of responsibility open allows us not to consider it to be solved once and for all. Meretoja notices our tendency to pinpoint the wrongdoers and place all the guilt on them, making us feel morally superior to them.[48] Ultimately, the refusal to entertain the question of responsibility can also be seen as leaving it open for all of us to answer for ourselves while considering that there might be no straightforward and clear answers.

The reading I developed in the second part of this chapter not only shows the character of Malaparte in a different light than Hope's and Hofstadter's readings, but it also represents how vital storytelling and listening to stories is for our self-understanding. *Kaputt* further shows how omnipresent war becomes, how the horrors we know about pierce every aspect of our being in the world, and how they end up twisting and altering the lives of everyone, even animals. We might be tempted to ask, who is there to blame? Yet, in this respect, *Kaputt* offers no answers. Hope and Hofstadter argued that it is because Malaparte is too insensitive, but I would side with Meretoja and propose that there is no answer because this question can never be closed.

[48] Ibid., 246.

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