

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE: CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Though literature may be viewed as a document of human experience, yet there are many philosophical implications of it. Philosophy deals with certain very intractable questions related to our life and experience. The analytic tradition of philosophy with its emphasis upon clarity and precision was inspired by science. But there are certain aspects of philosophy which brings it close to literature : its use of rhetoric, metaphors and thought experiments are examples. We find philosophy in literature and also literature in philosophy. There is also a branch of study called philosophy of literature which investigates the nature of literary interpretation and also the presuppositions and foundations of literature. The Platonic view that literature is mere imitation of imitation is unsubstantiated. Here representation goes beyond the particular. The 'representation' is here that of the essences, which explains the universal appeal of literature.

Keywords: *literary discourse, philosophical discourse, mimesis, analytic tradition, interpretative tradition, representation.*

1. Introduction

Literature is ultimately grounded on experience and imagination. It does not replace philosophy. There are certain critical and speculative urges of human thinking which can be fulfilled by philosophy alone. But there are philosophical implications of literature and hence often we go to literature for certain philosophical insights and illuminations. Philosophical discourse presupposes literary discourse. Philosophical thinking with its demand for conceptual clarification and system building presuppose a careful use of language. It is such a use of language that nourishes literature. A literary text is not an isolated entity. This vast network of interrelationships that sustains both literary and philosophical discourses. Outside of and independently of such a context we cannot have either literary or philosophical discourse.

Oral Literature and Philosophy

Philosophy is often regarded as a mother subject. Many sciences emerged out of philosophy, the latest of them being psychology. But literature is not in the strict sense an academic subject or discipline. Literacy studies is an academic discipline. Literature is present in both literate and pre literate societies. The aim of literature, as Indian thinkers stated, is the production of *Rasa* (Seturaman, V.S.,

1992, p.191). Philosophy as Aristotle pointed out emerged out of a sense of wonder. But the conceptual, critical and speculative thinking which is the backbone of philosophy generally presupposes a literate culture. But in the recent years attempts have been made to locate philosophical ideas even in the preliterate traditions. The view that there is an African tradition of philosophy is grounded on this approach. African philosophy has its roots in the oral traditions of African culture. Such philosophy is more speculative than critical. Here we find an extension of the term philosophy. It seems that the oral tradition of philosophy and the oral tradition of literature go hand in hand. But the sustain critical discourse necessary for investigating the foundations of one knowledge and values etc. demands an intellectual focus which is perhaps not possible completely independently of written texts. Therefore a tradition of written discourse is required for philosophy. But it is undeniable that in the early traditions of philosophy there was less emphasis on written literary text than on verbal discourse. The very word 'dialogue' used by Plato emphasized the role of orality. The etymology of the Sanskrit word 'Upanisad' signifies the emphasis on the close contact between the teacher of philosophy and the pupil and verbal communication.

Through literature and philosophy (whether embedded in the oral tradition or in the written tradition) mankind could emerge from themselves and could contemplate about the universe, meaning and values and also about its destiny. Philosophical discourse presupposes language. Without a clear awareness of the conventions of language philosophical discourse is not possible. To know the conventions of language is also to know the conventions of literature.

Three Fundamental Aspects

When we investigate the relationship between philosophy and literature three fundamental aspects of the issue particularly stand out. First, we find philosophy in literature. There are many major works of literature which are in certain ways concerned with philosophical issues. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Camus, Kafka and Sartre are modern literary masters whose works are full of philosophical insights.

Secondly, we find literature in philosophy. Plato criticized the art of literature but he himself was a master of that art. His philosophical works are full of literary beauty. Similarly, the Upanisadic texts are basically philosophical texts. The Upanisads are often considered to be the fountain heads of Indian philosophy. But they may be read for their literary beauty. Voltaire, Rousseau, Russell etc. are philosophers. But in their philosophical works we find much that can be admired for its literary worth.

Philosophy in literature and literature in philosophy do not constitute the whole story. Over and above them there is a third aspect which we may call philosophy of literature. Philosophy of literature may be understood as a second order discipline which investigates the foundations and presuppositions of literature. What is the intention of the author is relevant for the appreciation of the value of a text, what is the meaning of a text, can there be a diversity of the meanings of a literary text, what is the root of the evocative power of literature, should literature have an utilitarian end – these are some of the questions that may be found in philosophy of literature.

Philosophical discourse is not completely devoid of rhetoric. Philosophy is often presented as literature (for example by Kierkegaard or by Nietzsche). When it is resented as literature then it makes use of rhetoric (Ed. McKeon, Richard, 1973, p.721). In the analytic tradition of philosophy this rhetorical aspect of philosophical writing is often frowned on. When philosophers like A. J. Ayer says that a metaphysician is a misplaced poet (Ayer, A.J., 1976, p.59) then this rhetorical aspect of

philosophical writing was kept in view. The analytic tradition in philosophy unlike the interpretative tradition, was less inspired by the scientific ideal of precision and clarity than the literary ideal of evocation and free play of meaning. The element of suggestiveness and indeterminacy of meaning found in the literary ideal is frowned upon by the analytic philosophers. But in the interpretative tradition it is often held that the difficulty and imprecision of a text is often the mirror image of the difficulty of the context. Human response to the universe which results in knowledge and values often is a complex response and this complexity is reflected in the difficulty of the text. To hope for simplicity, clarity and precision in such a situation may be treated as a hope against hope.

Points of Contact

There are certain points of contact between philosophy and literature. In the absence of a universally accepted definition we may at most say that philosophy is a document of human experience. Similarly there is no universally accepted definition of philosophy. We may at most say that philosophy deals with some of the most intractable intellectual problems faced by mankind.

Though it is said that philosophy is highly cerebral and argumentative yet like literature it has a persuasive aspect. The total transformation of philosophy into an academic discipline is comparatively recent. Great philosophers often wrote for the general educated public. Descartes, Locke, Hume, Mill and others generally did not write for fellow philosophers exclusively. They wanted to reach out to the general readership. The books of the great masters of philosophy, excluding a few, upto the 19th century were written in non – technical language. Kant and Hegel were exceptions. They coined many terms and their style put their books beyond the reach of ordinary readerships. The persuasive tone was confirmed not just to literature. Philosophers too wanted to persuade and hence like literature philosophy too made use of rhetoric. The persuasive tone is clearly present in the dialogues of Berkeley. Poetic persuasion is a part of the philosophy of Nietzsche. Elements of autobiography were introduced by Descartes into his philosophical writings.

Fiction as a genre belongs to literature. But philosophy also sometimes makes use of fiction. Philosophy is not exclusively presented in the form of fiction, but frequent use of fictional fragments is a part of the craft of many philosophers. In Plato's dialogues we find extensive use of fictions. Some dialogues such as *Phaedrus* are highly fictional. (Dialogue as a genre belong to both literature and philosophy.) Poetry and philosophy are not always mutually exclusive. The *Bhagavadgita* is a poetical text as well as a philosophical text. *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius is similarly both poetry and philosophy. The role of the later in the genesis of European Renaissance has recently been emphasized by Stephen Greenblatt in his book *The Swerve*.

Thought experiments constitute another point of contact between philosophy and literature. The aim of a thought experiment is to enable a reader to have an intuitive grasp over an important and difficult (philosophical) issue by using a fiction. A philosopher may discover that a philosophical difficult idea may be explained by making appeal to the power of imagination of a reader. Imagination here is sustained by a myth or a story. Effective communication is the goal. For effective communication of an idea a philosopher may conduct a thought experiment and in this thought experiment often metaphors are present. Here we find literature coming to the aid of philosophy.

Some thought experiments of philosophy are rightly famous. Plato's myth of the cave may be understood as a thought experiment. Descartes' two thought experiments are often called hypotheses. One is the dream hypothesis and the other is the malignant demon hypothesis. Neurath's boat is a

famous thought experiment by which Neurath attempted to justify coherentism. The thought experiments of Descartes were ultimately concerned with laying the foundation of his foundationalism. Heidegger's metaphor of the river also contains a half-submerged thought experiment which aimed at giving an account of the knowledge situation in which the dichotomy between the knower and the known emerges.

Insights of Literature

We may argue that literature often seeks to give us certain insights. These insights cannot be boiled down to arguments. These insights may not have clear and precise forms. We cannot say that we are deeply moved by only the clear. Often the opposite is the case. Often that which has a feeling of depth and which cannot be formulated in clear terms moves us effectively. Literature is characterized by suggestiveness. Instead of clearly stating something it suggests something whose outlines are not very clear. Some of our deepest emotive concerns may thereby be stoked. Some of the moral and existential concerns of humanity defy intellectual clarity.

Are these certain issues belonging to the 'human predicament' which may best be treated in literature? It is a debatable issue. We may at most say that literature gives one remarkable approach to this issue (or certain remarkable approaches). Who am I? Behind this question there is the problem of identity. How am I related to my language? The problems of migration, right, freedom, compulsion, faith, co-existence are certain issues touched by both philosophy and social sciences. Yet they are very effectively dealt within literature. Every culture has certain philosophical preoccupations. Great writers are concerned with these philosophical preoccupations, not as philosophers, but as writers who are not afraid of philosophy.

Plato did not entertain the idea that literature is capable of giving us insights. He condemned literature on the ground that it gives us imitation of imitation. The ultimate originals are the Forms or Ideas. The concrete things are their copies or representations. In literature we find imitations of these representations. The highest ideal of truth and / or knowledge is not satisfied by literature. Plato's predecessor Heraclitus also condemned literature. He stated that Homer should be whipped. Behind the absurd exhortation there was perhaps a 'high' moral ideal which, Heraclitus thought, Homer could not attain and perhaps even went against. Plato stated that a dramatic poet represents a character in whom the unreasonable part of the psyche is predominant. Plato wrote, "... the reasonable element and its unvarying calm are difficult to represent... The dramatic poet... will find it easy to represent a character that is unreasonable and refractory" (Plato, 1974). Plato even mentioned what he thought to be a greater danger: "... the dramatic poet produces a similar state of affairs in the mind of the individual, by encouraging the unreasonable part of it" (Plato, 1974).

But Aristotle did not agree with Plato. Explaining his position Ole Martin Skilleas wrote, "Aristotle holds that the *mimesis* of literature is a representation of essences and universals, not of particulars and trivialities. Literature misses out on details, but that affords a greater concentration on what is crucial, the essence of what is being represented. Representation, or *mimesis*, is not a case of copying, but a process requiring mental effort. The *mimesis* of literature, therefore, is not a second-rate activity with a potential for subverting the rational order, but a process which accentuates the true nature of what is represented, and therefore closer to philosophy even than history" (Skilleas, Martin Ole, 2001, p.29).

Knowledge about Literature

Philosophy is generally dominated by reason. So when philosophy encounters literary discourse then it faces a strange situation. It finds that literary discourse is highly evocative. It also finds that even though in literature reason operates yet here reason generally functions in conjugation with passion. Yet philosophy finds that great literature is deeply concerned with the philosophical preoccupations of the age. One can go a step further and say that no literature can be great unless it is concerned with the philosophical preoccupation of the age. Martha Nussbaum stated that literature is the best way to deal with ethical problems and their impacts (Nussbaum, Martha, 1990).

As many deep problems of life are dealt within philosophy so philosophy has to acquire knowledge about the nature, foundation, value and limits of literature. The different literary theories that have emerged at various times may be regarded as attempts of philosophy to acquire knowledge about literature. Literary studies as a discipline make use of philosophy. Behind the various literary theories such as formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, reader-response theory, Marxism, feminist criticism there are living philosophical ideas. Many major writers have attempted to understand the nature of the literary craft (like Tolstoy in his book *What is Art*) and they have made use of philosophical ideas and world views. These books also enable philosophers to acquire knowledge about literature. They enable philosophers to know what the great masters of literature think about their craft.

Many philosophers are keenly aware of the limitations of their understanding of the nature of literature. It may even be asked – Why define literature? The philosophical approach to literature is a cognitive approach. The focus of literature is on enjoyment. The word ‘enjoyment’ is taken here in a broad sense. The enjoyment of tragedy is a legitimate form of enjoyment. But it is not just pleasure or sensual gratification. Our entire being, without any compartmentalization seems to be engaged in the highest form of literary ‘enjoyment.’ It is a form of enjoyment in which there is a sense of ‘immersion’ and here the feeling of ‘the other’ seems to be obliterated. So the knowledge that is involved here is not ordinary sensitive knowledge or demonstrative knowledge.

A distinction has to be drawn between a work of literature and the psychological process that brings the work of literature into being. The psychological process that is responsible for the genesis of a work of literature is not relevant for the appreciation of the work of literature. At most the psychological process throws some light on the significance of some of the factors of the work of literature. The author himself may not be aware of the significance of the psychological factors. Between the authorial intention and the actual work of literature as it is produced there is a gap. To seek to explain literature in terms of its origin is to commit a fallacy. Borrowing a term from logic we may call it the genetic fallacy. Literary theorists Wimsatt and Beardley called it ‘the intentional fallacy.’ The psychological causes of literature cannot supply us a standard of literary criticism. Philosophers, while trying to understand the nature of literature are keenly aware of this point. The thesis of Roland Barthes in which the death of the author is metaphorically proclaimed is something that emerges out of this understanding. T.S. Eliot wrote :

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow
.....
Between the conception

And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow
.....
Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the shadow (Eliot, T.S., 1983, p.92)

We may say that between the authorial intention and the actual literary text there is a 'shadow.' There is something which is not clearly 'visible.' It is this factor which introduces an element of indeterminacy into literature.

Conclusion

Literature is not a field of academic investigation in the way in which mathematics or philosophy are. Philosophy makes use of literature in the sense that philosophical ideas are often brought to the readers through literature. Philosophical discourse and literary discourse are closely connected. Historically as well as conceptually philosophical discourse presupposes literary discourse. Many ways of using language widely employed in literature – such as rhetorical, fictional, allegorical etc. are also widely used in philosophy. The greatness of a literary work is determined by the intensity and success with which such a work is engaged in the philosophical preoccupations of the age. Some of these preoccupations are universal and this partly explains the near – universal appeal of the great work of literature.

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