Introduction

Literature and philosophy are very much like two family members: sometimes they quarrel furiously, and other times they get along quite well, either by ignoring one another's existence or by believing that they share every possible interest. This book is an introduction to the kinship that lies at the root of their relationship and their quarrels. It begins by explaining that, like the members of most every family, they share a history that bears upon all their dealings. That history is at least as old as Plato, who refers to it as "ancient." Its implications for the present are numerous. The literary challenges to philosophy, no less than some philosophical resistances to literature, persist in part because their respective proponents believe that there is something of essential value that the other fails to see. But the subject of this book is not just their differences. The affinities between philosophy and literature are substantial and deep; indeed, the differences in question would scarcely matter except for the fact that literature and philosophy share some essential concerns. Matters of truth, of value, and of form – which I adopt as the organizing categories of this *Introduction* – are not the exclusive province of either one. Yet literature and philosophy nonetheless tend to proceed in very different ways (and sometimes with different consequences) in their approach to these issues. This *Introduction* offers a way to make sense of the affinities and the differences that seem most consequential between them. It gives a broad picture of a field that is sometimes quite contested but, beyond that it explains why literature and philosophy ought to matter to one another, even when they do not always recognize this need.

"Literature" and "philosophy" name vast domains, and this Introduction is relatively short. To begin by defining these terms would be to set out on a fool's errand. Is a television series a work of literature? (*The Wire* has been regarded as such.) Is a graphic novel? Was Cicero a philosopher? Was Coleridge? Such matters may not be decidable in any conclusive way. I say this in full acknowledgement of the fact that the issues raised by such questions call for as much sharpening as possible. One might be tempted, for instance, to think that literature cultivates the use of fictions whereas philosophy's commitment to truth

censures them. But this turns out to be roundly false; there is as much use of fiction in some kinds of philosophy as there is in literature. Likewise, there is a literature of fact, but also a literary interest in truth that may not depend on a fidelity to matters of fact. Or, one might be tempted to say that philosophy is interested in making valid arguments, and that literature does not share this interest and relies instead on plausibility to make its claims. There is a history of thinking about literature in these terms that goes back at least to Aristotle. But this is an equally unreliable way to distinguish them. Much of the European sonnet tradition is, for example, structured around some form of argument. But what *kind* of arguments, and addressed to whom? One might rightly ask. Milton's *Aeropagitica* is manifestly an argument about education – but it is also literature. We would likely find ourselves in a similar quandary with virtually any attempt to approach the relations between literature and philosophy by establishing watertight definitions, including those that might invoke notions of aesthetic value, historical specificity, or universal validity. Philosophy is, after all, a historically specific enterprise, and one that has undergone considerable change over time. Try to imagine the works of Descartes without the science of Galileo on the heavens – we might not have had *Meditations on First Philosophy* or *Discourse on the Method*. Kant and Hegel would likely have regarded questions of progress and history very differently had it not been for the French Revolution. Wittgenstein's writings, early and late, are tied to the worlds of Vienna and Cambridge. Philosophy is also aesthetic, which is to say that it is responsive to matters of form (including the shape of its own writing) and to the idea of beauty (think of Plato, Aquinas, and Kant). It is important to understand why Hume uses both the treatise and the dialogue (e.g., "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion"), why Nietzsche prefaces *The Gay Science* with a series of German rhymes, and why Rousseau writes in the genre of the confession and Voltaire in the form of the "philosophical tale" or *conte philosophique* in works such as *Zadig* and *L'Ingénu*. In short, the issues of greatest concern in the sometimes vexed relations between literature and philosophy are rarely ones that can be settled by defining them as wholly different kinds of writing. This is an introduction to a set of relations, not to a set of neatly defined things. It is an inquiry into what Stanley Cavell described as an "open-ended thematics."[1]

We also need to recognize that each of these terms (literature and philosophy) has evolved considerably over time. These terms do not mean the same thing across all cultural and historical contexts because the practices to which they refer are the products of cultures in the process of change. In some historical contexts, for instance, the designation "literature" had little to do with things of special artistic value; the term simply indicated a kind of writing.

"Poetry" once meant virtually all of literature. The philosophical notion of "virtue," and likewise conceptions of the *specific* virtues indicate very different things in classical antiquity and in the modern Christian world. To speak as if literature and philosophy were fixed and unchanging would be to misrepresent the case. That said, each has come over time to attach particular value to its identity, often construed in opposition to the other.

Rather than work from definitions, I proceed by suggesting that literature and philosophy form parts of intersecting traditions. Traditions matter. Writers call into memory, build on, and struggle against their predecessors, sometimes repeating their efforts and sometimes displacing them. They take up old questions, try new answers, repeat or invent forms and styles, and inevitably think and write under the influence of those who have preceded them in what we may construe as traditions of discourse.[2] They cast glances at the writings from adjacent discourses – from religion, politics, and the law, among others. Traditions of discourse, like all traditions, create allegiances and also invite resistance. For the most part, literature and philosophy in the West have conceived themselves as part of distinct traditions. To be sure, there have been some significant points of convergence, as when Aristotle treats tragedy in the *Poetics*, when Jacques Derrida takes up questions of the law through Kafka's *The Trial* ("Before the Law"), or when Jorge Luis Borges reflects on time, identity, and chance in the stories collected in *Ficciones* (e.g., "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "The Circular Ruins"). But because literature and philosophy have often conceived their identities in contrast to one another, the points of intersection between them are often flashpoints – the places when their divergent orientations and interests have sparked fierce battles.

This *Introduction* is designed to give an account of these flashpoints but beyond that to bring to light the interests that literature and philosophy share. It explains their sometimes sharp differences, but it also presents a vision of how literature and philosophy might each be able to acknowledge the other's claim on the things it holds of greatest value. Proceeding in this way leads to a series of further questions. How exactly does literature work philosophically (if it does)? In what ways can philosophy be thought of as incorporating the values that literature holds dear (e.g., style, expressiveness)? To say that literature and philosophy are different kinds of writing or different discourses says both too much and too little. The further question to be asked is what do these differences matter to the questions of truth, of value, and of form?

Chapter 1 takes up questions that center on notions of truth. "What is truth?" said jesting Pilate (John 18:38), declining to answer. Does truth lie in the propositions of language? In the correspondence of ideas to reality? Does it lie in the representation of verifiable facts or states of affairs in the world?

To what extent is truth established by consensus or agreement? Plato famously wished to reject literature because he regarded it as a form of untruth, and that because he defined truth in terms of faithfulness to immutable "forms." Is it possible for a work of literature to be true even though it makes no reference to anything that exists, either in this world or in any transcendental sphere? If so, what kind of truth would this be? Much of Chapter 1 will be devoted to different conceptions of truth, and to an investigation of the various sorts of truth-claims that literature and philosophy make. While I make no pretense to a historical coverage of shifting notions of truth, I do nonetheless take into account the role that Plato and a few crucial others (Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Wittgenstein among them) have played in defining it for much of Western culture.

Truth intersects with a much larger field of concerns, including value and form. Truth may well have a value in itself; it may involve a commitment and require pursuit. There are also those who claim, roughly following Nietzsche, that any notion of truth implies some value, and that truth-seeking must also involve a critique of values. Hilary Putnam argued that the fact-value distinction cannot stand. Value can of course be thought of as something in and of itself, as context-free and independent of anything we might say or do. Plato's notion of the good might be thought of in this category. But that leaves out the question of how we pursue value, or are drawn to it, which for Plato was a matter of *eros* (desire). The work of Part II is to concentrate on the domain of value as including the powers (including the passions and the will) that revolve around the *activity of valuing*. This allows us to broach a much wider range of concerns about human action, interest, and freedom – concerns about what we ought to do (and why), about what and who we regard as worthy (and why), about the commitments we make, and about the sometimes different responses that works of literature and philosophy offer to these questions. One view of morality suggests that we should only regard as binding obligations those imperatives that we could imagine being accepted universally – agreed to and owned in principle by everyone. But how, then, might we account for conflicts of values (or conflicts among frames of value) of the kind we see in Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, where kinship and the state command very different obligations, and thus are starkly opposed?

The terms "literature" and "philosophy" suggest not just a set of different allegiances, traditions, and interests, but a different set of forms and different ways of writing. Indeed, they often diverge in the role they ascribe to form in relation to thought, truth, and value. This is the subject of Part III. There are specific "forms," and then there is the more general notion of "form." Think of the former (forms) as aligned with genres and with other similar modes of

speech and writing (e.g., the dialogue, drama, essay, treatise, novel, allegory). Think of the latter (form) as pointing to the quality that anything said or written has by virtue of the fact that it must inevitably be given some form or other. "Form" not only names things as seemingly diverse as the specific arrangement of words on a page, as in the case of "concrete" poetry or the narrative arc of a novel, but also the shaping of philosophical arguments in the form of dialogue, or as set of fragments, a treatise, or a meandering essay. A caricature of philosophy, which some would argue contains some kernel of truth, is that it regards matters of truth and of value as independent of the forms in which they are expressed. For literature it would seem to be otherwise, since the form of any literary work makes a definitive contribution to the way it frames value and truth. Questions of truth and value engaged by works like *Othello* and *King Lear* begin in what the characters say (sometimes quite literally, as Stanley Cavell has shown), and reach to every dimension of their form, including the fact that they are presented in concrete theatrical situations where we are held from responding directly to what is said. How far these differences reach is a question we will deal with in due course.

I hope it will be clear from what has been said thus far that each of these terms (truth, value, and form) needs to be construed broadly, although I hope without a sacrifice of clarity, to capture the wide array of stances that literature and philosophy have adopted toward them over a great expanse of time. As we proceed, a series of specific examples will help make the issues in question substantially more concrete than they might otherwise be. "Truth" needs to embrace something beyond the notion of a correspondence between ideas in the mind and things or states of affairs in the world, although the so-called correspondence theory of truth needs to be acknowledged as being of crucial importance, alongside the dialectical, pragmatic, and edifying accounts of truth that seem more congenial to works of literature. The notion of "truthfulness" put forward by Bernard Williams needs to be recognized alongside more skeptical views of the very idea of truth itself.[3] We must also probe the relationship between truth and rationality, and between the rational and the real (along with its potentially false cognate, "realism"). "Value" embraces questions of morality and ethics as well as questions of aesthetic value in literature. Whether value is absolute or constructed, given or made, and if so how, are deeply contentious matters that create very different allegiances among their partisans. "Form" in turn needs to be understood broadly enough so that the ancient dyad of form and content (and its implications for literary thinking) won't preclude considering the way in which forms are rooted in the historical and material conditions of life. What is the relationship between made forms and the forces that go into their making? This is a matter of equal

importance for Hegel (e.g., in the opening sections of *Phenomenology of Spirit*) and for Nietzsche (e.g., in *The Birth of Tragedy*) as it is for writers like Melville and Whitman, and for Marxist philosophers like Georg Lukács and Louis Althusser.

While each of these three terms – truth, value, and form – names a set of contested issues, they also provide occasions to indicate how they matter to *specific* works of literature and philosophy, not just to a general dialogue between them. While this book is indeed an introduction and covers a relatively large amount of ground, it would hardly make sense to proceed as if these questions were wholly abstract. On the contrary, traditions are formed and are altered as the result of specific arguments, specific works, and the subsequent engagements and responses they provoke. Recognizing the impossibility of an encyclopedic treatment, my hope is that readers will add to the examples offered here many more drawn from their own experience, some of which will no doubt raise further questions.

One final note before proceeding. To consider the areas of similarity and difference, of conjuncture and divergence between literature and philosophy also lets us see the places where each discovers its own limits. The very notion of a discourse implies that there are things that cannot be said within it. Exposure to what lies outside a given discourse can generate an awareness of those limits and, with that, the invention of new forms of language and thought. I reserve the question of limits for the Afterword of this book, noting there that the project of philosophy has frequently been marked by the wish to honor the bounds of what can or cannot be said, known, and conceived. It would be too simplistic to think that an appeal to literature could or ought to liberate philosophy from an obligation to stay within its bounds. Indeed, literature has also found it important to be bound by truth and value, albeit in sometimes different ways and often through different forms than its philosophical twin.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Gary Hagberg and Walter Jost, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
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Peter Lamarque, *A Philosophy of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009).
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Part I

Questions of Truth and Knowledge

Chapter 1

The "Ancient Quarrel"

In one of the most famous passages of the *Republic*, Plato refers to the relations between literature and philosophy as reflecting an "ancient quarrel":

> [T]here is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. One can quote many examples of this ancient antagonism: remarks about the "bitch that growls and snarls at her master," and "a reputation among empty-headed fools," or "the crowd of heads that knows too much" and the "subtle thinkers" who are "beggars" nonetheless.[1]

One of Plato's aims in the *Republic*, we are led to understand, is to intervene in this ancient dispute in order to determine whether literature ("poetry" in Plato's terms) can earn a rightful place in the ideal republic. To qualify for inclusion in the republic, literature will have to be judged to be both a source of truth and a conduit of virtue; at the very least, the proponents of literature will have to show that the poets are not the source of lies and do not encourage vices in the citizens of the state. In spite of the fact that Plato's treatment of literature has sometimes been misconstrued, Plato's answers to these questions have set the stage for much of the subsequent thinking about the relations between literature and philosophy in the Western tradition. This is especially so regarding what Plato has to say about literature's relationship to the overarching concern of this section: truth. Ever since Plato, literature has been cast in a defensive position with respect to philosophical claims about the nature of truth. The recurrent complaints are that literature is bound to distort the truth about the real nature of things, or at best has nothing to do with truth at all – that it is a form of speech whose purpose lies elsewhere: in the cultivation of pleasure, or in the creation of beautiful things for their own sake, or in preserving memories from the past. To see what Plato may have been intending in addressing the ancient quarrel between literature and philosophy, and to grasp the larger significance of the terms he set in motion, it is necessary to understand something about Plato's conception of the truth and to explain its relation to the preexisting tradition.

Plato says things that are relevant to literature in some of his other dialogues. He addresses the question of the poet's "enthusiasm" in the early dialogue *Ion*; he takes up questions of artistic inspiration as a kind of divine madness in the *Phaedrus*; and he discusses the nature of true and false images in the *Sophist*. But the most encompassing – and certainly the most notorious – of Plato's claims about literature are found in the *Republic*. Much, though not all, of what Plato says there through the mouth of Socrates bears specifically on the question of truth, and what does not bear directly on truth pertains to questions of value and form that are equally central to the larger purposes of the *Republic* and to what most anyone might consider in assessing the importance of literature in human life. To be sure, this leaves to the side the question of whether the Platonic dialogues are themselves forms of literature, and it likewise sidesteps the question of whether Socrates is a reliable spokesperson for Plato and, if not, which of the two is the greater ironist. Is the *Republic* itself, as has been suggested, a "philosophical poem" written as a way of perfecting literature rather than disparaging it?[2] Is Socrates' proposal to have a censor serve as a judge of literature in the ideal state to be taken literally? I will return to some of these questions later in this chapter.

It is best to begin with a clear picture of what Socrates and the characters Glaucon and Adeimantus have to say in Plato's *Republic* about literature in relation to truth. This will help establish the degree to which Plato marks a difference from what came before him, and it will help underscore why the backlash against Plato has so often taken up the cause of literature. Plato's critique of literature revolves around an especially influential philosophical conception of the truth, a conception that differs significantly from many of the ideas that preceded it. Indeed, without Plato's version of the truth, the discipline of "philosophy" might never have come to regard itself as a distinct form of inquiry at all, or have built a sustained identity around specific criteria, methods of argument, and standards of validity.

Before Plato, the notion of truth was not linked to philosophy in any special way. There were, of course, philosophical thinkers of tremendous importance before Plato, including Miletus, Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus (see text box).

Who Were the Sophists?

Among the philosophers working before Socrates (the pre-Socratic philosophers) was a group that included a number of figures who appear in Plato's dialogues: Thrasymachus, Gorgias, Protagoras, and Hippias of Elias. Plato characterizes