

Rigour and Recoil: Claims of Reason, Failures of Expression

Paul Standish (UCL Institute of Education)

This paper begins with the ‘ancient quarrel’ between philosophy and literature, which, with the subsequent splitting of logos into word and reason, comes to mark philosophy’s self-conception and much other thinking besides – in the process, compartmentalizing what is understood by ‘literature’. Philosophy, thus separated becomes atemporal and abstract, preoccupied with propositions rather than statements or sentences, and, in some of its incarnations, aligning itself with science. Language, thus separated, becomes ‘literary’ – that is, it comes to be epitomized by self-consciousness about literary form and style; and a casualty of this is the ‘poetic’, a term whose origins in poiesis (production of meaning) are forgotten. But the relationship has never been as settled as it may have seemed, and examples from classical and contemporary philosophy and literature help to demonstrate this. At stake in these examples are the ways in which reason requires that one means what one says. A classic expression of commitment to this view is provided by the words of Polonius’ words to his son, in Hamlet: ‘This above all, to thine own self be true.’ The implications of this in relation to the claims of reason are developed with reference to moral education and the task of the teacher.

‘But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?’
– Stanley Cavell.

Why does the question of philosophy’s relation to literature arise? Because of an ancient quarrel. Why is this an issue for education? Because of a contemporary denial.

Both answers are too neat, to be sure, but they at least provide a guide to the broad structure of what follows. But what is at stake in this pairing of terms, and what exactly is meant by ‘literature’ in the discussion? Aside from the looseness that generally attaches to the term,¹ the phrase ‘philosophy and literature’ overlaps, in fact, with other related formulations. A modern version might be that of the relation between logic and language, while in earlier times something similar was evoked by the ‘ancient quarrel’ between philosophy and poetry, which embraced also the further related contrast between *logos* and *mythos*. Let us begin with the quarrel.

The ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry

What is the quarrel about? Perhaps its most explicit expression is at the start of Book X of *The Republic*. Celebrating the prospect of the envisioned

¹ “I have just received a pile of literature on life assurance.” “English literature” tends to imply something highbrow. “He loves literature” usually suggests a love of fiction. Sometimes a contrast is made – say, in the study of a foreign language – between the study of its literature and its language.

city, Socrates remarks again on its exclusion of the poets. The crucial reason for their condemnation emerges within a more general suspicion of poetry's power to stimulate emotion and so, potentially, to distort judgement and generate illusion. This danger has a distinctively political hue because the stirring of emotion will be the means of a bad politics, whether in service of tyranny or of democracy (in the debased form in which it is conceived in *The Republic*). The exclusion here can be taken to refer to art more generally because it is focused above all on art that is mimetic. Mimetic art is objectionable because it presents copies of copies of real things – the most real things being the ideal forms. The table in front of me is a contingent manifestation of the idea of the table, a drawing of the table being at a further remove from that ideal form. Although it is salutary to ponder the overwhelming presence of images (copies of real things) today, the metaphysics of Platonism is scarcely taken seriously today, and so it is rather the power of literature to stimulate emotion and potentially distort judgement that has had the more significant legacy in what remains of the quarrel today.

The reference, in the ancient quarrel, to 'poetry' rather than 'literature' reflects in the first place the fact that literature in classical Greece² simply was, to all intents and purposes, poetic in form; and, notwithstanding the importance of writing in that tradition, the oral tradition of presentation and transmission should not be overlooked. So this in a sense justifies the name, and that name would certainly not have connoted anything marginal, let alone, say, genteel or 'precious', in the way that contemporary usage of the phrase might. Works of literature are, after all, one of the ways in which a culture or a people make sense of their world, and it is difficult to imagine a civilisation for which this was not true in some degree. They offer the means of seeing things as a whole, rather than from some more technically specialised point of view.

The more important point, however, is that poetry was understood as a form of *poiesis* – that is, as a form of production: poetry could not have been simply a description of the world for the very term implies the creation, composition, or calling forth of something new. In this respect it contrasts with *diairesis*, which refers to ways of thinking that involve division and classification, a contrast brought out in Plato's dialogue *The Statesman*. It is difficult to see how thinking could take place without such processes of division, but their necessity and the orderliness they introduce can obscure the more dynamic tendencies implied by *poiesis*. The issue here is not the familiar one between "lumpers" and "splitters", given prominence by debates in the taxonomical sciences, although a valuable outcome of such controversies is indeed their demonstration of the provisional and, in a sense, heuristic nature of classifications (see Standish, 2017).

The point can be made clearer by reference to yet a further distinction, this time from Blaise Pascal, between the *esprit géométrique* and the *esprit de finesse*. While the former orientation is appropriate to division, analysis,

² Of course, this is too sweeping a statement. Whatever the continuities, the works that fall under the loose heading 'classical Greece' span a number of centuries and different ways of life and world-views.

and classification, the latter involves a response in circumstances where there is no appropriate means of measurement or calculation and where perception involves one's being affected before one can begin to reason more systematically. This being affected must be part of what it takes to reason in the first place, the very factor that gives calculation its point and crucial to the whole in which the distinction between philosophy and poetry comes to light.

Yet a further distinction arises in Socrates' discussion of such matters, however, and although this may at first sight seem to rest at a tangent to the main concerns here, it warrants acknowledgement. This emerges most clearly in the now famous final pages of the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates recounts the myth of the invention of writing. The myth lays the way for Socrates' assertion that writing is a dangerous invention, which, rather than providing an aid to memory as promised, will lead to its destruction.³ The animus of Socrates' condemnation is directed especially at the indirectness of writing. Words in writing will be like orphaned children, with no one to protect them. They may fall into the wrong hands. Who knows what will happen to them? By contrast, there is a directness to speech that secures meaning: the author's intention is realised in the mind of the listener. This directness of speech reflects the immediacy of one's thoughts to oneself.

I shall not dwell at length on the exposition of the development of these themes in Plato's writings, because this is the subject of Richard Smith's 'The ancient quarrel and the dream of writing', also in this special issue. It is appropriate to sketch, however, the principal lines of objection to the picture provided thus far, before directing the discussion towards two main themes.

The first of these concerns the point just raised. Socrates' assumption of the immediacy of thought is, at first sight, natural enough, but it ignores the facts that our thoughts come to us overwhelmingly in the form of words and that those words are derived from the public circulation of signs, into which, as small children, we are initiated: our thoughts depend upon something that is already out there, on sounds and marks that can only function as they do if they extend beyond the circumstances of our immediate acquaintance with them, through occasions of use that we can never know or control. Hence, the indirectness that Socrates fears in writing is a necessary condition also of speech – and, that is, of thought itself.

Socrates' blindness to this is matched by the blinkered nature of the mainstream reception of Plato's writings, which Smith criticises at length and in convincing detail. Let me be more succinct. The tendency to refer to "Plato's thinking" flies in the face of the fact that Plato, in virtually all his writings, does not speak to the reader directly but presents dialogues in which Socrates is the main protagonist. Hence, it can reasonably be said that we do not actually know what Plato thought. At the same time this seems a partial exaggeration. The fact that Plato gives so much space to the demonstration of Socrates' way of thinking and to the exposition of his ideas surely indicates that he values them and subscribes to them at least in part;

³ For a full discussion see 'The Learning Pharmacy' in Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish, 1998.

but equally it would be a mistake to miss the ways in which these ideas are occasionally subverted or upstaged in the drama of their presentation. There is the obvious irony that Socrates does not write and Plato does – an irony that stares the reader in the face in the condemnation of writing. And it is plainly the case also that the indirectness in Plato’s approach to the reader through dramatic form contrasts with Socrates’ insistence on the importance of direct communication of ideas. The fact that they are presented in drama is crucial, as this allows the playing off of one point of view against another, sometimes in order to lead convincingly to a conclusion but sometimes also to leave the matter unresolved or to allow the argument to run into the sand.

These differences already raise questions concerning forms of expression in philosophy, and while the centrality of writing is now unquestionable, questions of style have in some ways gained a new prominence. Let us take an example.

‘To be’ in translation

In a highly influential manifestation of the quarrel in modern times, literature is rendered suspect in the light of a high point in empiricism. In this, it is not just that facts are to be contrasted with values, the former belonging to the realm of the objective, the latter to that of the (merely) subjective. The truth of a proposition is to be tied to the practice of testing, such that if there is not means of testing, the proposition is without sense.

Few philosophy books have had the impact of AJ Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic*. Published in 1936, it was an exposition of the idea of verificationism, the philosophy that Ayer had acquired from his encounter with the Vienna Circle, which was in turn refracted through his inheritance of the philosophy of Bertrand Russell and, perhaps in particular, of Russell’s ‘theory of descriptions’. A part of what motivates Ayer’s book is the aspiration to overcome the imprecision of ordinary language in order to provide a robust means of reasoning and access to the truth. Hence, in seeking to give an account of what a complete *philosophical* description of any language would consist in, Ayer claims that it would involve enumerating the types of sentence that were significant in that language and displaying the relations of equivalence that held between sentences of different types. Relations of correspondence between types of sentence and exchangeability between symbols in the respective sentences would mean that substitutions or ‘translations’ could take place without changing a significant sentence into a piece of nonsense. In the case of the ‘theory of descriptions’, then, the fact that the language in question is English is said to be largely immaterial, while whether the sentences in question are in speech or writing is irrelevant. Ayer goes on to emphasise that what makes two signs constitute elements of the same symbol is not merely an identity of form, but also an identity of usage. Thus, he explains:

if we were guided merely by the form of the sign, we should assume that the ‘is’ which occurs in the sentence ‘He is the author of that book’ was the same symbol as the ‘is’ which occurs in the sentence ‘A cat is a mammal’. But, when we come to translate the sentences, we

find that the first is equivalent to 'He, and no one else, wrote that book', and the second to 'The class of mammals contains the class of cats'. And this shows that, in this instance, each 'is' is an ambiguous symbol which must not be confused with the other, nor with the ambiguous symbols of existence, and class-membership, and identity, and entailment, which are also constituted by signs of the form 'is' (p. 52).

It is obvious that the range of ambiguity attaching to terms in a natural language extends beyond the usage of the verb 'to be' and the kinds of confusion in reasoning this can generate. Moreover, it would be a mistake to understand the point of concern here as confined to strikingly ambiguous terms such as 'bank' (the place where the money is kept/the land immediately on each side of the river). For it is questionable how far the relations of correspondence and equivalence that are sought do in fact exist. Ayer's aspiration is to secure meaning in such a way that the machinery of logic can function efficiently and, hence, to ensure the cogency of our reasoning. Ambiguity is presented as a threat to meaning in natural language that can be overcome by the 'translation' of the language in question into one that is more philosophically robust.

But, like it or not, philosophers are condemned to express their ideas in language. Even logic, which rides on the back of language, is itself a literary form – with its characteristic marks and expressions, and with its unavoidable rhetorical effects. Ayer's in many respects admirable prose is not realised in defiance of literary form but through sensitivity to rhetorical effects. Even the most technical language has its rhetorical force. A technical manual will set out to avoid any ambiguity or allusiveness, and it will simultaneously carry its message of precision and reliability. Even the spreadsheet has its rhetorical form. It is difficult to read the lines above without a powerful sense of the tonality of Ayer's writing, something savoured by advocates of a particular analytical style. And philosophers from William James to Cornel West have remarked on the importance of tonality to philosophy of distinction.⁴

Philosophy and dramatic form

⁴ In a letter to George Santayana, William James expresses despair regarding 'the grey-plaster temperament of our young PhDs, boring each other at seminars, writing those direful reports of literature in the *Philosophical Review* and elsewhere, fed on "books of reference" and never confounding "Aesthetik" with "Erkenntnistheorie"' (James, in Rorty, 2009, p. 136). West writes: 'All the philosophers of darkness, I think, very much like the artists of darkness, are going to be relevant for the twenty-first century. Paul Celan's poetry is going to be central in the next century, Kafka central, Hardy central, the Schellings and Schopenhauers. Not because their conclusions are convincing, but [by] the nature of their wrestling. There's a sense in which in analytic philosophy we overlook the tonality of the philosopher, and the Schellings and Schopenhauers and Kierkegaards will come back because of their tonality' (West, in Upham, 2002, p. 117).

When Timothy Williamson wrote his *Tetralogue: I'm Right, You're Wrong* (2015), he adopted the form of a dialogue in order to lead the through a series of confusions in reasoning. The dialogue takes place amongst four characters on a train journey, whose ordinary (if somewhat contrived) conversation leads them into and out of a number of philosophical puzzles. In adopting the dramatic form, Williamson in effect endorses the importance of discussion and argument in philosophy, but he also returns to a practice that, as we have seen, is there at philosophy's beginnings. Dramatic form is adopted from time to time in philosophical works throughout the ages: a modern adaptation is found in the work of the later Wittgenstein. Conversely, the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre are literary in form but plainly stage problems and arguments of a philosophical kind.

That the boundaries here are not clear-cut is illustrated by the fact that dialogue plays a more or less prominent role in the novel. A novel such as *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder (1994) also leads the reader through a series of philosophical arguments and positions, though here in a more obviously explanatory way. A particularly significant manifestation of the philosophical novel is to be found in the work of J.M. Coetzee, which is central to the paper by Emma Williams in this special issue, where she discusses his novel *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 2000). I propose to turn to what is perhaps his most overtly philosophical novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, and specifically to the germ of this novel in the Tanner Lectures, which Coetzee gave in 1997.⁵ In the lectures the question of the relation of philosophy to literature is explicitly addressed. But the manner in which this is done is quite different in style and substance from that of the other works just cited. For example, Williamson's approach is to adopt an engaging and humorous dialogue as a means to addressing the problems. The characters of the four participants emerge fairly clearly and to some extent comically, but again they are means to an end and not of special interest in themselves. Williamson could obviously have presented these problems in more formal

⁵ Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* has a surprising history. The two chapters considered above were presented originally as the Tanner Lectures, and they were first published alongside four other essays in an unusual text called *The Lives of Animals*, accompanied by papers by contemporary philosophers specialising in animal rights. Cora Diamond responded to this work with an essay that was published in *Reading Cavell*, a collection edited by Alice Crary and Stanford Shieh. More recently Alice Crary has also edited *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life, a Festschrift for Cora Diamond*, and in this collection there are contributions from Stanley Cavell, who writes in response to sections of Diamond's essay related to *Elizabeth Costello*, and by John McDowell, responding to Cavell on this topic. In 2008, *Philosophy and Animal Life* was published, a book that brings together the papers by Diamond, Cavell and McDowell, together with introductory and commentary essays by Cary Wolfe and Ian Hacking. As this last volume makes most abundantly clear, these discussions extend well beyond the theme of animal rights to call into question the relation of the human to the animal, the nature of moral philosophy and moral education, and the relation between philosophy and literature. This is an immensely rich body of work.

terms, and so the dialogue is used primarily to provide an accessible and agreeable way into them. If, in this case, the relation between the literary elements (the scripting of the drama, the drawing of character, the touches of humour) and the philosophical questions that are addressed can be described as an external one, the relation between the telling of the story and the substance of the ideas in the case of Coetzee is internal. Thus, the realisation of the character of Elizabeth Costello is integral to the depiction of the philosophical questions raised and to the way that these are experienced by the reader. The words spoken are crucial to her sense of the situation that confronts her and to her manner of engaging with it. Having written about the story elsewhere (Standish, 2009), I do not propose to discuss it at length here, but a little further explanation and an example will help to illustrate this.

The titles of the two lectures that Coetzee gave were “The Philosophers and the Animals” and “The Poets and the Animals”, which immediately indicates his preoccupation with our central theme. His manner of doing this also involved genre-bending in at least two ways.⁶ In the first place, the expectation of those who are invited to present Tanner Lectures is that the speaker give lectures! But Coetzee used the occasion to tell a story. In the second, the substance of his story concerns an elderly Australian novelist, Elizabeth Costello, who herself is invited to give prestigious at an American University. It is expected that she will speak on feminism and the novel or on postcolonial fiction, but to her hosts’ surprise, and provoking a degree of embarrassment, she subverts the occasion by speaking instead of the evils of the industrial production of animals for human use. The story combines parts of Elizabeth’s main lecture and the ensuing questions with a formal dinner-party with members of the Philosophy Department and senior colleagues, and with a seminar to the English Department the following day – all interspersed with details of Elizabeth’s stay with her son, John, and his family, beginning with his meeting her at the airport on her arrival and ending with their return to the airport at the end of her visit. There are tense domestic moments relating to what food is to be on the table and what the children are to be given to eat, and these are interlaced with her daughter-in-law Norma’s scarcely disguised irritation at what she perceives to be the cranky nature of Elizabeth’s ideas. Norma is herself a philosopher and, as her name indicates, a representative of moral philosophy-as-usual. Moreover, the various names that are brought to the debate include those of the non-fictional protagonists in the literature, ranging from Peter Singer, Mary Midgely, and Thomas Nagel, to Franz Kafka, Ted Hughes, and Jonathan Swift.

This explanation is sufficient to indicate Elizabeth’s preoccupation – indeed obsession – with her topic. It does not begin to show the range of that concern, because the matter of the treatment of animals opens onto broader questions of human-animal relations, including questions about what it is

⁶ In *Elizabeth Costello*, the novel, there is also a jump across ontological categories, when Elizabeth is said to have had an affair with Robert Duncan, the Black Mountain poet.

to be human, in ways that move well beyond purely intellectual engagement to touch the very core of her being, insistently impressing these questions upon the reader. As the title of Stephen Mulhall's eloquent and erudite study indicates (2008), the figure of the 'wounded animal' functions not only as a metonym for the industrial maltreatment of animals but also as an intimation of something in the human condition itself, represented especially perhaps in the female human condition.

Coetzee's prose is celebrated for its economy of style, with sparse indications of authorial point of view, and, in this case, with a central character who is viewed sympathetically but with a detachment that matches the lack of warmth she imparts. When her son kisses her (he has not seen her for two years), he remembers the familiar smell of cold cream on her face. What is clear is that, in her lecture and subsequent discussions, Elizabeth is straining at the limits of expression, an excess that apparently seems necessary if she is to be true to her inmost conviction: to respond reasonably to what she perceives involves defying the protocols of reasoned argument as normally understood. It is an aspect of this expressive excess that provides the example I want to consider, for this in a sense is the crisis point in the story.

The climax of her condemnation of the meat industry comes with these words:

I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town. I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them.

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.

Fully aware that there will be shock at what she has said, and anticipating that, having offended her audience's sense of decorum, she will be charged with tastelessness, she continues defiantly:

And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life (once its victims are dead, after all, it does not burn them to ash or bury them but on the contrary cuts them up and refrigerates and packs them so that they can be consumed in the comfort of our homes) is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been — pardon the tastelessness of the following — to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body-fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with.

Pardon me, I repeat. That is the last cheap point I will be scoring. I know how talk of this kind polarizes people, and cheap

point-scoring only makes it worse. I want to find a way of speaking to fellow human beings that will be cool rather than heated, philosophical rather than polemical, that will bring enlightenment rather than seeking to divide us into the righteous and the sinners, the saved and the damned, the sheep and the goats.

At the dinner-party that is arranged in her honour for the evening of the lecture, there is an empty space at the table because one guest has not come. This is Abraham Stern. Subsequently, Elizabeth receives a letter from him, in which he explains his decision not to attend:

You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God. But God does not have the likeness of man. If Jews are treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way.

The remainder of the story returns again and again to questions of the appropriateness of expression, especially regarding one's inmost thoughts, and this is played out in the domestic and the more public scene. Indeed, they are intertwined. The search for expression, the ability to speak in your own voice, to say what you mean, is there with particular poignancy where experience itself – whether one's own or that of others, and whether related to headline issues such as her lecture raises or the nuances of domestic relationships – seems to defy description, where one runs up against the limits of language.

Clearly this is to describe rather than to justify the thoughts that Elizabeth has and into which, up to a point, Coetzee draws the reader. What is apparent is that such thoughts – this preoccupation with the limits of expression and with the need sometimes to go beyond the apparent proprieties of expression and familiar criteria of meaningfulness – is likely to remain opaque to anyone who takes sense-making to require the availability of means of verification.

But let me juxtapose this brief account of Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello against a further example, this time not drawn from a work of fiction.

The logical discipline of philosophy of education

Some years ago, my attention was drawn to an article by John Wilson, to which I was encouraged to write a response. The article lamented what it took to be the lack of coherence in the philosophy of education in terms of both its substance and its methods of enquiry. Supposedly bewildered by the variety of titles at a recent conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (exemplified by 'Foucauldian influences in the turn to narrative therapy', 'The Promise of Bildung', 'Waiting on the Web', and 'Reconsideration of Rorty's view of the liberal ironist as the post-modern ideal of the educated'), Wilson reasserted his conviction that the philosophy of education is a logical discipline whose purpose is 'the discovery, and perhaps also the creation, of logical distinctions which are time-free and culture-free, and hence not in the normal sense of the term "empirical"'

(Wilson, 2003, p. 288). This, fundamentally, was the only thing he thought it could do.

In his many books and articles, Wilson's approach and style were consistent, attempting to bring clarity to fundamental concepts but also honouring the tradition of philosophical writing illustrated above by Ayer and aspiring to its level of argument. As with Ayer on occasion, with Wilson more frequently, this writing was not without its rhetorical flourishes and humour, and this was certainly true of the article in question. Indeed, in the response I eventually published, I wrote the following:

the charge of being prosaic is plainly one that cannot stick with Wilson, as his penchant for rhetorical flourish and elaboration makes clear. He is not above acknowledging the 'cheap shots' that he sometimes deploys (p. 281), and his paper is not necessarily the worse for this. At times his writing is amusing—when, for example, in distinguishing paradigm from borderline cases, he tells us of the manufacturers of waders for Baptist ministers practising total immersion who claimed to be working 'in the field of religion' (p. 290). The humour is sustained, though perhaps becomes a little laboured, when, in illustrating the confusion of librarians about which books to put on the philosophy shelves, he imagines finding Ada Astrologue's *Afterthoughts on the Afterlife* alongside works by respectable philosophers (p. 281). At times this goes badly wrong: the sense of the obscene provoked by his observation that 'if someone said that he was engaged in education when in fact he was massacring Jews or eating fish and chips, we should think that his dictionary (if not his head) needed examination' (p. 290) is not alleviated, a page later, when he writes: 'if someone said that his conception of education involved massacring all first-born, like Herod, we should not understand him' (p. 291). While one may recoil at these examples, it is to be remembered that there is nothing wrong with the *logic* of the argument. From a logical point of view there *could* be no objection. But it is not sufficient to think of these formulations merely as a temporary lapse of common-room wit. Does this not say something about the limitations of taking the logic of value-judgements as the sole means of addressing questions of value? (Standish, 2005, p. 274)

In late August 2003, when I was in the throes of writing my response, and just months after the publication of the paper in question, John Wilson died suddenly of a heart-attack. I had known him for many years – not well, but I liked him well enough. The sad news of his death certainly threw me into doubt about whether to go ahead with the paper I was writing, and certainly I delayed for some time. I was fairly confident, however, that he was not the kind of person who would have wanted criticism to be withdrawn or mollified under these circumstances, and eventually my paper was written and published – in fact, alongside other papers paying tribute to Wilson.

The reason for mentioning it here is, of course, the coincidence in the excess of expression – in one case conceived in a work of literature, a fictional work, and in the other in a philosophical essay. There are certainly

differences between the cases. Wilson is making a logical point, and the hyperbole is designed to underscore the absurdity of extending the boundaries of a concept indiscriminately. It follows, as I have shown, a series of flourishes whose casual comedy lies in their absurdity. Elizabeth Costello is in earnest: she argues for the validity of her comparison in defiance of – and perhaps because of – the predictable reaction that this is monstrous.⁷ Moreover, it is reasonable to think that Elizabeth believes the apparent monstrosity of her comparison to be called for by the moral outrage of the abattoirs. I do not doubt Wilson's sincerity in the case he presents, though I imagine that, on his own conception of philosophical argument, the imagery employed might well have been cut without significant loss to what he wants to say. I do not doubt Elizabeth Costello's sincerity, whether or not she is mad, as her daughter-in-law sometimes thinks, but in her case this excessive speech is internal to what she has to say, and, that is, to what she feels most deeply.

In both cases, the response must surely be one of recoil, whether the cause of recoil is to be described in terms of egregious lapses of good taste or seen, with Stern, as a kind of blasphemy. Matters of taste, as Kant saw, may have rather more importance than is apparent at first sight. There is no argument to be refuted here, and to insist that there is, is surely to miss the point. The exercise of reason will require acceptance of the fact that what matters in these cases cannot become apparent without appeal to a sensibility, to the capacity for the reader to be affected. How does it complicate the reader's response that the source in one case is a fictional work, in the other something that actually happened? How is this response further affected by my recounting of the two examples in juxtaposition?

Fantasy, reality, and the failures of expression

Let me refer once again to the paper by Richard Smith. At an early point in his discussion, he makes the point that no particular argument or opinion voiced by the characters in Plato's dialogues can be assumed to express Plato's own views, any more than it can be assumed that Shakespeare's characters speak for him. By way of illustration he directs us to the familiar catalogue of advice that Polonius gives to his son, Laertes, on the latter's departure for Germany. The high point in that advice is found in the following lines:

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

(Act 1, sc. 3, ll. 78–82)

⁷ As a number of commentators have noticed, and as was surely apparent to Coetzee, Heidegger draws a similar analogy in his 'The Question Concerning Technology' ('Agriculture is now a mechanized food industry. As for its essence, it is the same as the manufacture of corpses in the gas chambers and the death camps, the same thing as the blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs').

Smith is dismissive of the advice as both nonsense and sententious, and both criticisms are sound. But the dismissal brushes over, to some extent the power the cliché has come to have, as an expression of a certain conception of authenticity. This is surely a debased concept of authenticity, but it is one that, for example, David Cooper exploits in seeking to evoke the sense of authenticity that he finds in Nietzsche's work (Cooper, 1983): Cooper identifies a notion of authenticity that he characterises as a Polonian sense of correspondence with one's nature in contrast to one that is found in the sense of the creative and dynamic nature of a human life, as if in the creation of a work of art. In fact, Polonius' moralising plays a dynamic role *Hamlet* because, however reasonable the precepts he espouses may be thought by some to be, they prove inadequate for the situation in which Hamlet finds himself. That that situation – he is caught, amongst other things, between a medieval and modern world-orders, and between Catholicism and Protestantism – leaves him in a state of inertia and inexpressiveness is central to the plot and themes of the play, and internal also to what it is to be a subject in the modern world, where the sense of what it is to *be* a human being is opened in new ways.⁸

Inertia is seen in the many ways in which he delays in confronting the situation and seeking revenge, and hence in achieving some resolution. His inexpressiveness is not exactly a failure to speak. At times he is formidable – taunting and manipulating Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with feigned madness, and troubling Ophelia in ways that more or less drive her mad. The inexpressiveness is then not so much a failure to speak but a failure to find what he wants to say, or a failure to feel conviction in his words and expressions, to feel those words to be apt. Looking at the rehearsals of the troupe of players ostensibly employed to entertain the king and queen, and looking especially at the player's display of grief as he recounts the death of Hecuba, Hamlet remarks:

What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? He would drown the stage with tears.
(*Hamlet*, Act 2, Sc. ii).

⁸ Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are waiting as Hamlet muses: 'What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the
world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me,
what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not
me: no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling
you seem to say so' (*Hamlet*, Act 2, sc. 2, ll. 295-302).

What is Hecuba to him? What is Elizabeth Costello to me or to you?

The negativity in Hamlet reaches its classic expression in a soliloquy that turns upon the verb 'to be'. 'To be or not to be, that is the question' – a line difficult to translate in so many languages, a line whose resonance hangs in part on the oddness of the verb when not in its predicatory but its existential sense. And is the actor, whose expression is so convincing, somehow closer to this elusive sense of what it is to be or not to be? After all, is it not on the strength of such performances that we garner our sense of what the real thing must be? And today, bombarded with fictions, with images of images, is it not likely that our expression seems required to meet the standard of our fictions. Hence, Hamlet is at a loss, condemned to a kind of inexpression. And hence, in the 20th century, T.S. Eliot realises something like this in the condition of the ordinary man, for whom the overwhelming standing question is whether he can somehow finally bring things together, see it whole, and say how it is:

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while, 90
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say, 'That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all.'

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while, 100
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the
floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all." 110

Expression fails. You speak, but it is not quite what you intended. You struggle for expression and risk your words, but the blank face or polite smile responds in return: 'I don't understand what you are trying to say. I don't know what you mean.' And so you do not live up to these fictions, and your words betray you, run away with you. Shying away from the rebuff, you withdraw, settling for a quieter life, a bit-part in the conversation:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

(Eliot, 1915, ll. 89-109)

And here the verb ‘to be’ is allowed to play more freely. ‘No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be Prince Hamlet’ – that is, first, I am not fit to live so illustrious a life as that of a prince, and also not fit in the drama to take on quite that role. But then, second, with a different extension: which can also mean ‘No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be *at all!*’ I should never have existed. So am I, in the face of this, to be true to myself? Here it is as if inexpressiveness and inertia have lost the patina of the heroic and settled into the mediocrity of modern mass living. Desire for full expression, for an authentication in my own words is fraught with fantasy.

Decadence and the sense of the whole

In the Preface to his *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry*, Stanley Rosen remarks on a late 20th century decline, which he identifies as the ‘public repudiation of poetry, in the name of the thesis that philosophy is the technical solution of “puzzles”’ (Rosen, 1988, p. vii). The proponents of philosophy understood in this fashion have failed, moreover, to see that their style too is a kind or *poiesis*, which I take to mean that it produces and installs a particular style of expression and argument and that it does this with a lack of self-awareness, naturalising this style as that inevitable accomplice of the prevailing scientific naturalism. The counterpart to this, on Rosen’s view, has been the degeneration of art into postmodernism. In her *Recommencer la Philosophie*, Sandra Laugier charts what she takes to be a decline in aspects of philosophy in the United States, resulting from the filtering out of the broader philosophical project of Jewish emigrés from Europe in the 1930s and 40s and the institutional channelling of reception of their work into more narrow and technical kinds of enquiry. The result of both historical trends has been the undermining of attempts to think in terms of the whole, where the whole is not an agglomeration of parts part more like a holistic surview. To think the relation between philosophy and literature but as a necessary symbiosis, the contemplation of which itself involves a stepping back poetically from the tendency simply to divide and compartmentalise.

My view is that a similar decline has beset thinking in education, a casualty of which has been the humanities. The humanities are now positioned in such a way that they have to justify themselves as worthy of inclusion and as competitors for the space otherwise allocated to science and to more technical kinds of learning. But a robust statement of the

humanities would not accept their place in a kind of symmetry with science in education. This is by no means to deny the power and importance of science, but the asymmetry is evident when one considers that the humanities can reflect on themselves and on science alike: in fact they are based upon an orientation towards the whole. The sciences, by contrast, cannot reflect on the humanities because the more systematic ways of reasoning upon which they are based are confined to the objects of their study, the particular circumscribed fields abstracted from experience that comprise physics and biology and the sciences at large.

Given this disparity, it is lamentable that enquiry into education has styled itself insistently and evasively as a social science and that policy is developed on the basis of 'evidence-based practice'. The character of questions concerning the aims of education or the relative value of different kinds of knowledge and practice is inevitably holistic, not technical, and it is the resources of the humanities, not the sciences, that can help us to address these.

From the point of view of students also, a similar decadence is evident. Students at all levels are encouraged to think of their studies in terms of the satisfying of 'criteria', where criteria are understood in a more or less technical way – not as the basis of all human practice, whether explicit or not, but rather as a checklist of points that the student must somehow cover or even recite when they are assessed. This turns learning into the learning of formulaic ways of thinking, in the sciences and the humanities, and it deprives students of the chance to speak for themselves. In its tendency towards giving ready-made answers, it muffles the students' expression. This is likely to be misunderstood if it is thought of as a matter of its stifling their 'creativity' or, as in the contemporary preoccupation with student voice, of not giving everyone a chance to speak. It is to do with presenting students with subject matter that calls for a response in themselves, where the exercise of judgement is crucial to that response, and where the articulation of that response exposes to risk and possible rebuff. That they come to experience and accept this risk, that they sometimes, perhaps often, are thrown back on their words, is part of what it means to take subject matter seriously and to realise how and why it is serious. In regimes of prefigured responses, students are anaesthetised to this. In moral education, Polonius' precepts for living well provide a moralism that prevents the development of moral judgement. This is not just relevant to our confrontation with obvious moral challenges, for it relates to our ordinary lives together, as Coetzee's story brilliantly shows, and to our lives together as political subjects, as Rosen and Stanley Cavell make clear.⁹

⁹ Rosen is at pains to argue that the importance attached to the relation between philosophy and poetry in the ancient quarrel in Plato's writings is political and not, say, metaphysical. Cavell is consistently committed to the sense that a democratic politics depends upon voice, which involves the development of sensibility and judgement, and the willingness to risk those judgements in expression, in the ways I have described. See also Standish, 2005.

The epigraph to this paper – ‘But can philosophy become literature and still know itself?’ – is the last sentence of *The Claim of Reason* (1979). It reiterates but partly re-replaces the Delphic injunction (‘Know thyself’), retaining the force of this but entirely avoiding the debased self-knowledge that Polonius articulates. At the same time the phrasing touches on an earlier sense of ‘becoming’ as ‘comely’ or ‘beautiful’ and ‘suitable’. It does not collapse the distinction but reaffirms the relationship, including its mutual dependence. The unsettledness of this relationship, which is live in Coetzee as it is in Cavell’s own work, is suggestive of qualities towards which a non-decadent education might aspire, and it suggests that prospect of a democratic politics, to which the judgement of individuals and their risking of expression are essential. The double genitive in *The Claim of Reason* refers both to my claiming of reason in the judgements and opinions I express and the requirements that reason places on me, requirements to which I am answerable. These requirements will not be purely calculative in kind but will involve the cultivation of judgement and sensibility, and the capacity for recoil, conditions upon which rigour depends. This is the contemporary denial.

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