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Literature Is Philosophy: On the Literary Methodological Considerations That Would Improve the Practice and Culture of Philosophy

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How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?) Sometimes this is taken to be trivial question. I shall claim that it is not.

—Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*

[T]here is nothing that so alters the material qualities of the voice as the presence of thought behind what is being said: the resonance of the diphthongs, the energy of the labials are profoundly affected—as is the diction.

—Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*

PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE ARE AKIN in rich and meaningful ways. Like philosophy, novels make arguments and explicitly engage the range of philosophical questions; and like literature, essential elements of philosophy include aesthetic considerations. Moreover, the current distinction between philosophy and literature does a disservice to both. Overlooking the philosophical contributions of literature ignores incisive criticism, silences interlocutors, and passes over valuable contributions to traditional questions. Overlooking the literary qualities of philosophy omits important aspects of arguments and inappropriately trivializes the impact that beauty has on thought. In order to rectify this methodological shortsightedness, I will present a number of literary considerations that would augment the rigor and range of philosophical inquiry and analysis.

Furthermore, the consequences of the traditional distinction between philosophy and literature extend beyond stylistic qualms with academic writing. The relegation of literature to a philosophical supplement or to the realm of art has contributed historically to the double exclusion of non-dominant voices from philosophy. On the one hand, the particularity of literature is

analogous to the particularity of certain kinds of voices. Just as literature tells particular stories rather than making generalizable claims, the black voice, the woman's voice, and the queer voice are presumably too mired in their subjectivity to provide insights that bear upon humanity in general.¹ On the other hand, literature is not considered a critical discourse.² This creates a disciplinary problem because the methodological peculiarities of the literary form provide unique advantages for addressing some kinds of philosophical questions, such as those posed by Africana philosophy. If literature is not considered a critical discourse, then the use of the literary form for the analysis of questions will not be considered "analysis" or even the engagement with "questions."

First, I will defend the kinship between philosophy and literature and propose four literary considerations that would improve philosophy. Then I will examine the ways in which the traditional philosophical form of discourse without the proposed literary considerations implicitly entails evaluative commitments that perniciously maintain the cultural homogeneity of the discipline.

Part 1: The Kinship between Philosophy and Literature

In the contemporary discourse, we make a distinction between philosophy and literature. Presumably, philosophy is critique, whereas literature is art. Philosophy is evaluated in terms of truth and goodness, whereas literature is evaluated in terms of beauty and expressiveness.

Insofar as they converge, philosophy is the content, the meaningful aspect of a text; it is *what* one has said or written. Conversely, literature is the medium or form; it is the structural or material aspect of a text; it is *how* one speaks or writes, that is, the way that the text *appears*. Though all discourses have both form and content—and in that sense are both philosophical and literary—the two aspects are, nonetheless, viewed independently, converging accidentally in a given text. Any particular content could, in principle, be expressed through any number of discursive forms—in the same way that a chair, for example, may be made out of any number of materials, such as wood, metal, or plastic. The decision to use one material rather than another is a function of durability, comfort, cost of materials, design, and so on, but these considerations do not affect the chair-ness of the chair. Analogously, the decision to write one way rather than another is function of clarity, rigor, conciseness, beauty, and so forth, but these considerations presumably do not affect what is being said.

At this juncture, I present two contentions. First, the form of discourse is not a mute vehicle for content, but is also constitutive of content. Martha Nussbaum famously makes this point in *Love's Knowledge*. She says that "style makes, itself, a statement: that an abstract theoretical style makes like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not."³ If you choose to write in a traditional philosophical style, part of your argument will include the implicit claims of the form of discourse, which will function as additional premises to whatever argument you make. These premises include the claims that (a) reason is the most important faculty that the reader should use in order to evaluate the text; and (b) within the scope of the question, your argument should be logically consistent and scholastically comprehensive. Alternately, if you choose to write a novel, your argument will include the implicit premises that (a) reason, emotions, *and* character are important resources for understanding and evaluating the text; (b) chance and luck are relevant variables, ethically and epistemologically; and (c) some kinds of inconsistencies, incompleteness, and apparent contradictions are tolerable (Nussbaum 26, 36–44).

These "extra-textual" premises interact with the "content," modifying, amplifying, and occasionally negating it. When the form and content seem to conflict deliberately, we attribute the disjoint to irony; when it appears accidental, however, it reads as simply a poor statement.

The second contention: literature is excluded from philosophy because of an unproductive double standard. In order for literature to be considered philosophy, it must satisfy criteria to which we do not hold philosophical texts. On the one hand, we say that literature is not philosophy because it is not true. In many cases, it is explicitly "fiction." On the other hand, literature is not philosophy because it does not edify. Horrible people are well-read, and those same people enjoy stories that should broaden their experiences of the world in ways that we think would make them better people.⁴

Literature *may* be true; literature also *may* edify us. Yet philosophy is not necessarily true or edifying either. Literature *and* philosophy are both primarily argument. They aspire to be persuasive, not necessarily true or ethically trueing. Concerning literary "truths," the British novelist E. M. Forster explains in his witty and insightful series of lectures, *Aspects of the Novel*, that literary characters "are real not because they are like ourselves (though they may be like us) but because they are convincing."⁵ Similarly, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that the better kinds of poetry make believable claims rather than possible ones. He says, "With a view to the poetry, an impossible thing

that is believable is preferable to an unbelievable thing that is possible.”⁶ Like philosophy, the goal of literature is to persuade, not necessarily to make truth claims, and persuasiveness depends more on consistency than accuracy.

Correspondence with the world is frequently an important consideration in telling a good story—just as truth contributes to a persuasive syllogism—but that correspondence is not the primary goal. If characters can fly in the world of the literary work, then the believable story will entail an argument that explains the difference between the physical laws in the story and those same properties in the world of the reader. The claim of the believable story is not that people *can* fly, but here is how it might work if they could. The same consideration is relevant when making a good argument in a traditional philosophical text. If the premises of a syllogism are obviously false, then the argument, even if it is valid, will not be persuasive. Nevertheless, the goal of the syllogism is not to claim that a given premise is true; it is, after all, a *premise*. The conclusion claims, rather, that *if* a given premise is true, then we should act in a particular way, or we should accept some other claim, namely, the conclusion, that was not, at the outset, obviously true.

Regarding the moral objection, just as we do not expect familiarity with the classics of moral philosophy to yield better judgment or behavior, we should not discount the philosophical value of literature for failing to do so. Familiarity with Kant’s *Groundwork*, Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, or Aristotle’s *Ethics* does not make us more discerning or compel us to live more ethical lives. Attributing a distinct nature to literature for failing to meet these alternate criteria is a disingenuous cordoning off of literature that impoverishes philosophy by silencing dissenters and interlocutors.

This common shortcoming of the classics of moral philosophy is due, arguably, to the statement of their form of discourse. The *Groundwork*, *Utilitarianism*, and the *Ethics* are written in the traditional philosophical style, which means that their arguments are pitched primarily at the persuasive register of reason. Yet being a good person in our daily lives entails the calibration of reason, emotions, and character. Consequently, understanding these classic moral systems as *ethically* persuasive requires converting them to another persuasive register, that is, translating them into our lives and grounding them in examples that invoke—in addition to our intellect—our emotions and character as well. Moreover, we might note that we usually do not read these texts in order to be edified; rather, we seek in them vocabulary and justifications for our own already robust but as yet unarticulated moral intuitions. By contrast, the kinds of texts that are ethically persuasive are usually narrative accounts of moral problems faced by characters with whom we can identify.

As a pertinent aside, Nussbaum's actual arguments in *Love's Knowledge*, and elsewhere, are ultimately more conservative than the position that I propose in this paper. Between the promise of the opening question of *Love's Knowledge*—"How should one write . . . if one is pursuing understanding?"—and the explicit delimitations of her thesis and arguments, we find a curious and disappointing deflation. At the crest of her introductory wave, she says:

Nothing could be further from my intentions than to suggest that we *substitute* the study of novels for the study of the recognized great works of the various philosophical traditions in ethics. Although this may disappoint some who find moderate positions boring, I have no interest in dismissive assaults on systematic ethical theory, or on 'Western rationality,' or even on Kantianism or Utilitarianism, to which the novels, to be sure, display their own opposition. (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 27)

Nussbaum's goal is not to challenge philosophy. She merely wishes to expand the boundaries to include a few additional texts.

The disappointment with Nussbaum's conservativeness, however, is much deeper than "boredom." In her efforts not to dismiss any of the traditional philosophical views, she impoverishes her own position and does a grave disservice to literature. Her pre-emptive apology to philosophy says, effectively, though many literary texts are deeply critical of many traditional philosophical ideas, philosophy does not need to take those criticisms seriously. In Nussbaum's response to Richard Posner's essay, "Against Ethical Criticism"—where Posner basically makes an empirical argument against Nussbaum's suggestion that literature edifies—she says, in short, that her conclusions are not generalizable.

Nussbaum says that

[i]n neither [*Love's Knowledge* nor *Poetic Justice*] do I make any general claims about "literature" as such. . . . I also make it very clear that even in terms of the general line of inquiry I map out, I have chosen to focus rather narrowly on certain questions about how to live, and to leave other equally interesting questions to one side. Thus no claim I make could be refuted by pointing out that novel A or B does not fit my description, since I all along insist only that my claims are applicable to certain writers discussed by me, and others who resemble them in relevant respects. (Nussbaum, *Exactly and Responsibly* 345)

In effect, not only are the claims made by literature *not* generalizable, but Nussbaum's claims about literature are not generalizable either. Philosophy remains in the indefinite middle space of being asked to listen to literature, to include at least some literature among its ranks, but not to respond to it since its claims do not actually bear upon the nature of philosophy.

In her essay, “Liminal Agencies,” Mary Rawlinson challenges Nussbaum on this point. Rawlinson says that “literature, rather than merely supplementing the concept and project of moral philosophy, actually calls it into question. Rather than merely inducing feelings that are effective in turning the mind toward philosophy’s ideas of the moral good and justice, literature produces significant conceptual effects that challenge those very ideas.”⁷⁷ Literary texts that are sufficiently critical of classic philosophical ideas cannot remain merely supplemental. Rawlinson goes on to demonstrate persuasively that in the realm of moral philosophy, the detective novels of Chester Himes, for example, challenge our ideas of agency “in ways that demand a critique of fraternity as a regulative ideal and rational deliberation as a description of moral experience” (131).

In the realm of epistemology, mystery and detective fiction as a genre makes philosophical arguments as well. Mystery and detective stories begin from a place of measured ignorance. We might say the genre as a whole asks: What if you do not know (or cannot know) a crucial piece of a puzzle? How does this lack of knowledge affect reason and judgment? How does it affect justice? In detective stories, the narrator knows everything, but the reader does not. In a mystery, the narrator and the reader are equally blind.

We could imagine a syllogistic argument that aspired to function like a detective story. We might have a comprehensive list of possible premises upon which we impose a structural limitation. For example, imagine that eight of the listed premises are needed to make a sound argument, but the reader can use only five. Which five premises produce the strongest argument? Which five premises gesture best toward the “true” conclusion? And what if these sets of premises are not the same? If done well, this would be a fascinating essay, but I would wager that the presentation of the philosophical problems would work more efficiently as a narrative.

The affinity between philosophy and literature does not necessarily mean that philosophers should write novels and poetry. There are, however, a few methodological considerations that are taken for granted in literature, but would improve the rigor and range of traditional philosophical styles of inquiry. I have identified at least four.

First, every text—traditionally philosophical or literary—includes a number of voices. If we align these voices along a spectrum from creator to recipient, they would include the author, the narrator, the characters, the narratee, the implied reader, and the actual reader.

In ostensibly literary texts, these voices are, to varying degrees, conspicuous and distinct. Rendering these voices conspicuous—by giving them bodies,

clothing, habits, and so forth—contributes in large part to what we commonly think of as the literary form. The separation of these voices from the author's or the reader's voice creates a space and a world that is also distinct from the space and world of the author or reader. Gérard Genette calls this space the "narrative situation."⁸

Non-literary texts also create a "narrative situation," along with the voices that occupy it. Even if the author aspires to speak as herself in the text—as is often the case for authors of non-literary texts—from the moment the text is written, a narrator emerges who continues to speak in the absence of the author, *as* the author of that historical moment. This narrator directly addresses a counterpart who occupies the same time and space; this addressee is the narratee. And though there may not be characters in non-literary texts whose manners and physical appearances have a function in the development of something like a story, there are certainly centers of conceptual gravity that interact with the narrator and each other in ways analogous to characters.

The second literary consideration: There is an inherent temporality to every text, that is, an innate narrative-like structure. These include the temporal experiences of reading, writing, edifying, persuading, and believing. We read and write letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs in a sequence. The parts of argument must unfold in a particular order; at the very least, conclusions must *follow* (from) premises. Also, consider the *feeling* of logical operators. Terms like "and," "if," "but," and "not" direct us from a point of origin to a destination. "And" is furthering, literally compounding like the held hand of another who stands alongside. "But" and "not" both arrest the reader like the onomatopoeic unvoiced dental stop that concludes each word.⁹ Each of these temporal experiences is comprised of two moments: an original orientation and a future altered one. These moments entail a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The third consideration: Examples are Universals. They are not merely data from which to extract a generalization, nor are they simply tangible instantiations of an idea. The example is singular and concrete, yet it has the purview of a law. It is, literally, one of a kind, occurring in space and time, but in spite of its particularity, it functions as a model or guide, which is not the same as a rule or criterion. It points rather than explains; it guides by saying "like *this*." Giorgio Agamben explains in *Homo Sacer* that an example is "truly a paradigm in the etymological sense: it is what is 'shown beside.'"¹⁰ More precisely, it is a *dia-digm*: that which is *shown through or throughout*, a "criterion," so to speak, that is simultaneous with its appearance. The example is the particular that exhibits itself. For example, any moving story,

imagined or historical, functions like a universal because it constructs for its readers a paradigm, that is, a lens and a vocabulary, through which we may understand human experiences in general. For each reader—man, woman, or other, adult or adolescent—the time and place of the story becomes our time and place.

The fourth and final consideration: The quality of our language matters. If, as I argue, the form of our discourse is literally part of the content, then the question of beauty takes on new importance. We need to think of beauty, however, in a relatively novel manner. Beauty is not simply surface, washing over our passive, disinterested minds and bodies, arresting and dislodging us from our daily routines. As a concept, if it is a concept, beauty characterizes the prescriptive force of the exemplary. Examples are not found-objects—they are actively identified or created. Consequently, beauty is not something to behold. It is also an activity. As Toni Morrison explains, it is “something one can *do*.”¹¹

In other words, the example is *the particular that guides*. As a guide, examples are prescriptive. This sense of “prescription,” however, is not deontological. Rather, it describes the attractiveness of our beliefs and values. To say that the exemplary is prescriptive is to say, simply, that it is compelling; it exhorts us to believe or act in ways that are consonant with it. Thus, to say that the exemplary is prescriptive is to say simply that it is beautiful.

Part 2: The Analogous Exclusion of Non-white Voices

The exclusion of literature from philosophy is analogous to—if not directly instrumental in—the relegation of non-dominant voices in philosophy to the margins. The particularity of literature—as contrasted with the purported abstractness of philosophy—corresponds to the particularity of certain voices—as contrasted with the divine voice of the purported unmarked subject. The hallmark of the universal is its ability to extend to all times, places, and perspectives, and literature, being a particular story—“here,” “now,” and via a particular narratorial formulation—seems unable to function in that way. Similarly, the black voice, the woman’s voice, and the queer voice are too mired in their subjectivity, some argue, to provide insights that bear upon humanity in general. Questions that betray their particularity are ghettoized into sub-specialties of “applied philosophy”—for example, “black male studies,”¹² “black existentialism”—or are excluded outright, relegated to other disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, history, anthropology, and so on.¹³ The implicit claim is that “philosophical” insights concerning particular

identities may contribute to ethics or politics, but they do not bear upon the core questions of metaphysics, epistemology, or the fundamental presuppositions of philosophical method.¹⁴

Following the two literary contentions, at this juncture, I present two analogous considerations. First, just as the form of discourse makes a statement, the purported limited purview of any particular voice is a fiction, moreover, a prejudice, since all voices are particular, even those with a universal scope. As many writers have observed and argued, the divine voice of the unmarked subject, once interrogated, betrays the particularity of the dominant perspective—usually white, male, straight, Christian, and financially secure. In *Changing My Mind*, Zadie Smith observes:

In the high style, one's loves never seem partial or personal, or even 'loves,' because white novelists are not white novelists but simply 'novelists,' and white characters are not white characters but simply 'human,' and criticism of both is not partial or personal but a matter of aesthetics. Such critics will always sound like the neutral universal, and the black women who have championed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the past, and the one doing so now, will seem like black women talking about a black book.¹⁵

Similarly in philosophy, white Americans are not white Americans but simply "citizens." And rationalizations of white and male dominance are not rationalizations, but "truths" produced by "reason." In *Blackness Visible*, Charles Mills argues more forcefully:

Thus, there is a feeling, not to put too fine a point on it, that when you get right down to it, a lot of philosophy is just white guys jerking off. Either philosophy is not about real issues in the first place but about pseudo-problems; or when it is about real problems, the emphases are in the wrong places; or crucial facts are omitted, making the whole discussion pointless; or the abstractness is really a sham for what we all know but are not allowed to say out loud. The impatience or indifference that I have sometimes detected in black students seems to derive in part from their sense that there is something strange in spending a whole course describing the logic of different moral ideals, for example, without ever mentioning that all of them were systematically violated for blacks. So it is not merely that the ideal was not always attained but that, more fundamentally, this was never actually the ideal in the first place. A lot of moral philosophy will then seem to be based on pretense, the claim that these were the principles that people strove to uphold, when in fact the real principles were the racially exclusivist ones.¹⁶

By way of an example, consider briefly a figure like John Rawls, whom I choose because a case can at least be made that he was a “good white” person, which is to say, a well-intentioned liberal who nonetheless harbored implicit biases and prejudicial blind spots.¹⁷ In taking up the question of justice, we might have hoped that Rawls concerned himself with some actual American injustices. Nevertheless, his commitment to ideal theory was thoroughly “colored” by the condition of his position. Consider the Rawlsian “original position” and the “difference principle.” The original position is the imagined place where citizens negotiate fairly the terms and structures of society. The most notable feature of the original position is that negotiators “are not allowed to know the social positions or the particular comprehensive doctrines of the persons they represent.”¹⁸ Rawls calls this structural, epistemic imposition the “veil of ignorance.” The principal advantage of the veil is that, since negotiators do not know whether they will be a privileged Bill Clinton or an unfortunate Trayvon Martin, they will create a society that will be in the best interest of all. The difference principle accounts for inevitable inequalities; insofar as they exist, they must be “attached to offices and positions open to all . . . and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society” (Rawls 42–43).

In this idealized space, Rawls has proposed a curious inversion. The negotiators are homogenous behind the veil, and their differences are hypothetical. Out of fear, everyone, presumably, will become an advocate of the hypothetically disadvantaged. Two problems emerge. First, injustices are not ideal. The idea of a *hypothetical* disadvantage is oxymoronic. One can only advocate for actual disadvantages. Second, if a theory of justice is to be meaningful, much less useful, that is, more than an interesting puzzle to dawdle over in one’s “idle time,” then, as Edith Wharton notes concerning fiction, “there must be something that *makes* it crucial, some recognizable relation to a familiar social or moral standard, some explicit awareness of the eternal struggle between man’s contending impulses, if the tales embodying them are to fix the attention and hold the memory.”¹⁹

The original position fails in this regard, mostly because it is, in the terms of E. M. Forster, unconvincing. Were it a story, the suspension of disbelief would be difficult for many readers. Actual negotiators cannot retreat behind the veil of ignorance, and the account of the original position does not entail an argument explaining how they are able to do so in the world of the Rawlsian text. If the actually disadvantaged are even allowed at the negotiating table, they will advocate for their particular disadvantages, and the actually privileged will gamble that they will be privileged in society. The gamble is,

of course, insincere, since they know the outcome of the bet. Nor is there a need, while negotiating, to make too many concessions to the disadvantaged. Furthermore, all parties recognize that “fairness” is *only* attained between privileged members of society, rather than between all members; and though it is not determinative, to presume otherwise is symptomatic of the privileged perspective.

In addition to being unconvincing, Rawls’s theory of justice, due to its pretention to an abstract universality, renders an actual injustice as well. By failing to account for his particularity, even implicitly, he presumes to speak for all, pre-emptively silencing others. By contrast, Descartes’s claims in the *Meditations* could at least be read ironically. The ubiquitous narratorial “I” concedes the particularity of the voice. The narrator is a French, male, educated, financially secure member of the intelligentsia, with enough time, leisure, and security to spend six nights “seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown,” addressing the “very sage and illustrious deans and doctors of the sacred faculty of Theology of Paris.”²⁰

The particularity of the narrator’s voice might appear to limit its scope, but in fact the opposite occurs. It renders the Cartesian project all the more persuasive. The “I” serves as a structural mechanism by which a reader can hypothetically adopt the narrator’s perspective, even a reader who might be very different from Descartes—the narrator can try on, so to speak, some of the particularities, thereby testing their relative necessity. Rather than claiming that Descartes’s claims are unconvincing, if not flat-out wrong, because my experience serves as a counterexample to his implicit generalizations, I might concede that Descartes’s situatedness—that is, his social, political, and economic privileges—enables a plausible mind/body dualism. I might recognize that Descartes can indeed ignore his body; he barely needs to attend to physical nuisances like food, shelter, and clothing, much less negotiate the threat of violence or the possibility of an abrupt death at the hands of another. This ability to believably bracket the body is one of the most striking symptoms of his privilege.

Returning to Rawls, there is no such narratorial concession in his project. There is no first-person pronoun, no deliberate narratorial voice, no concession that his situatedness might inform an orientation as unconvincing as the original position. So as not to jettison the entire thing, we might hope that we, the readers, could make these concessions for Rawls; perhaps *we* could read the particularity of Rawls’s voice into his proposals, grounding the project in its historical context, and rendering explicit Rawls’s sociopolitical position. If we were to do so, however, the Rawlsian project would unravel

itself. The original position cannot sustain such a concession, and without it, the Rawlsian project barely gets off the ground.²¹

The second analogous contention: The whiteness of philosophy is not simply a secondary effect of an unfortunate history that yielded a racial hierarchy, where ideals are “white” because of the self-affirming gesture of a Nietzschean “noble morality.” The whiteness of philosophy is sustained by a pernicious double standard. On the one hand, just as philosophy uncritically pretends to have a nonliterary “pure content,” the particularities of whiteness are uncritically presumed to attain an *abstract* universality. On the other hand, just as literature must justify its status as philosophy using criteria that neither literature nor philosophy satisfy, non-white voices are subjected to hyper-scrutiny. They must, first, “apologize” for their particularity—read: non-whiteness—and, second, justify their claim to the universal. In other words, the process of justification does not entail an explanation of the ways in which universals are already particular, or the ways in which particulars become universal when they are dubbed examples. Rather, the process consists in defending their similarity to the de facto universal, namely, whiteness.

In her incisive essay, “How Is This Paper Philosophy?,” Kristie Dotson explains the particular practices by which this double standard is enforced. A “culture of justification” characterizes the practices of philosophy. Dotson explains: “To say that philosophy has a culture of justification, then, is to say that the profession of philosophy requires the practice of making congruent one’s own ideas, projects and, in [Gayle Salamon’s] case, pedagogical choices with some ‘traditional’ conception of philosophical engagement.”²² Dotson continues:

As such, a culture of justification will include at least three components. It will 1) manifest a value for exercises of legitimation, 2) assume the existence of *commonly held*, justifying norms that are 3) *univocally relevant*. That is to say, a disciplinary culture of justification is driven by the creation and/or discovery of papers and/or projects that fall within the purview of a certain set of commonly held, univocally relevant justifying norms. Compliance with these justifying norms, in turn, confers positive status on those papers/projects. (Dotson 7–8; emphasis in original)

More pointedly, Tommy Curry argues in “On Derelict and Method” that “[a]s a discipline, philosophy still operates under the implicit assumption that to be philosophical is to be bound by a European philosophical tradition.”²³ Curry goes on to state that the white evaluative mores insist that “in order for Black thought to gain a philosophical status, it must be describable by an established

European philosophical stream of thought” (Curry 150). In other words, philosophy demands methodological and ideological congruence from “philosophical” projects and practices, even when those projects are radically critical. Arguments, styles, and ideas that implicitly endorse the status quo are not asked to justify themselves. Arguments, styles, and ideas that are critical—and not merely critical in a way where nothing is at stake, conceding, ultimately, the fundamental presuppositions of one’s interlocutor—must answer the question “How is this paper philosophy?”

On the surface, the question is one that all of philosophy should continually ask of itself. In practice, however—at conferences, on journal editorial boards, on dissertation committees, in book proposals, during tenure reviews, and so on—the subtext of the question levies a demand for congruence. Cueing the “insiders” like a dog whistle, it reads: “How can you, an ‘outsider,’ say what *you’re* saying in such a way that I can continue to say what I am saying?”²⁴ If the outsider’s points are sufficiently critical, then the question cannot be answered. Or, it can only be answered in a few ways: (1) the insider cannot continue to say or do what she is saying or doing; (2) the outsider’s criticisms are wrong; or (3) the outsider’s criticisms are not actually a criticism, since they are not actually “philosophy.” Since the burden of justification falls on the outsider, answer (1) is precluded; and answers (2) and (3) do not challenge the status quo.

The demand for justification also extends to attempts to highlight the absurdity and particularity of the mechanism by which the whiteness of philosophy is maintained. Fanon describes this paradoxical space vis-à-vis reason in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He says: “My unreason [‘unjustified’ outrage] was countered with reason [i.e., the mores of justification] my reason [logic and demands for consistency] with ‘real reason’ [i.e., the univocality of ‘common sense’]. Every hand was a losing hand for me.”²⁵

The question “How is this paper philosophy?” sets a trap, a double bind, which, as Lyotard explains in *The Differend*, “consists in applying to two contradictory propositions, p and $not-p$, two logical operators: exclusion (*either . . . , or*) and implication (*if . . . , then*).”²⁶ The double bind reads: either p or $not-p$, and if p then $not-p$. Thus, all inputs yield $not-p$. This translates as either the paper is philosophical or it’s not; and if it *is* then it isn’t. The question is particularly insidious because it is insincere. In spite of the pretension to uncertainty, only certain speakers and arguments must answer the question. Therefore, nothing is at stake in the question. There is no doubt to be resolved. In short, there is no question. The speaker is already determined

not to be a “philosopher,” and her argument is already determined not to be “philosophical.”

In conclusion, the exclusion of literature from philosophy is problematic for three reasons. One, it is premised upon a faulty definition of philosophy that silences would-be interlocutors and ignores criticism. Two, the exclusion of literature supports the analogous exclusion of non-dominant voices. The presumably non-philosophical qualities of literature are attributed to certain kinds of voices, erroneously rendering them marginal at best. And three, philosophical questions for which the literary form provides methodological advantages—such as many of the questions that characterize the field of Africana philosophy—suffer an unjust and unphilosophical compounded exclusion. Going forward, thinkers and writers should explicitly incorporate the literary consideration presented in this paper into their prose. This literary orientation will increase the rigor and expand the range of their philosophical inquiries and analyses. It will also draw attention to, and perhaps begin to dismantle, the idiosyncratic motivations and forces that maintain the cultural homogeneity of the discipline of philosophy.

NOTES

1. Consider, for example, the pervasiveness of the aspiration to do “ideal theory” in the style of John Rawls’s project—see *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*—which requires bracketing the actual particularities of the political participants behind the veil of ignorance. For criticism of the philosophical inclination toward ideal theory, see Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology”; and Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes.”

2. In “Against Ethical Criticism,” Richard Posner rigorously defends Oscar Wilde’s famous remark from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all” (Posner 3). According to Posner, literature is simply art, and as such, is not “critical” in any philosophical sense. The ways in which satire, for instance, might appear to offer criticisms are not the literary elements *qua* literature. In another example, in *The Philosophy of Literature*, Peter Lamarque opens the first chapter with a weighty remark that lays bare many of his assumptions: “This is a book about literature written by a philosopher from a philosophical point of view” (1). He explains further in the preface: “The philosophical investigation of literature is a probing into practices and procedures but it does not offer a history of those practices or a sociological analysis of them. It looks at the underlying conventions and assumptions that give the practices what distinctive identity they have and seeks to find a coherent perspective that makes sense of them” (vii). Since Lamarque’s inquiry is decidedly “philosophical,” and not “literary,” literature, presumably, does not do the things that he is doing in this book.

3. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* 7.

4. For arguments defending the ethical significance of *some* works of literature, see Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*. For arguments contesting the ethical significance of literature,

see Posner (1–27), and two popular pieces on the failure of literature to edify us are Cole (“Reader’s War”); and Currie (“Does Great Literature Make Us Better?”).

5. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* 62.

6. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1461b10ff.

7. Rawlinson 131.

8. Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 31.

9. For an example, see Johnson, “Feeling William James’s ‘But.’”

10. Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 22. Also on the example, see Agamben, *Coming Community* 8–9.

11. Morrison 209.

12. For work on this particularly rich new field of inquiry, see Curry and Utley; Smith et al.; Johnson, “Challenging the Myth”; and Curry (*Man-Not*, “Killing Boogeymen”).

13. I am not making a claim about the relative merits of these other disciplines vis-à-vis philosophy. Questions concerning particular identities are obviously at home in many of these disciplines. My contention is with the exclusion of these questions from the heart of philosophy, where these questions should also find a hospitable place, if not a home.

14. See Alcoff, “Philosophy’s Civil Wars.”

15. Smith, *Changing My Mind* 11–12.

16. Mills, *Blackness Visible* 4.

17. See Sullivan. Also see Alcoff, *Future of Whiteness*.

18. Rawls 15.

19. Wharton 14.

20. Descartes 60.

21. I am using Rawls merely as an example of a “white” philosopher, and thus a full explication of his particular limitations is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, for a thorough explication of the unsustainability of his theory of justice in a manner consistent with my criticisms, see Mills (“Ideal Theory”; “Rawls on Race”).

22. Dotson 3–29, esp. 6.

23. Curry, “On Derelict and Method,” 139–64, esp. 140.

24. See López.

25. Fanon 132.

26. Lyotard 6.

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