

Philosophy as Literature and More than Literature

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Philosophy without Literature

If philosophy is conceived primarily in terms of definitional “what is?” questions, then “philosophy of literature” should take as its initial task the definition of literature, and that seems to mean that it should examine the nature of literature with objective, critical distance, as it were from the outside. But if philosophy is itself a form of literature, is this external perspective really possible? And how can we convincingly deny that philosophy is literature, given the enormous breadth of the concept of literature? We cannot exclude philosophy from literature by reducing literature to fictional discourse, since so much literature is non-fictional and aims at truth. Philosophy, moreover, displays a variety of recognized literary genres: essays, dialogues, poems, meditations, treatises, speeches, confessions, memoirs, letters, discourses, journals, commentaries, investigations, sermons, notes, lectures, fragments, aphorisms, inquiries, outlines, sketches – and the list could be doubled and will grow with the arrival of new literary genres, such as the blog, which has already been enlisted into philosophical use.

Nor can we deny that philosophy is literature by arguing that some philosophers (including the great Socrates) never wrote philosophical texts but only communicated their views in oral dialogue. Even if the term “literature” derives from the Latin root for “letter,” and thus suggests writing, the concept of literature clearly includes also oral literature, and we know that ancient Greek poetry was essentially intended for oral transmission and was largely preserved through oral traditions before being committed to textual form.

To award philosophy the privilege of defining literature, but at the same time to acknowledge that literature is itself the broader genus needed for defining philosophy as one of its species, suggests a disconcerting circularity. Even if circularity can be avoided, moreover, philosophy seems compelled to cede to literature the status of generic primacy, in which philosophy is a subsumed species. Such concession is something that philosophers are rarely happy to give, since philosophy first emerged as a major force in ancient Greece through its struggle to assert its superiority to poetry and rhetoric

not only in providing truth for the conduct of life but also (as argued in Plato's *Symposium*) for the realization of the highest kind of beauty and happiness.

To distinguish philosophy as more than "mere" literature (whether poetic or rhetorical, written or oral), ancient philosophers often insisted that their enterprise was essentially a way of life rather than a form of language, that it had to be expressed in action beyond mere utterances or textual inscriptions. In this tradition, philosophers like Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, and later Renaissance philosophers like Montaigne, disparage as mere "grammarians" or "mathematicians" those philosophers who devote more "care and attention to their speech . . . than to their lives," and thus "teach us how to argue instead of how to live." Philosophy in this tradition derives her value and "authority over other arts" by being the "most valuable of all arts, the art of living well." "Philosophy," says Seneca, "takes as her aim the state of happiness," not book learning or textual production whose zealous pursuit can be harmful. Diogenes Laertius reports that Socrates was not alone among the eminent ancient philosophers who "wrote nothing at all" but instead conveyed their teaching primarily through the conduct of their exemplary lives. As Montaigne writes, "To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books . . . Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately."

Though this tradition of philosophy as a way of life has waned in modern times with the institutionalization of philosophy as an academic profession of theoretical writing, we still hear echoes in Thoreau's famous complaint: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live."¹ And the insistence on philosophy as a way of life that goes beyond textual practice has been reasserted in contemporary times by philosophers as different as Foucault, Wittgenstein, and John Dewey.²

There is, of course, no contradiction between living and writing philosophy. Indeed the most successful ancient philosophies combined discourse and deeds, theory and practice. The Stoic life of simple consistency with nature and tranquil acceptance of its providence was, for example, both justified and facilitated by philosophical discourse that viewed the whole world as a perfect, living, organic unity, whose parts, as necessary to the whole, must be accepted. The same symbiosis exists between the Epicurean life of unmixed tranquil pleasures and its discourse on the nature and limits of human sensations and sentience. If philosophy is supposed to assert truths about the world, it must do so in some literary form, through some discursive linguistic expression. The point of asserting philosophy as a way of life, rather than merely as a form of literature, could still be important as underlining that philosophy needs to go beyond mere discourse and engage a world beyond that of words. Yet how could it really do this effectively and lastingly without relying on words and, eventually, writing? Even if it is the philosopher's actual embodied life rather than her discourse that is most important, the exemplary meaning of that life could not long survive her death without an enduring literary expression of discursive testimony. The tradition of the embodied philosophical life thus requires the literary genre of biography (including autobiography), and philosophy seems to have first firmly established itself through Plato's brilliantly literary account of Socrates' life and death for the sake of philosophy.

If both philosophical theories and philosophical life-stories require some literary formulation, then what kind of philosophy might exist without literary form? Perhaps the most likely candidate would be what Socrates identifies as the most basic and essential philosophical task, the one that prompted his philosophical quest – the Delphic injunction to “know thyself,” which he also closely connected with the idea of caring for oneself.³ Unlike narrating philosophical lives or expressing theories about knowledge, being, justice, and beauty, the task of self-knowledge and self-care would seem, *prima facie*, to be a matter of silent introspection and discipline. Philosophy, as such, would apparently require no special literary formulation.

In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates tells us that he cannot concern himself with all sorts of speculative knowledge because he is wholly engaged and “still unable” to do

as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was just saying, I look not into them but into my own self.⁴

Having identified self-examination as the philosophical project *par excellence*, the very same dialogue strikingly offers Plato’s most vigorous critique of writing as a mode of philosophy. Socrates does not condemn writing in general; he even affirms its value for literary arts, since it provides a man “gardens of letters for amusing himself.” But unlike literature, philosophy is too serious a matter to be identified with even “noble amusement,” since it concerns the essential health of the mind. Written formulations of knowledge make the mind weak by undermining the cultivation of memory. Writing fills men with an empty conceit of their own wisdom, which, without memory, is shallow and unabiding. Written philosophy is further censured as epistemologically inadequate, because, orphaned from the voice of its author who could explain or define it, it cannot speak to answer interrogators and is helplessly exposed to misinterpretation. Finally, the written word is metaphysically inferior, a lifeless image of oral communication and thus, as it were, two removes from “the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows,” “a discourse that is written with knowledge in the soul” (*Phaedrus* 276a). The Greek term, translated here as “discourse,” also often translated (in this dialogue and elsewhere) as “word” (among several other possibilities) is the seminal notion of *logos*. This term denotes not only the discursive expression (or words) of a thought but the unexpressed “inward thought itself.”⁵

If the possibility of wordless thinking is granted (and even Wittgenstein seems to allow this possibility), then *logos*, despite its intimate connection with words, might also signify such silent, wordless thinking.⁶ Moreover, even if silent thinking requires some link to concepts or words, it can hardly be considered literature; and this would suggest that philosophical self-knowledge could then apparently be pursued through introspection without the need of literary form whether written texts or oral soliloquies. Moreover, in the Platonic dialogues *Alcibiades* (131b) and *Charmides* (164d), the philosophical project of knowing oneself is identified with being “self-controlled” or being

“temperate” rather than with a specifically discursive knowledge about one’s person or mind. The work of philosophy as perfecting greater self-control would likewise seem not to require any real literary performance.

Having identified this option of philosophy without literature, I want to consider it more critically. Even if philosophical self-examination and self-mastery are matters of introspective discipline, such introspection, I shall argue, requires careful literary formulation for its most successful pursuit. Further, philosophical self-examination and self-mastery require more than introspection. Finally, I maintain that these philosophical activities also require more than literary means, so that philosophy is both literature and “more” than literature.

The Literary Formulation of Introspection

We should begin by underlining the psychological dangers of such silent introspection, first by recalling that the dominant ancient meaning of the Delphic injunction to know thyself was in fact a critical warning for mortals to know their place and limitations by acknowledging their inferiority to the gods. The project of self-knowledge was thus, from the outset, bound up with self-criticism, just as self-care highlighted recognizing the flaws in oneself that required amelioration. We see that quite clearly in *Alcibiades*, where Socrates convinces the talented, proud, and ambitious young Athenian that he is in fact hopelessly unready to pursue his political ambitions because he is miserably deficient in self-knowledge and self-cultivation, hence requiring a friend like Socrates to put him on the right path through a combination of dialogical criticism and friendly encouragement.

The project of solitary absorption in one’s self and its inadequacies seems a recipe for depression and frustration. Even Montaigne, surely among the greatest advocates of solitary self-study, warned of its psychological dangers, since honest self-examination reveals

an object that fills us with discontent; we see nothing in us but misery and vanity. In order not to dishearten us, Nature has very appropriately thrown the action of our vision outward.⁷

Likewise, Kant, while insisting that “the First Command of all Duties to Oneself . . . is “*know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,*” warns that this involves a “descent into the hell of self-cognition,” even though such descent is necessary to “pave the way to godliness.”⁸ Nietzsche similarly cautions that introspective “digging into oneself, this straight, violent descent into the pit of one’s being, is a painful and dangerous undertaking.” Nietzsche thus gives preference to the creative, dynamic project of self-transformation, “to become what one is” by changing one’s current self – a project for which the merely introspective “*nosce te ipsum* [know yourself] would be the recipe for destruction.”⁹ Goethe goes even further by protesting this emphasis on solitary self-examination that brings “psychological torments” and unhealthily directs us “away

from the activities of the outer world to an inner false contemplation.” Instead, he argues, one can know oneself better by knowing one’s world, which includes knowing one’s place in it among other things and other persons. By comparing our views of life with others, we can gain a more objective and nuanced self-knowledge than we could through isolated introspection.¹⁰

We thus move beyond the charge that silent and solitary introspection is psychologically morbid to the critique of its own epistemological inadequacy. Several arguments can be brought to support the claim that effective self-knowledge requires some form of mindful literary practice and even, preferably, a form of writing. First, there is a need to objectify the self in some way in order to examine it. The examining subjectivity (or “I”) must be directed at some representation of the self (or “me”). Verbal descriptions and expressions of that self provide such representations. Without gainsaying the important presence of nameless feelings and non-verbal images that stream through consciousness, it is clear that our most precise, articulate, and examinable representations of the self are expressed in language, and thus formulated in terms of words and meanings that are public and shared.

Secondly, uttered or written formulation gives thought an exterior expression that enables the subject herself to experience it in a different way, allowing for more critical distance. What seems right in one’s interior thinking may ring false and inadequate once it is actually said or written down. If critical thinking rather than mere thinking is essential to philosophical self-examination, then literary expression is also essential. Moreover, as Horace proverbially put it in his *littera scripta manet* (the written word remains), literary inscriptions have a durability and accessibility that neither silent thought nor oral expression could provide (though recording technology has now supplied oral literature with powers of permanence and reproducibility similar to written texts). Such durability enables continued consultation and re-examination of self-analysis essential for measuring one’s progress in self-knowledge and self-cultivation. Though it may weaken the powers of spontaneous memory, the use of writing and other technologies of recording in fact extends our abilities to remember by providing enduring reminders.

Writing, with its graphic spatial features, can be particularly effective in sustained efforts at self-knowledge and self-improvement. Consider, for example, Benjamin Franklin’s autobiographical account of the little book of virtues he devised “for Self Examination” and for progress toward “moral perfection.” It was composed of an inventory of 13 virtues, vertically listed on each page, with the days of the week running horizontally and perpendicular to the top of the list, creating a grid of empty squares where he would “mark by a little black spot every Fault [he] found upon Examination to have been committed respecting that Virtue upon that Day.”¹¹ Such a method prevented him from deceiving himself about his progress, even if his desire to think well of himself would incline his memory to forget his faults. Those faults would be marked there in baleful black to remind him, displaying with graphic clarity, in the immediacy of a quick glance, precisely those virtues in which he had been the weakest and which required the greatest efforts to improve.

Franklin’s book, it might be objected, is more a matter of accounting charts than the conventional stuff of literature, even though his book also includes for each virtue

an aphoristic precept and a few hortatory literary fragments from famous authors. But books that are instead composed with a concern for fine literary style can also, by that very character, serve as enduring means for self-examination and its work of memory. When oral or written texts are well-wrought with engaging literary qualities, they are more likely to be cherished, consulted, preserved, remembered, and hence can provide better service to philosophical investigations. It is therefore not surprising that philosophers take considerable pains to express their self-examining thoughts in attractive literary form, even if they are inscribed initially in the form of notes made for one's private contemplation and use. Consider the wonderfully evocative aphorisms and literary fragments that Wittgenstein secretly recorded in his so called "coded notebooks," a collection of which have been posthumously decoded and published in *Culture and Value*.¹²

The effort to pursue one's self-examining inquiries in literary form has a fourth advantage. Vague feelings can be rendered more precise and discriminating through literary expression. The care that one takes in giving one's thoughts and feelings an adequate and attractive literary formulation can, moreover, prompt and guide one's mind to new insights. Language does not so much mirror thought as shape it. William James notes how the different names of wines help us discriminate their subtly different flavors far more clearly than we could without the use of such names, while T. S. Eliot argues that the poet's role of forging new language enables us to feel things that could not otherwise be felt, thus "making possible a greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed."¹³

So far, we have concentrated on how the process, discipline, and techniques of careful literary expression can improve the individual's efficacy in exercising solitary philosophical self-examination and self-care. But we must not forget that an undeniably major merit of expressing one's efforts of self-examination in well-crafted literary formulation concerns the ways that such literary expression reaches out to other people who can then encourage, advise, comfort, and otherwise support the individual in her quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement.

As already noted, an honest critical examination of the self is likely to be a painful process that brings up disturbing personal flaws, ills, feelings of guilt, and fears – problems that one's consciousness may not have merely overlooked but even suppressed for the individual's own mental health and stability. In such circumstances it is extremely valuable to have a caring friend or interlocutor with whom one can share one's self-revelations and whose continuing friendship affirms that one's self, despite all the faults uncovered, is still worthy of friendship and respect, not least in part because of one's disciplined efforts at self-examination and self-improvement. This need for a dialogical friend in the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-improvement is already clear in Plato's *Alcibiades*, where Socrates not only uses his external perspective to show his interlocutor's lack of self-knowledge and need for self-cultivation, but also repeatedly frames his exhortation to undertake this pursuit by underlining his enduring love for Alcibiades and assuring him of his faithful, affectionate support in this self-ameliorative struggle: "[S]omeone who loves your soul, will not leave you as long as you're making progress" (*Alcibiades* 131d). And the dialogue closes with the hope that Socrates' own pursuit of self-cultivation "will be cared for in return" by his beloved young friend

(*Alcibiades* 135e). It should be obvious, moreover, that when such self-revealing dialogical exchange between friends is expressed in an attractive literary form, the rewarding pleasures of literary style add zest to the communication and can even deepen the bonds of friendly affection and mutual appreciation.

Moreover, because one is revealing oneself to someone whose love and loyalty is trusted and respected, there is a powerful incentive, both emotional and moral, to do one's best to be as honest, clear, insightful, and articulate as possible in expressing oneself. Among the many interdependent complementarities of self and other, one's sense of responsibility to an intimate other can drive the self to be more responsibly frank and diligently rigorous in self-examination than when one is left to one's own devices. And when there is no fear that one might have to face an embarrassed, bored, or disappointed look from one's interlocutor at the very moment of one's self-expression (say, because that interlocutor is not physically present but is being addressed in a letter), then self-exposure can be freer still. In today's very different world, intimately detailed self-revelations are exchanged over email that might never have been expressed if the interlocutors were confined to real-time and face-to-face communication (despite the ever-present risk of interception).

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Socratic idea of self-examination and self-transformation through open yet mindfully focused and stylistically attractive communication with friends soon evolved in antiquity from the form of oral dialogue to the genre of letters. Written expression has distinct advantages. It allows one to take more time to compose one's thought in a more careful, critical, and attractive form without making one's interlocutor wait in silence during the time needed for formulating one's views. This extra time enables one to probe deeper in introspective analysis, providing more detail and nuance of one's mood and following a line of inquiry at greater length than one could do in oral communication with a friend. The written technology of "introspection" can thus be seen as changing the very practice and experience of philosophical self-examination. As Foucault argues, citing, for example, the loving correspondence between the young emperor-to-be Marcus Aurelius and his rhetoric teacher Fronto (a relationship rather parallel to that of Alcibiades and Socrates), "A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing."¹⁴

Besides, because writing is recorded and hence preserved beyond its immediate context of production, one's soul-searching message can be composed at one's leisure and in tranquil privacy, yet nonetheless be faithfully communicated without the need for one's interlocutor to be physically present. Indeed, through copying and forwarding, the message can reach more than one friend. Moreover, the written form allows the receiver of the message to examine it at his convenience and pace and even re-examine it repeatedly so as to insure a better understanding and thus provide better critical feedback to the philosophical friend who composed it. One prominent example of this genre of philosophical writing is Seneca's famous *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* (a collection of 124 letters dealing with ethical issues and written to his friend Lucilius).¹⁵ Because words do not simply clothe thoughts but rather shape them, it

follows that greater literary skill in formulating the letters should also enhance the revelatory insights of the self-analysis. And such improvement in the style and insights of the letters encourages repeated perusal by their readers and thus inspires more attentive and perceptive feedback from them. The powers of the epistolary form, with its sense of direct, personal communication, are such that it has even been deployed as a fictional device for philosophical composition, in which we find the putative philosophical correspondence between two friends who are but the creations of a different philosophical author (for example, the Julius and Raphael of Schiller's *Philosophical Letters*).

Given the proven powers of friendship-grounded epistolary self-examination and self-cultivation in philosophy's ancient pursuit of the art of living, it is not surprising that Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, though not formally composed as letters, is rhetorically directed not to the general public of readers but directly to God as a dialogical partner. God is here addressed as an intimate, loving, caring, attentive (though infinitely superior) friend with whom one could share one's deepest secrets, struggles, and hopes for self-knowledge, self-improvement, and salvation, and who provides the sturdiest support for this pursuit of the good while also being the ultimate judge of its success. In this path-breaking philosophical and literary work of art, which innovatively combines the verbal music of the Latin rhetorical tradition with the sweet sacred language of Christian prayer, "The pronoun *tu* – "Thou," "You" – occurs in 381 out of the [book's] 453 paragraphs."¹⁶

If the psychological advantages of externalizing one's self-analysis in literary form are now evident, the epistemological advantages should be no less so. Solitary introspection for self-analysis and self-care faces the unavoidable problem that one's view of oneself is always partial, in both senses of "biased" and "incomplete." One cannot even view the surface of one's body without the help of a mirror or other reflecting device. The depths of one's soul, the complex layers, quirks, and weaknesses of one's personality, are hardly transparent to one's own consciousness, either because they are implicitly repressed or because, as part of one's second nature, they are so close that they escape attention. Even if one subjects oneself to the strictest scrutiny that one's own critical perception and reason can muster, one's purely self-directed self-analysis always remains within the limits of one's own subjective capacities. Subject-centered reason must therefore yield to the greater power of communicative rationality, even within the quest for self-knowledge.

Goethe, we may recall, in sharply criticizing the traditional ideal of introspective self-examination, insisted that a healthier and more reliable self-knowledge can be gleaned not only by looking outward to the world to teach us about ourselves and our place in it, but also, and especially, by learning about ourselves through the testimony of others.

Most effective are our neighbors, who have the advantage, from their standpoint, of comparing us to the world, and therefore of achieving a better knowledge of us than we ourselves could acquire. In my riper years, I have given great attention to how others have been inclined to know me, by which, as if through so many mirrors, myself and my inner being could become clearer.¹⁷

While adversaries' views of him could not be taken to heart because of their essential negative bias, Goethe claims that he "readily and without limit depends for guidance" on those views of himself held "by his friends and always regards them with pure trust as truly edifying."¹⁸ Contemporary experimental studies in psychology confirm that one's well-intentioned teachers and sympathetic colleagues provide a surer sense of one's abilities than can be discerned by one's own self-reflection. Students, asked to evaluate themselves honestly, consistently overvalue their abilities and even actual performance, while their teachers and peers give more accurate judgments of them. Moreover, feedback from peers (as from teachers) tends to improve both the self-knowledge and the performance of students.¹⁹

What an individual can learn from others about one's self is not, however, confined to others' expressed opinions about that self or their reactions to one's own formulations of self-analysis. It just as importantly includes the others' articulated views on a whole range of topics that concern the wider world. Because a great many of the self's beliefs are so implicit that it takes contrast to bring them to full consciousness, by discovering what others think about things, and especially how their views and interests differ from one's own, an individual can come to distinguish more clearly and know more deeply her own opinions and values. This encounter with different views has always been one of the highly touted benefits that literature offers for philosophical and personal insight. Thinkers as different as T. S. Eliot and T. W. Adorno have insisted that when we read a literary work of art we must, in order simply to grasp its meanings and achieve the aesthetic experience it offers, immerse ourselves empathetically into its world and the beliefs that structure it, though one should thereafter proceed to a second stage where those views are subjected to critical questioning from other viewpoints, including one's own perspective.²⁰ Yet one's own perspective can be transformed by a powerful author: "[Y]ou have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself," Eliot claimed, but "the self recovered is never the same as the self before it was given."²¹ Wide reading is especially valuable, Eliot argues, because it prevents an overwhelming of the self, "an invasion of the underdeveloped personality . . . by the stronger personality of the poet." In caring for the self, the need to read widely in literature is not so much for accumulation of informational knowledge; rather, it is

because in the process of being affected by one powerful personality after another, we cease to be dominated by any one, or by any small number. The very different views of life, co-habiting in our minds, affect each other, and our own personality asserts itself and gives each a place in some arrangement peculiar to ourself.²²

Public Self-Transformation

Eliot's remarks on reading display the general tendency to blend the projects of self-knowledge and self-cultivation, whose connection is highlighted in Plato's *Alcibiades* and elsewhere in antiquity. The Greek term for this second project, *epimelia*, implies the notions of caring for or carefully attending to something, of showing concern for

something, of taking charge, managing, or governing something. Because the originally dominant meaning of the Delphic command to “know thyself” was to humbly note one’s human and personal limitations so as not, through *hubris*, to risk punishment from the gods and the powerful, the relationship of self-knowledge to self-care was initially clear and unproblematic. However, when self-knowledge is construed more in terms of rigorously analyzing one’s self and inner character, then there is the possibility of a serious tension between self-examination and self-care, because too much ruminative self-analysis can be detrimental to psychological health.

This worry is what drives Nietzsche and Goethe to prefer creative self-transformation through one’s activities in the world to an introverted preoccupation with one’s private consciousness. If William James and John Dewey also express this worry in different ways, Michel Foucault (explicitly building on Nietzsche) is more forthright in urging that self-care is more important than self-knowledge, and that philosophical literature (even with respect to the self) should be more focused on transforming the self, on escaping (rather than dwelling on) the limits of its present state. If “the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning,” then literary writing provides an excellent way both to transform oneself and to hide one’s self behind a faceless labyrinth of words. “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face,” claims Foucault. “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.”²³ By creating a textual persona to conceal and thus protect the self-examining self from physical exposure to the public, an exposure that could be much too inhibiting and risky, one can provide greater freedom for imaginative experiments to question one’s self and the social conventions that define it, to challenge one’s own limits (and society’s) in a more adventurous quest for self-transformation.

But for all its values of concealing the individual behind the veils of textual constructions and even fictional pseudonyms, literary form is also a crucial device for bringing oneself into the public and thus transforming oneself productively precisely through the public exposure that literary composition brings to the subject herself and that rescues her from the privacy of her thoughts, feelings, and imaginative efforts of self-knowledge and self-care. I use the feminine pronoun here pointedly, because two of the twentieth century’s most important female philosophers (Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir) have insisted on the value of literature for the project of woman’s emancipatory self-realization by liberating that project of self-recognition from the oppressively stifling confinement of self-examining introspection, of private, ephemeral interiority.

Arendt, for example, in her book on Rahel Varnhagen (*née* Levin, a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Jewish salon intellectual), stresses the importance of Rahel’s chosen literary practice of letter writing as necessary for her quest of self-realization by insuring that her rich inner life found external expression in a literary form that made it no longer ephemeral and private. In the same way, Rahel’s reading of literature (especially Goethe) gave her the tools not only to experience life more subtly but also to capture and convey that experience in precise and preserving language: “The function of language is preservation,” writes Arendt, and what literature embodies can “remain longer than is possible for ephemeral human beings.” Through her absorption in literature’s “absolute precision in the use of words,” “Rahel acquired to the point

of mastery the art of representing her own life" to others and thus emerging more confidently beyond her inner world into the real "intricacies of social life." "She had learned that the pure subjectivity which makes a point of 'bearing a world within itself' is doomed because this inner world" rests too narrowly on the mere contingency of the individual's experience without sufficient support by broader social existence and recognition.²⁴ Through literary writing, even in the form of letters which she circulated among her friends, social recognition of one's distinctive personhood could be achieved, and through such recognitional processes the self could be transformed.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir continuously cautions against the special dangers that introspective self-examination poses for women. Distanced from the life of public action and essentially confined to the private domains of caring for home, husband, and children, women are already overly inclined to "being occupied with [themselves]" in the realm of contemplative interiority. Relegated to the essential role of ornament, whose value depends on its always presenting a charming appearance, the female sex is already too absorbed in critical self-analysis of what she is and how she looks to achieve a radical transformation of her condition in the world. "She still regards her life as an immanent enterprise," measured by "subjective success." Rather than self-analysis, "what woman essentially lacks today for doing great things is forgetfulness of herself," an escape from critical subjective immanence that enables the transcendence of projecting oneself boldly and forcefully into the world of action.²⁵

Given the societal conventions that have constrained the possibilities of women to make a public mark in the world, writing presents an extremely important mode of transcendence and public recognition. Beauvoir always proudly defined herself as a writer rather than a philosopher, and it is clear from her extensive autobiographical writings that she regarded writing as an indispensable tool for converting self-analysis into active transcendence in the public sphere. "This was the meaning behind my vocation," she writes in examining her early years, "I would take my childhood in hand again and make of it a faultless work of art. I saw myself as the basis of my own apotheosis."²⁶ To transcribe one's life, feelings, and thoughts in a literary form can thus transform the self not only by taking it beyond its interior experience so that it can play a more public role, but by reshaping the self into a more coherent and effective narrative that supports further activity of transformational transcendence.

Another way that writing the self can help care for and transform the self is by enlisting others to encourage and assist us in that pursuit. Instead of struggling alone with its efforts at self-reform, the self can acquire, by expressing that struggle in a literary form attractive to others, an extensive support group to cheer it on but also to admonish it when it strays or lapses. An interesting contemporary example of this can be found in the increasingly popular genre of blogs devoted to debt. In these blogs (with such names as "bloggingawaydebt.com," "wereindebt.com," and "makelovenotdebt.com"), the individual bloggers (who typically remain anonymous) try to get a handle on their struggle with debt and irresponsible credit card spending by reaching out to a wide, anonymous internet audience with whom to share their struggle, revealing to an extensive public intimate financial details and personal feelings that they dare not share with their family and close friends. In order to connect to these unknown people through

the internet, the bloggers claim to rely on their “good communication skills.” And without sufficient literary skills to recount, with poignancy and humor, their struggles with debt and spending, how could they succeed in engaging this initially unknown audience? The bloggers also claim that feedback from their internet public has helped their self-discipline, not only through the “supportive” comments but through “the fear of censure” for their failures.²⁷

Philosophy as More than Literature

Having thus far urged the need for literature in pursuit of the philosophical tasks of self-examination and self-care, I wish to conclude by briefly arguing that philosophy in this sense must also be “more” than literature. Discourse, no matter how powerful and exquisite, is not enough. To know oneself requires knowing one’s deeds as well as one’s words, just as judgments of others are more reliable if based also on their actions beyond the speech acts they perform in utterance or writing. Formulations of one’s philosophical ethos must be tested in trials of experience, especially since philosophical views can often be a contrasting compensation for one’s own life rather than a faithful expression of one’s experience or character.²⁸ To explore the value of philosophical views by examining the quality of life of the person expounding them can be seen as a form of *argumentum ad hominem*, which is today considered a glaring logical fallacy and is surely irrelevant to philosophy’s more formal, abstract issues. But in earlier times, it was common to test a philosopher’s views by his manner of life, often with special emphasis on his way of facing death. As Montaigne praises Socrates, Cleanthes, and Seneca for how they managed, and ended, their lives, so he condemns Cicero for the wretched, cowardly way he met his death. In fact, Socrates, who produced no writings and whose words we only know through their interpretation by others, gave philosophy its inspirational power largely by his heroic model of living and dying in the courageous pursuit of wisdom rather than by any specific doctrine or literary masterpiece that he left us. Similarly, when Plato uses his persona in the *Phaedo* to argue for the immortality of the soul, the Socratic example of actually meeting death with cheerful welcome rather than cowering fear gives a more powerful aura of credibility to the discursive arguments Plato offers. Other ancient philosophers (either inspired by Socrates’ example or preceding it) also insisted on embodying their philosophies not merely in discourse but in forms of concrete embodied practice, including distinctive somatic disciplines that were alleged to contribute to philosophical insight, virtue, and happiness. Though philosophy in modern times has largely neglected such forms of embodied practice to confine itself to literary or conceptual expression, there are some very important philosophers who do insist on the somatic dimension of their enterprise.²⁹

Thus far, I have dealt only with philosophy and literature in the Western context. Let me conclude by reminding readers that philosophy and literature are also intimately intertwined in the Asian philosophical traditions, which have not suffered from Plato’s foundationally formative attack on mimetic literature as essentially deceptive and

morally destructive. Yet Asian traditions also emphasize with particular force that the philosophical quest for self-knowledge and self-improvement cannot be a mere matter of words alone. The *Bhagavad Gita* (or “Song of God”), a poem that forms part of the *The Mahabharata* (one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India), is a key text for yogic and vedantic doctrines, and thus is often described as a basic guide to Hindu philosophy. But, when it comes to the yogic practice of philosophy – whether we are dealing with yoga of action, yoga of devotion, or yoga of meditation (all delineated in the *Gita*), we obviously cannot limit philosophical practice to the realm of mere words.

The same twofold message of philosophy as literature and more than literature is evident in the Confucian tradition. On the one hand, Confucius insists on the importance of poetry, repeatedly affirming the value of the *Shih Ching* or *Book of Songs* for guiding one’s thought and efforts at self-cultivation. “My young friends, why don’t you study the *Songs*? Reciting the *Songs* can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills.”³⁰ On the other hand, Confucius repeatedly insists that fine words are not enough, that they require fine action to make them convincing, and that without such action words in themselves are suspicious. “What can possibly be done with people who find pleasure in polite language but do not draw out its meaning, or who comply with model sayings but do not reform their ways.” “Exemplary persons would feel shame if their words were better than their deeds” (9:24; 14:27). Moreover, right action for Confucianism is not merely performing the proper act but also requires performing it with the “proper countenance” or “demeanor” that expresses the proper attitude (2:8; 8:4). Similarly, the Confucian tradition emphasizes that some of the most persuasive lessons in the philosophical art of self-cultivation can be conveyed without words, through the wordless, radiating power of the bodily bearing and gracious action of the teacher, who instructs by the exemplarity of his being and behavior, in ways that both interpret and complement the words of his teaching. As Mencius says of Confucius, “His every limb bears wordless testimony.”³¹

The view that philosophy is both literature and more than literature poses a double challenge for students and teachers of philosophy. It is not enough to compose our texts and refine them with logical and literary skill – we must also take real pains, in practicing philosophy, to give careful composition to our character, behavior, and bearing, and to refine them through harmonizing grace and attractive style that is artfully appealing though not artificial or insincere.

Notes

- 1 See Epictetus, *The Handbook*, trans. Nicolas White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 28; Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 1969), 160, 171, 207; Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 124 (quoting Cicero), 850–51; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), vol.1, 17; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Viking, 1969), 270.

- 2 See Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 3 Self-knowledge, of course, also forms an essential part of larger philosophical projects, as, for example, when Descartes makes the self-knowledge of the knowing subject a crucial first step in his general theory of knowledge.
- 4 Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 510. The Stephanus page reference is 230a. I will henceforth quote from this Hackett edition but give the standard Stephanus page references.
- 5 See *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 476–7.
- 6 Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), paragraph 122.
- 7 *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, 766.
- 8 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191.
- 9 Friedrich Nietzsche, I translate from the authoritative 15-volume critical scholarly collection of Nietzsche's work, edited by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999). See "Schopenhauer als Erzieher" (§1), vol. 1, 340; "Über Wahrheit und Luege im aussermoralischen Sinne," vol. 1, 877; *Ecce Homo*, vol 6, 293.
- 10 I translate from J. W. von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, in Erich Trunz, ed., *Goethes Werke* (Christian Wegner Verlag: Hamburg, 1966), vol. 12, 413; and *Zur Naturwissenschaft im Allgemeinen*, in Trunz, *Goethes Werke*, vol. 13, 38.
- 11 Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1986), 90–100.
- 12 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
- 13 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 483. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber, 1978), 134.
- 14 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, ed. L. H. Hutton, H. Gutman, and P. H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 28.
- 15 Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 1969).
- 16 See Peter Brown, "Introduction," in Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), xiii, who notes that *Confessions* would have struck its first readers as "a literary work" that was "almost without parallel," "creating a new sacred rhetoric" (xi, xii).
- 17 J. W. von Goethe, *Zur Naturwissenschaft im Allgemeinen*, 38.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 David Dunning, *Self-Insight: Roadblocks and Detours on the Path to Knowing Thyself* (London: Psychology Press, 2005).
- 20 On the one hand, claims Adorno, "one must enter into the work" and "give oneself over to the work"; but on the other hand, "Those who have only an inside view of art do not understand it." See T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984), 346, 387, 479. Eliot similarly describes "two attitudes both of which are necessary and right to adopt in considering the work of any poet." First is to "try to understand the rules of his own game, adopt his own point of view" but secondly we must go beyond the poet's world, rules, and viewpoint so as to "measure him by outside standards." See T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber, 1957), 145. For more on the two-stage theory of reading shared by Eliot and Adorno, see Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), chapter 8.

- 21 Quoted from a letter to Stephen Spender that Spender cites in his “Remembering Eliot,” in Alan Tate, ed., *T. S. Eliot: The Man and his Work* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1966), 55–6.
- 22 T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber, 1936), 103–4.
- 23 Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 9; *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 17.
- 24 Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 170–73.
- 25 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 623, 626, 702.
- 26 Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (New York: Harper, 1959), 57.
- 27 See John Leland, “Debtors Search For Discipline Through Blogs,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2007, 1, 23.
- 28 For more on this point, see the “Introduction” in Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*.
- 29 Michel Foucault, John Dewey, and William James are three examples. See my discussions of them in *Practicing Philosophy* and in *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 30 See *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine, 2002), book 16, §13. Future references to the *Analects* similarly use the standard form of book and section number, and employ the Ames and Rosemont translation. The *Songs* are an anthology of 305 poems compiled about 600 BCE from a selection of already existing poems some of which date back several hundred years earlier. According to one tradition, Confucius personally selected these works from an earlier collection of over 3000 poems, choosing and arranging them to exemplify his ideas about government and harmonious personal relations.
- 31 *Mencius: A New Translation*, trans. W. A. C. H. Dobson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 181.