Henry James Among the Philosophers

By Jenny Teichman

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LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE
Essays on Philosophy and Literature.
By Martha C. Nussbaum.
248 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. $42.95.

By Jenny Teichman

The Best of Rhymes

THE POETS OF TIN PAN ALLEY
A History of America's Great Lyricists.
By Philip Furia.
310 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. $32.95.

By John Rockwell

BOOKMARK

This week, America's continuing and misbegotten infatuation with progress. With author Christopher Lasch and host Lewis Lapham, editor of Harper's Magazine.

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LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE Essays on Philosophy and Literature. By Martha C. Nussbaum. 403 pp. New York: Oxford University Press.

In "Love's Knowledge," Martha C. Nussbaum's main thesis is that there is no sharp distinction between literary criticism and philosophy. The book consists of a long introduction and 14 essays, 12 of which have been published elsewhere. There are two chapters about philosophers -- Aristotle on ethics, Plato on desire -- and another on the Nietzschean conception of transcending humanity. A fourth asks a philosophical question about love: should a true lover love her beloved because he is unique or because he is virtuous?

Apart from these chapters and a review-essay, the book is mainly about works of fiction. Several chapters are devoted to interpreting the behavior of some characters in the novels of Henry James. Another chapter describes a story by Ann Beattie. There are also essays on Proust, Dickens and Samuel Beckett.

Ms. Nussbaum, a professor of philosophy and classics at Brown University, criticizes academic philosophers for not writing about literature-and-philosophy. I create this hyphenated word to distinguish her concerns from esthetics. She is not saying that philosophers ignore esthetics, for esthetic theory is still an element in traditional philosophy courses. Rather, she means philosophers do not write directly about novels. And she maintains they have also failed to write about erotic and romantic love.

She attributes these failings partly to the boundaries drawn by universities between disciplines and partly to what she sees as a literary style adopted by British and American philosophers that is "correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid" and hence unsuitable for writing about novels and love.

It seems to me that, although content can influence style, the major determinants of it are education and personality. Next, it would not follow, and it is anyway untrue, that literary style influences choice of content. Third, there is no such thing as a special British and American philosophical style. There are nearly as many styles as philosophers. Thus Philippa Foot is careful, Mary Midgley intense, Elizabeth Anscombe difficult and involved; Arthur Prior is terse, J. J. C. Smart is elegant; Edmund Gettier is lucid, W. V. O. Quine is self-conscious and Saul Kripke is conversational; Robert Nozick is rhetorical and interrogative, David Lewis is boyish and Peter Geach is deliberately outrageous. Of course I am using ellipsis and speaking of styles, not people.

There may be bad reasons why philosophers stay away from certain topics. Philosophy is rather a macho subject, and macho types perhaps feel that love and literature are just sissy. They might also hold the view, be it true or false, that much of what is actually published on literature-and-philosophy is blah. Yet there is an honorable reason for avoiding the study of literature-and-philosophy: it looks to be philosophically unfruitful.

Ms. Nussbaum says novels teach us important moral lessons. Insofar as that is a philosophical saying, it does not take long to say. On the other hand, describing just how a novel makes its moral points is much like describing the skill of a skier: it isn't doing philosophy, and it can't be turned into philosophy however much jargon you throw into the mix. Ms. Nussbaum also says novels deal with particularities rather than with universal laws. But she does not consider the relation between particularities and universal laws in a more general manner, for that would take her away from literature-and-philosophy back into philosophy proper.

I find this book peculiar in several ways. For instance, although the essay topics are not unalike, they are knitted together with hundreds of superfluous cross-references, some in footnotes, some in the text. As well as an infestation of footnotes, there is an infestation of name-dropping. Almost every page is disturbed by the plop-plop-plopping of names -- "Leibniz," "Kant," "Heraclitus," "Derrida," "Empedocles." And Ms. Nussbaum seems unable to say anything, however simple, without adding an extended explanation of her meaning. Then she explains the explanation. In short, she is a compulsive scribbler, a fact she herself discusses, not too briefly. Now, the essence of compulsive activity is repetition, and the substitution of repetition for thought. This peculiarity is not just a quirk, it is an intellectual handicap.

Resorting to parable, I would say these essays are like a false pregnancy. In a typical first trimester the author explains how she

came to write the essay: what the weather was like and where she had lunch and what the furniture mover had to say about it all. In the second she forecasts what she is about to say on the next page but intimates that it might not, after all, be more than a sketch -- it is a work in progress and you must please see the next book, and also all the earlier ones. The third consists of a long review of the first two. By now everything has got very big and fat, but there is no actual baby.

In my opinion, this book is mainly snake oil.