

## Introduction to Suffering, Endurance, Understanding: New Discourses Within Philosophy and Literature

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**Volume 21 Issue 5 (September 2019) Article 1**

**Douglas Berman,**

**"Introduction to Suffering, Endurance, Understanding: New Discourses Within Philosophy and Literature"**

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.5 (2019)**

Special Issue ***Suffering, Endurance, Understanding***. Ed. Simon Estok, Douglas Berman, and Frank Stevenson

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** Literature is generally seen as depicting the lives of human subjects through their unique narratives. And that, while its endpoint may be universal, it is typically grounded in the specificity of a human being (or, occasionally, an animal). Philosophy is tasked with providing the foundational cognitive tools to grasp the meaning of experience for the whole. In Hegelian terms, it unfolds the history of the concept. Yet, as George Steiner, Jacques Derrida, and other recent authors have shown, both philosophy – along with its agonistic cousin, religion -- evoke literary themes, rhetorics, and struggles. Over the past fifty years, Continental philosophy has found a home for literature within philosophic discourse (and vice-versa). That is the backdrop for this special issue. The topic is suffering, as a concept and an experience. The theme of suffering is broad enough to accommodate many different approaches and texts. And that is hopefully borne out by the multiplicity of themes and topics the authors have chosen to discuss.

## Douglas BERMAN

### Introduction to Suffering, Endurance, Understanding: New Discourses in Philosophy and Literature"

The theme of this special issue is one universal to all creatures – suffering. In Latin, *sufferere* means literally, "to bear up" under, to endure, tolerate. This suggests suffering is primarily a mental or existential condition as opposed to, say, physical pain, which may be of momentary duration and yielding to medicinal palliation. There may be heuristic and philosophical reasons to separate pain from suffering, at least when dealing in categorization. *Jules et Jim* captures this rift when the lead character cries: "God spare me physical pain! I can cope with moral suffering" (Truffaut). Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* argues that representations of physical pain in literature are surprisingly rare compared to numerous depictions of "psychological suffering [which] have referential content" (11). Scarry argues it is impossible to understand another's pain, but she also suggests that suffering does have its own vocabulary and language. Richard Rorty takes up this point in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* through the subject of torture. Besides enacting damage to the corporeal body, torture renders impotent any attempt to reconstitute the self and thereby make oneself whole within language. While Scarry's view that artistic creativity can be realized through suffering is controversial, the idea that suffering can shape a human life through language has found a home in trauma studies. Other works that come to mind that try to theorize suffering within ethical inquiry are Judith Butler's, *Precarious Life, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Co-Habitation* – which asks whether we (humans) are ethically required to respond to suffering that appears far away from us – and, in a different register, the work of Peter Singer, which adopts a utilitarian perspective.

Religion and, to some extent, philosophy seek meaning within suffering and may even find compensatory virtue – the obvious example being the suffering of Christ on the cross. There are secular versions of this as well, as exemplified by Michael Brady's recent work *Suffering and Virtue* (2018). Brady suggests that suffering is unavoidable and therefore he wants to demonstrate its "use," either as a "test of faith" or virtue (Brady 159). Or as a form of atonement (153). According to Brady, "we are creatures that strive and seek to accomplish things of value, and to do so successfully we need to face and overcome difficulty, adversity, setbacks, hardships" (89).<sup>1</sup>

Other writers see suffering as (im)posing the impossibility of redemption. Mark Taylor, in an elegant – and elegiacal – passage, demonstrates Maurice Blanchot's dedication to thinking the latter:

Death and dying expose the radical passivity of all finite human beings. To live is to suffer dying; the most profound suffering is undergone not only in terms of distress, illness, or when the end of life draws near, but occurs in every passing moment, in every fleeting instant of life. For Blanchot this suffering is not redemptive... Life is always after death because there is no after life (80).

Given the many ways exist to think, feel, to make *sense* of suffering, it may be profoundly quixotic – and even misguided – to expect a single issue, even one primarily focused on literature, to say anything profound, let alone new, about a topic so universally acknowledged and fretted over. Our hope was to give contributors free rein to define suffering any way they wished with one condition: the essays had to speak to, and within, the interlinked discourses of literature and philosophy (or literary theory). Put somewhat broadly, the goal was to solicit articles that make the reader think and feel, ideally in ways that define easy categorization, and without subsuming one form of discourse into the other (philosophy collapsing into literature or vice-versa)

Literature has the benefit of being directly connected to people lives and offers a ready – if not always immediately accessible – portal into the theme of suffering. Like religion, literature, as a catharsis-enabling vehicle able to soothe pain and provide lessons in empathy, which is one of its trustworthy attractions. This means readers must interrogate the value of all depictions of suffering itself. At times, aesthetic depictions of suffering – and here I am thinking too of more visceral portrayals in photography and film – can cause us to question the pleasure – or at least fascination – we take in such images. Literature (and art) ask us to participate (take part in) the work; we are never passive observers. Apropos of photography, Susan Sontag and John Berger have exquisitely delved into this in two pieces: *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Sontag) and "Photographs of Agony," both discussing the ways that

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<sup>1</sup> As a juxtaposition to this reading, the reader might refer to Scott Samuelson's *7 Ways of Looking at Pointless Suffering*, which could be seen as a corrective to this approach.

photos of anguish and pain can either activate or, in Berger's view, desensitize us to suffering, in the latter example, victims of the war in Vietnam.

Conversely, aesthetic representation, in its "virtuous" aspect, has exemplary powers to activate positive emotions, to provoke compassion, fellow-feeling, and – dare I say it? – *pathos*, even where it may be partly clouded by ambivalence. Katie Wetzel's essay in this volume on Charles Dickens shows how affectionate portrayals of trauma within the family can heighten – and perpetuate -- national ideology. But Dickens' affective power to reveal human suffering – in the different forms it can take as injustice, insult, and privation -- through the lives of Little Nell, *Oliver Twist*, Pip, and others is unmatched. These renderings are different from, but still connected to someone like, to choose another example, Robert Bresson, the great poet and filmmaker of suffering. Anyone who has watched his films knows that suffering is the life, breath, and blood of Bresson, overtly and covertly depicted in every frame. If we could select just one image from this sparse, but overfilled, corpus, the scene in *Au Hasard Balthazar* of Balthazar the donkey laboring in her paces and ultimately collapsing may be the most poignant.

For Bresson, the donkey Balthazar is a sacrificial victim, and here the question arises of how suffering links up with a larger intended meaning or framework. One cannot watch Bresson, and also Pasolini, without questioning the role of Catholicism in their oeuvres. The aesthetic encounter with their work deepens and tragically complicates any version of the church as dogma or simple devotion.

Such routine – but never routine -- encounters with peasants, domestic animals, and children may lead us to question our humanistic vision of the world. This fundamental doubt over the value of ideas and values is expressed in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum speaks of "a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity and gives a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations" (ix). As readers, we are confronted not with an abstract question to resolve. We are thrust into unique narrative worlds where suffering is part of the texture of lived experience. Nussbaum encourages us to stop compartmentalizing the cognitive and the emotional domains. These are far more intertwined than we may imagine, particularly in regards to what we mean by the simple verb, to know: "one sees here, again, the difficulty of characterizing the debate between the literary works and standard philosophy in any way that will yield a shared account of the goal. Yet I think we may have the sense that there is a genuine debate here, the sense that self-knowledge, even if vaguely specified, is a goal with real content and real importance, capable of organizing further inquiry" (285). This kind of knowledge does not start with abstract ideas but with a complex set of facts and moves outward.

As I type these words, my thoughts turn to a recent review by Colin Burrow in the *London Review of Books* on the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. The genius and also perplexity of Wordsworth's greatest poetry stems from efforts to weld an expansive philosophic vision – one encouraged steadfastly by his friend Samuel Coleridge – onto poems that reflected human and natural life. And yet as Burrow reminds us, Wordsworth was a poet principally of feeling: "a poet [e.g. Wordsworth] points your towards this thing it's possible to feel or to have felt, and you can follow if you're prepared to accept that it's real even though you can't see it" (Burrow 14). Roe's argument is that as Wordsworth matured, he began to move away from earlier forms of abstract justification towards a more existential and sympathetic encounter with nature and human beings. In short, "Wordsworth moved away from the direct poetry of protest ... towards what Roe terms the *poetry of suffering*" (15, my emphasis).

This does not displace philosophy entirely – and Wordsworth's efforts to attain a "philosophic poem" would drive much of his later efforts to shape *The Excursion* – but the leech gatherer, displaced soldier, disposed widow, and other characters who populate the *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Ruined Cottage* – simply exist. The observer observing the scene (whoever he is) is often forced to suspend any moral and critical judgment in favor of sheer wonderment that is arguably pre-philosophical. To read Wordsworth is both familiar and unsettling: the voice of a consciousness processing reality.<sup>2</sup> But it is not to deny philosophy altogether. If anything, that embedded dialogue between Coleridge and Wordsworth is what constitutes Wordsworth's poetry and renders value.<sup>3</sup>

As ambivalent inheritors of the Enlightenment and Kant, the Romantics sought a new order in mythology (Blake), pantheism (Shelley), and belief in the primacy of feeling (Wordsworth). The common

<sup>2</sup> In an earlier study, I have tried to show how philosophy might be useful in interpreting Wordsworth's shaping of the earlier poetry, focusing on ideas of (non)closure. See Berman, "Reading Wordsworth with Hegel and Deleuze."

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Hartman's book of essays, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, attempts to show this dialogue in different ways. As he writes, "The contrast of Coleridge and Wordsworth is not meant to devalue the former but to disclose a missed connection between philosophy and poetry... The question is... can we take poetry as seriously as Coleridge took Wordsworth" (xxix).

view that British Romantics privileged the supremacy of feeling over cold reason is not without truth. But feeling was itself an object of study within philosophy, most importantly in the works of Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. In the 18th-century Adam Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, based his entire theoretical edifice on the role feelings play in creating virtue through empathy for others. And he tried to show, using conceptual terminology, how feelings arise, even within theatrical spectacles, or dramas, where we know the action on stage is fictitious. The development of *sympathy* as a concept, and efforts to describe how it operates in the body and is shared by others, is directly correspondent to any theory of suffering, particularly any that would deal with literary and artistic representation.<sup>4</sup>

If we moderns have become today less trustful of art and philosophy to disclose suffering, it is not because we lack examples. If anything, we have too many. We are inundated with imagery, news, and stories that cry out for our attention. And, in turn, this outpouring may cause us to doubt the efficacy of the intellect or the mind to make sense of it. Alternatively, we may be led to evaluate every encounter by how easily it translates into political action, next to which "mere" art and critical aesthetic appraisal can appear indulgent or irresponsible (this problematic is discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4 of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*). As critics – who stand betwixt and between the world of the artist and the world of the thinker – how do we mediate between this locus of feeling and thought?

### **Brief Note on Philosophy / Literature**

It seems incumbent on me to say something about the last part of the theme title: "new discourses within philosophy and literature." Efforts within literary studies to mediate philosophy and literature seem rarer these days. Perhaps this is due to the success of literary theory itself. If everything has become a text, then do we need to continually rethink the divide? if we are living in a diminished time for the humanities – when, specifically, philosophy lacks salience – then continuing to interrogate its connection to other disciplines may appear to outsider observers like trying to rearrange the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic."<sup>5</sup>

In 1987, when that success was slightly less assured, Arthur Danto wrote that "Philosophy seems so singular a crossbreed of art and science that it is somewhat surprising that only lately has it seemed imperative to some that philosophy be viewed as literature: surprising and somewhat alarming" (Danto 3). Danto was hardly trying to collapse both domains or, conversely, articulate clear borders, but to invite readers to reexamine both the tendencies of analytical philosophy to bracket the literary to privilege its own domain; and, second, by remapping the outer boundaries of both, reclaim literature as a vehicle of expression within philosophical discourse.<sup>6</sup>

That makes George Steiner's 2011 *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan* seem something like a throwback. Steiner, in his usual capacious manner, engages the entire corpus of the West within this nexus. Steiner's view is inclusive; he is happy to admit into the gates a vast parade of poets, dramatists, thinkers, and sages, over the millennia whose work straddles – or crosses – the divide: from Empedocles, Sophocles, Plato, Protagoras and the other Sophists, to, more recently, Rilke, Holderlin, Nietzsche, Goethe, Heidegger, and Benjamin.

This is not to say the historical and conceptual distinctions between philosophy and literature are lost on him. Steiner readily attests that philosophy and literature have their respective histories, stylistic and conceptual and institutional apparatuses, as well as modes of organizing reality, are entirely disparate. Not commingling philosophy and literature, but keeping them at arms-length distance, working within the border regions of the two. Steiner's credo for the book is formulated early on: "where philosophy and literature mesh, where they are litigious toward one another in form and matter, these echoes of origin can be heard" (Steiner 13).

Jacques Derrida's provocative statement in *Margins of Philosophy*, that "the task is to consider philosophy also as a 'particular literary genre,'"<sup>7</sup> could be taken to mean that both discourses resolve themselves into the same thing – it is not so simple. But rather than try to parse these differences here – there is not space for it, in any event -- I would close by suggesting that, in the spirit of Steiner, and

<sup>4</sup> A great reference source for the Romantic period is Nancy Yousef's *Romantic Intimacy*. For a broader history, see Schliesser.

<sup>5</sup> For anyone who thinks this is a recent problem, I would strongly recommend Adorno's short essay written in the early 1960's, "Why Still Philosophy." It is not exactly an elegy for philosophic discourse – Adorno is trying to save it from its metaphysical precursors – but the tone of self-humility he adopts on behalf of philosophy is significant.

<sup>6</sup> This work has continued to the present day in the journal, *Philosophy and Literature*. For something of a counter-example, see Ogden, and more recently Rethorst.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Peter McCormick (54).

others, we should not foreclose discussion by pre-defining. The topic is an important one, and there is obviously sufficient interest in both subjects to allow for continued fruitful discussion in these (and future) pages.

### The Papers in this Volume

As the above brief comments make clear, qualitatively describing, let alone understanding, the breadth of work on, related to, or about suffering, is an insuperable undertaking, and most likely impossible. Just as the ways one may encounter suffering – either personally or in an artistic work – are inexhaustible, so are the ways we may make sense of them. There is hardly a single literary work that does *not*, in some form, deal with suffering, or its cousins, anxiety, conflict, or dread. It is the one of the ways we define ourselves as radically and distinctly human, as we try to make room for other species on this planet.

As one might expect from a topic this vast, the articles that make up this volume are extremely varied. Most of the authors took the gambit – or rabbit's foot – of engaging philosophy in the context of literature. Professor Lo focuses on the dismal state of an "anonymous and mostly muted, underprivileged human-billboard" in Tsai Ming-Liang's film of the same title who wanders the streets of Taipei lost and mostly alone (Lo 3). Hivren Demay Atay's looks at the author, Peter Handke, facing his mother's suicide. And in the two essays on Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, the authors explore how not conforming to the specific demands of a meat-eating culture can pose suffering of its own as well as extreme effects. In each essay, the authors were also forced to consider how such personal and lived experiences can enable a specific philosophical viewpoint or idea.

Aleksandra Hajduczek works within the contours of Derrida's work on archives to unpack certain signifying traits in David Park's 2008 novel, *The Truth Commissioner*. Themes of remembered and enacted violence, and political control, take place in an imagined universe in a post-apartheid South Korea. Essays by Yulia and Gerald Naughton, Katherine Wetzel, Chao Shun-Liang, Hivren Demir, and Kim Won-Chung mine a rich body of interpretation on an eclectic group of authors, ranging from Nabokov, Dickens, Mary Shelley, the Austrian novelist, Peter Handke, and the Korean writer, Han Kang. The issue rounds out with reflections on climate change (Simon Estok); Syrian refugees (Asaad), and Buddhist philosophy (Justin Hewitson). In Asaad and Estok's work, we see a striving to use theory to complexify the political debates surrounding climate change and migrants, respectively but also a desire to see if suffering can be used towards a political end ("politics" not confined to any determinate or simplistic binary opposition with theory). Asaad also suggests how the medium of documentary can be used to subvert the typical, and somewhat glib, portrayal of refugees as abject subject. And Ji-Ching Hsiung has written a thoughtful study of Emmanuel Levinas and Orwell's 1984 that confronts the important issue of embodiment in both writers' works ("Self and Body: A Levinasian Reading of Orwell's 1984").<sup>8</sup>

Finally, as the co-editor of this special issue I am particularly grateful to my fellow co-editors, Simon Estok and Frank Stevenson, for their willingness to stick with this to the end, and to the many contributors of this special thematic issue. In the end, we may be left with a chasm – but a fruitful one. Philosophy can provide a conceptual apparatus and, in some cases,, possible justifications to why we suffer. But compared to the affective powers of art, and its portrayal of lived histories, the risk it will become overly abstract or even pollyannish. And yet the result of literature is to cause us to crave enlarged meaning, a theoretical or ethical framework that will at least result in a world we want to live in. It is that challenge posed by the conjunction of philosophy and literature that animates our discussion here.

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<sup>8</sup> The subject of suffering in Levinas is extensively discussed in the selection of essays in *Nietzsche and Levinas: "After the Death of a Certain God."* Of particular importance is "The Flesh Made Word; Or, The Two Origins" (Bettina Bergo) and "Beyond Suffering I Have No Alibi" (David Boothroyd).

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