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LITERATURE AS A TOOL FOR CULTIVATING HUMANITY: MARTHA NUSSBAUM'S ACCOUNT OF THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF LITERATURE, ETHICS, EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

This paper examines Martha Nussbaum's account of the interrelation between literature, ethics, education, and democracy. It argues that certain dimensions of human rational, emotional, and ethical experience can be adequately understood only through literary narratives, which offer a distinctive form of ethical knowledge unavailable to either philosophy or science. The paper further explores Nussbaum's concept of the "narrative imagination" as a central component of liberal education and a necessary condition for the formation of democratically responsible citizens. Finally, it addresses Nussbaum's diagnosis of the "silent crisis" of the humanities and emphasizes the role of literature in sustaining and revitalizing democratic institutions within contemporary, profit-oriented societies.

Keywords: literary theory, narrative, education, liberal education, philosophy, moral philosophy, emotions, neoliberalism.

Introduction

Martha Nussbaum has been interested in the relationship between literature, ethics, education, and democracy for most of her career. Since her first book, *Fragility of Goodness* (first published in 1986) — in which she deals with

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the ethical and political potentialities of ancient Greek tragedy — up to 2010, with the publication of *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Nussbaum, 2010), her discussions about literature have been almost exclusively framed in the aforementioned context. Although she has been mainly interested in more explicit political and ethical topics in recent years, her dealings with literature and education will probably remain her lasting contribution to theory in the broadest sense of the term. Namely, the editors of the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2018) decided to include three chapters from *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform* (including Chapter 3, *The Narrative Imagination*, which exclusively deals with literature) as representative of Nussbaum's critical *oeuvre*.

In that regard, the present paper elaborates on the complex interconnection between literature, ethics, education, and democracy, as they are presented in her main books on the topic of literature: *Love's knowledge*, *Poetic Justice*, *Cultivating Humanity*, and *Not for Profit*. In the first part of the paper, we discuss the elements by which literature differs from both science and philosophy, especially in regards to ethics and aesthetics following Nussbaum's argument. We analyze her claims that some aspects of the human condition are more accessible to the discourse of literature. We also point out the important connection between the theories of Nussbaum and the ideas of Henry James, Lionel Trilling, and Wayne Booth about the specific connection between ethics and literature. In the second part of the paper, we shift our attention to the role of literature in education and Nussbaum's ambitious claim that literary education — mostly with the help of novels — is one of the most potent tools for cultivating humanity. Reading good novels, argues Nussbaum, is an important step in building democratically inclined citizens who respect the differences of other people and not only think but also feel democratically. Finally, in the third part of the paper, we discuss the so-called “silent crises” in the humanities and the urgency of Nussbaum's ideas in today's exclusively profit-oriented and deeply pragmatic society.

Although some of the books discussed in this paper were published thirty years ago, the concepts they analyze and the ideas they advance are as relevant today as at the time of their publication. The “silent crisis” in the humanities that Nussbaum warned against fifteen years ago is becoming louder and more aggressive, especially in the USA. Entire departments in the humanities and the social sciences are either closed, restructured, or merged on the grounds that they are unprofitable or constitute alleged centers of “wokism” and “left-wing propaganda” (Mudde 2025; Speri 2026). In this context, emphasizing the unique role that the humanities play in the development of the imaginative, ethical, and political capacities of future citizens—a development closely tied to the teaching and study of the humanities—is more relevant than ever. For these reasons, we argue that Nussbaum's reflections on education, literature, and ethics remain well worth reconsidering today.

1. Literature as a Kind of Knowledge

The starting point of Nussbaum's argument about the importance of literature for contemporary democracy begins with an analysis of the relationship between philosophy, science, and literature. She asserts that some parts of our public and private existence aren't fathomable by either conceptual thinking, logical argument, or scientific reasoning. Science and philosophy, statistics, and logical analysis, argues Nussbaum, present an abstract, homogenous, cold, and flat picture of the individual person and its relationships to society. These disciplines are obviously very useful and powerful in their own way — Nussbaum's goal isn't to denigrate or attack science and philosophy² — many important things are lost to them: but they cannot adequately articulate the "world's surprising variety, its complexity, and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty" (Nussbaum, 1990: 3-4). Although perfectly capable of creating abstract theories, precise hypotheses, and highly controlled experiments, they are almost completely oblivious (due to the nature of their structure) to many other aspects of the human condition.

If we reach out for an example, Nussbaum's problem with scientific and philosophical discourse can be suitably summed up in Fleda Vetch's reply to the widow Adela Gereth near the end of Henry James' *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), where Fleda reproaches Adela for having an older woman's reductive worldview that does not recognize the nuance of interpersonal relationships: "You simplify too much. You always did, and you always will. The tangle of life is much more intricate than you've ever, I think, felt it to be. You slash into it," cried Fleda finely, 'with a great pair of shears; you nip at it as if you were one of the Fates'..." (James 1987, 186p). It is obvious that Nussbaum is mostly concerned with the "loosely defined" (in scientific and philosophical terms) and elusive domains that we conventionally ascribe to ethics and aesthetics, and which are usually marginalized in the science-oriented tradition of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Those are values, choices, emotions, art, love, sexuality, thinking about other people, but also politics, and some societal notions².

² For example, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (proposition 6.421) Ludwig Wittgenstein presents the following conclusions: "It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one)" (Witgenstien, 1999: 105). In *Love's Knowledge* Nussbaum emphasizes that in the atmosphere of Harvard during her studies at the end of the 1960s, ethics — even the studying of the Ancient Greeks — was never studied in relation to literary works. Following the Greek models, she discovered something completely different: „But even more important than my own ambivalence about these disciplinary separations was the fact that by now my study of the Greeks was showing me that most of them would have found the separations unnatural and unilluminating. For the Greeks of the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., there were not two separate sets of questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions, to be studied and written about by mutually detached colleagues in different departments. Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing,

Nussbaum illustrates her thesis in the following way:

An article, for example, argues that the emotions are essential and central in our efforts to gain an understanding on any important ethical matter; and yet it is written in a style that expresses only intellectual activity and strongly suggests that only this activity matters for the reader in his or her attempts to understand. There might have been some interesting reason for writing this way; but usually, in cases of this kind, the whole issue had just not arisen. Such articles were written as they were because that was the way philosophy was being written, and sometimes because an emotive or literary style would have evoked criticism, or even ridicule (Nussbaum, 1990: 21).

How can we seriously talk about emotions, asks Nussbaum, without utilizing the expressive capacity of language? How do we understand drama, tragedy, or loss with dry language and clear-cut arguments? The kernel of her argument, as presented in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum's main book about literature, can be summed up in the following way: the problem with philosophy and science is not precisely with what they say but rather with the way in which they say it. The way in which philosophers write about ethics is too abstract and distant (and even reductive) to articulate, for instance, the specific density of interpersonal relationships, the mixed-up nature of emotions, or the intensive state of choice-making³. According to Nussbaum, the examples provided by "schematic philosophers" almost always lack the particularity, the emotive appeal, the absorbing plottedness, the variety, and indeterminacy of good fiction." They also lack "good fiction's way of making the reader a participant and a friend; and... it is precisely in virtue of these structural characteristics that fiction can play the role it does in our reflective lives" (Nussbaum 1990, 46)⁴. Analytic philosophy in general, but also the discourse and vocabulary used

a single and general question: namely, how human beings should live" (Nussbaum 1990: 15). Nussbaum exclusively tackles that tradition in her first book *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (2001).

³ To illustrate her argument Nussbaum quotes the following statement by the philosopher-novelist Iris Murdoch: "Of course philosophers vary and some are more 'literary' than others, but I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course, this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold, clear, recognizable voice" (Nussbaum, 2001: 16). According to Nussbaum, Murdoch exemplifies the dominant tradition of thinking about the "proper philosophical style", that stems from John Lock and the third book of his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689).

⁴ Compare Nussbaum's argument with the similar claim by Lionel Trilling, one of her main intellectual influences: "A true relation to the sources of life does not refer to rational criteria; it is expressed not in the doctrine, not in systems, ethics, and creeds, but in manner and style.

by Kantian and utilitarian ethics — her main polemical “antagonists” in *Love’s Knowledge* — are found deficient in their refusal to utilize literature in their arguments and in their rigid denial to investigate different kinds of discursive modes of expression when confronted with problems of ethics and aesthetics⁵.

But that does not mean that we should let language and thought run amok, and discredit any kind of structure, organization, or rational discourse, warns Nussbaum. Literature is more open and flexible than the examples and arguments of “schematic philosophers” but also more structured than what Henry James calls „poor dear old life” or the naive and unreflective experience of the real world. „The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived” (Nussbaum, 1990: 47). Because of those specificities, literature provides (in a certain way) the best from both worlds: it gives the precision, the order, and the heightened awareness of a conceptual order (of a different kind), combined with the artistic imitation (*mimesis*) of messiness, spontaneity, and the complexity of “real life.” The spontaneous and naive categories of everyday life and everyday language are criticized and refined without being crystalized in reductive metrical scales or rigid *a priori* imperatives.

Consequently, literature, and particularly good novels,⁶ are here to fill the

We know whether or not a person is in touch with the source of life not by what he says, by its doctrinal correctness, but by the way he says it, by the tone of his voice, the look in his eye, by his manner and style. So too with a society: we know if it is really in touch with the sources of life not by its mere practical arrangements but by the style of life that it fosters — in short, by its culture, which we judge as a whole, rather as if it were a work of art” (Trilling, 1966: 222-223). Trilling connects his line of thought with the so-called “great classic literature of the modern period”, exemplified by writers like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce etc., and adds that “each in his own way, have instructed us not to make these judgments for ourselves, teaching us that there can be nothing within that passeth show, that whatever is within of grace or lack of grace will manifest itself in the timbre of the voice, the rhythm of the speech, in how the foot meets the ground, in the feel of the chosen cloth, in the fashion of the house inhabited. By such things we learn to know our neighbors; they yield knowledge that transcends the knowledge of mere action” (1966: 223).

⁵ “‘How can one maximize utility?’ we accept, already, a certain characterization of what is salient in the subject matter of ethics, of the right or relevant descriptions for practical situations—one that would rule out from the start, as irrelevant, much of what the novels present as highly relevant. Similarly, reliance on a Kantian characterization of the domain of the moral, and of its relation to what happens in the empirical realm, together with reliance on the Kantian’s organizing question ‘What is my moral duty?’ would have the effect of artificially cutting off from the inquiry some elements of life that the novels show as important and link to others—all in advance of a sensitive study of the sense of life that the novels themselves have to offer (Nussbaum, 1990: 24).

⁶ Nussbaum gives the novel a privileged place in her philosophy, as she claims it’s the most suitable narrative form for developing her topics. In *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* she writes that „the novel is a living form and in fact still the central morally serious yet popular engaging fictional form of our culture”, and she compares it with the function that the tragedy

gap left by philosophy and science. Nussbaum gives four reasons why narratives are fundamental — while being different from philosophy and science — for understanding reality, particularly ethical reality (Nussbaum, 1990: 36-44).

1. Good novels always emphasize qualitative differences: they show us that life is full of things that are not only different from each other by degree but also by kind. In life, we often choose between two equally “good” things that are at the same qualitatively different (duty or love, for example). Plainly speaking, novels present a completely opposite way of thinking and feeling than Dickens’s *Gradgrind*, the personification of statistical and metrical thinking and utilitarian ethics, for whom everything which is not calculable (in terms of “more” or “less”), does not exist. Nussbaum calls this aspect the “Noncommensurability of the Valuable Things.”

2. Novels always prioritize the particular situation, the individual context, and are mostly “allergic” to general rules and *a priori* reasoning, especially in the domain of ethics (Nussbaum sharply concludes that Kantians and utilitarians always come up bad in novels). Following the notions of Aristotelian ethics and Henry James’ theory of the novel, Nussbaum argues that ethical wisdom requires a “finer responsiveness to the concrete,” which does not play away with any “antedecedently built system of rules.” That’s what’s called, inspired by James, “The priority of perceptions” (or the “Priority of the Particular”).

3. Novels are not shy of representing emotions in their full complexity; on the contrary, they thrive on it, both in their negative and positive manifestations. For a good novelist, they are neither carnal nor irrational, as it is usually perceived, but always connected with values and have an important cognitive dimension that cannot be excluded from the picture without falsifying the human condition. In short, novels usually offer us a broader picture of human rationality, integrating in itself a more realistic and intelligent picture of emotions, which are considered a central aspect in any ethical situation. Nussbaum calls this third aspect “the Ethical Value of the Emotions”⁷.

4. Novels are first to notice the prevalence of the unexpected in our lives, the uncalled tragedies, and the like, and are here to teach us how to cope with

had in Ancient Greek society. They are particularly suitable for what she tries to do because „... the novel is concrete to an extent generally unparalleled in other narrative genres. It takes as its theme, we might say, the interaction between general human aspirations and particular forms of social life that either enable or impede those aspirations, shaping them powerfully in the process. Novels... present persistent forms of human need and desire realized in specific social situations” (Nussbaum 1995, 6-7).

⁷ “In *Poetic Justice* Nussbaum writes that “Literature is in league with the emotions. Readers of novels, spectators of dramas, find themselves led by these works to fear, to grief, to pity, to anger, to joy and delight, even to passionate love. Emotions are not just likely responses to the content of many literary works; they are built into their very structure as way in which literary forms solicit attention” (Nussbaum 1995: 53). For a deeper and more thorough discussion of the emotions see Nussbaum’s main book on the topic, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Nussbaum, 2001).

undeserved catastrophes and the great misfortunes that befall humanity. The human subject has little or no control over many aspects of his or her life. That does not mean that the “unexpected” should be rushed out of ethics — quite on the contrary, it should play a key part in every theory that seeks to engulf the full complexity of the human condition. She names this fourth aspect the “Ethical Relevance of Uncontrolled Happenings.”

Before we continue, it's important to emphasize that Nussbaum continues a long and fruitful American tradition of thinking about literature, especially novels, that stems from Henry James' famous novels and prefaces, Lionel Trilling's essays and public lectures, and Wayne Booth's numerous critical books — a tradition which refuses to separate concerns about literature from ethical discussions and political problems (Rawlings, 2006: 124). For these three authors, technical problems about the point of view, the status of the fictional characters, or the representation of time and space in the novel — i.e., what they usually call “the problems of style” — cannot be detached from wider ethical and political concerns, i.e., the question of “the good life.” Nussbaum shares the ideas presented in James' prefaces to the New York Editions (James, 1937), Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (Trilling, 1953) and *Beyond Culture* (Trilling, 1966) and his meditations about “moral realism,” and Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Booth, 1981) and *The Company We Keep* (Booth, 1989), especially his theories about the implied author and the process of “co-duction.”⁸ Nussbaum's choice to identify herself as a progenitor of this tradition is not accidental but is another statement in her position-taking in the intellectual field. Namely, simultaneously polemicizing against the exclusion of literature by science-dominated discourses or the ethical systems of utilitarianism and Kantianism, she also takes her stand against some currents of literary theory, like Anglo-American New Criticism or some forms of Deconstruction⁹. In *Love's Knowledge*,

⁸ More about this tradition in *American Theorists of the Novel: Henry James, Lionel Trilling, Wayne C. Booth* by Peter Rawlings, especially in the chapter *Moral Intelligence* and the last chapter of the book, *After James, Trilling, and Booth* (Rawlings, 2006: 105-118, 119-130).

⁹ Her attacks of New Criticism and Deconstruction are not systematic, but usually more along the way of other arguments and analysis. For example, we can find this comment about Derrida's texts in the essay *Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory*: One can have no clearer single measure of this absence than to have the experience of reading Jacques Derrida's *Éperons* after reading Nietzsche. Once one has worked through and been suitably (I think) impressed by Derrida's perceptive and witty analysis of Nietzsche's style, one feels, at the end of all the urbanity, an empty longing amounting to a hunger, a longing for the sense of difficulty and risk and practical urgency that are inseparable from Zarathustra's dance. A longing for some acknowledgment of the fact that Nietzsche saw a crisis at hand for Europe, for all of human life; that he thought it mattered deeply whether one lived as a Christian or in some other as yet unspecified way; and that he dedicated his career to imagining that way. Nietzsche's work is profoundly critical of existing ethical theory, clearly; but it is, inter alia, a response to the original Socratic question, ‘How should one live?’ Derrida does not touch on that question. ‘Of all that is written,’ says Zarathustra, ‘I love only what a man has written with his blood.’ After reading Derrida, and not Derrida alone, I feel a certain hunger for blood; for, that is, writing about literature that talks of

Nussbaum develops her own argument on the lines of this tradition, mediated by the vocabulary of Aristotle, mainly by using his notion of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. She thinks that the Aristotelian paradigm is not only congruent with James' theory of the novel and his insistence on "perception" but is also more flexible and open to the ethical potentialities of literature. Most importantly, she always connects literature with the question of "how should one live?" which she finds lacking in most contemporary literary theory.

2. "Literature and Democracy are Natural Allies"¹⁰

„We are accustomed to think of literature as optional”, writes Nussbaum in *Poetic Justice*, “as great, valuable, entertaining, excellent, but something that exists off to one side of political and economic and legal thought, in another university department, ancillary rather than competitive.” (Nussbaum, 1995: 2). Like Jerome Bruner, Nussbaum is baffled by the fact that we are steadfast in teaching the Pythagorean theorem to every eighth grader while being comfortable with the fact that almost none of them have even heard about Aristotle's theory of plotting and catharsis not once while in high school or even college (Bruner, 2002: 5). But, literature, emphasizes Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity*, is one of the three cornerstones of liberal education, and a prerequisite for democratically capable and inclined citizens. Together with “Socratic self-examination” (the critical examination of oneself and one's own tradition) and “cosmopolitanism” (considering yourself a citizen of the world), developing a narrative imagination amongst students is a sure way to prevent them from becoming, as Nussbaum calls it, “narrow citizens,” or people “who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves,” and” whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting” (Nussbaum 1997: 14).

Building on her four main premises developed in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum transposes them into the domain of education and pedagogy, slightly changing her examples in the process, shifting her focus from, if we borrow

human lives and choices as if they matter to us all” (Nussbaum, 1990: 171). In the same essay, she adds the following comment about the schism between ethics and literary theory in the late XXth century: “To explain how literary theory lost this practical dimension would be a long story. This story would include the influence of Kant's aesthetics; of early twentieth-century formalism; of the New Criticism. It would include the influence of several prevailing trends in ethical theory as well—above all that of Kantianism and of Utilitarianism, ethical views that in their different ways were so inhospitable to any possible relation with imaginative literature that dialogue was cut off from the side of ethics as well. It would include, too, a critical look at some writing about literature that did, during this long period, keep ethical concerns in view. For much of this writing has understandably given ethical writing about literature a bad name, by its neglect of literary form and its reductive moralizing manner” (Nussbaum, 1990:171-172).

¹⁰ The quote is taken from one of E.M. Forster's BBC talks on the radio during WWII. This particular talk is from 1942 and is dedicated to Aldous Huxley's *Grey Eminence* (Forster, 2008 :159).

Roland Barthes' distinction, from *writerly* to *readerly* texts (Barthes, 1975). Namely, while in *Love's Knowledge*, she interprets the "late" novels of Henry James, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and even some texts from Samuel Becket, in her later more engaged and education-oriented works, she exemplifies her theories by reading *Hard Times* (1854) by Charles Dickens, *Maurice* (1971) by E.M. Forster and *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright. She does not explain her decision to shift her focus from modernist texts to less experimental forms of fiction, but it can be safely assumed that the reason behind this change lies both in the nature of her ideas and the intended recipients of her work. Namely, in contrast to *Love's Knowledge*, neither *Poetic Justice* nor *Cultivating Humanity* are exclusively works of literary theory but rather books about the place of literature in contemporary education. Furthermore, the former (like the *Fragility of Goodness*) is a densely written academic work, while the latter is intended for a broader, less narrowly specialized audience.

Be that as it may, the kernel of her arguments is not changed but slightly modified. Literature, again, has that specific power that makes us see and understand other people's lives better without bracketing the particular and unique aspects of their situation and context. It can also make us sympathize and empathize with their specific situation — no matter how far or distant it seems at first sight. "Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest — with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society's refusals of visibility," writes Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity* (Nussbaum, 1997: 88). Furthermore, with the help of literature "we come to see how circumstances shape the lives of those who share with us some general goals and projects; and we see that circumstances shape not only people's possibilities for action but also their aspirations and desires, hopes and fears. All of this seems highly pertinent to decisions we must make as citizens" (Nussbaum, 1997: 88). Novels are almost literally textbooks, and they too can teach us about the cognitive and ethical relevance of emotions: reading Proust on jealousy, for example, is as potent (or in a way, more potent) and rich as any statistical analysis or philosophical book on that topic. Finally, literature can sensitize us to the well-known fact that everything that happens to other people can happen to us. We, too, have — regardless of our race, class, or gender — unfortunate and uncalled accidents and tragedies happen to us. Literature gives us common and flexible tools with which we can better understand and endure our personal tragedies and misfortunes.

Furthermore, literature has that specific power to broaden and deepen our perspective of the people around us. "Our experience is, without fiction," writes Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge*,

too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling. The importance of this for both morals and politics cannot be underestimated.... literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life (Nussbaum, 1990: 47).

Consequently, novels (and fiction in general), argues Nussbaum, should not only be present in the curricula of schools and institutions of higher learning in the humanities department but also in law schools, administrative schools, and even government departments and courts. Literature is our main tool for cultivating humanity and one of the key instruments in educating the so-called “public rationality.” Future citizens, voters, lawyers, judges, and public administrators should be avid novel readers, capable of transposing their care and understanding from the fictional characters they are reading about, to the real flesh and blood individuals they’re working and living with (Nussbaum, 1995: XVIII)¹¹. They should not only know (in an objective and distant way) that there are people in their society who are of a different race, gender, or class: rationality, in this case, argues Nussbaum, is not enough. Every citizen — who wants to be a “true” citizen, should also try to find out how it feels to be of a different race, gender, or class, with all the particulars imbued in their imagination.

The insight of the main protagonist in *Maurice* (1971) is fairly representative of what Nussbaum hopes to achieve with the help of literature:

Once inside college, his discoveries multiplied. People turned out to be alive. Hitherto he had supposed that they *were* what he *pretended* to be — flat pieces of cardboard stamped with a conventional design — but as he strolled about the courts at night and saw through the windows some men singing and other arguing and other at their books, there came by no process of reason a conviction that they were human beings with feelings akin to his own (Forster, 2005: 23).

¹¹ “Governments cannot investigate the life story of every citizen in the way a novel does with its characters; it can, however, know that each citizen has a complex history of this sort, and it can remain aware that the norm in principle would be to acknowledge the separateness, freedom, and qualitative difference of each in the manner of the novel” (Nussbaum 1995: 44). By reading novels, adds Nussbaum in the same book, we enter the „real substance of life“. „A story of human life quality, without stories of individual human actors, would, I argued, be too indeterminate to show how resources actually work in promoting various types of human functioning” (Nussbaum, 1995: 71).

Without feeling — and not only thinking — democratically, the contemporary democratic institutions are threatened to become empty shells, cold structures without a “local habitation and name,” as Shakespeare’s Theseus fancies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Institutions, by their nature, rely on numbers, and are thus blind to values and lose emotional involvement, which is a necessary prerequisite for detecting and ultimately solving different kinds of societal problems. Literature, particularly novels like Henry James’ *Ambassadors* (1903) and Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), but also Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Forsters’ *Maurice* and Wright’s *Native Son*, present one of the best ways for developing “public rationality” and capable and cultivated citizens with a rich imagination, deep empathy, and flexible emotional and cognitive capacities for judgment. „If the literary imagination develops compassion, and if compassion is essential for civic responsibility,” writes Nussbaum, “then we have good reason to teach works that promote the types of compassionate understanding we want and need. This means including works that give voice to the experiences of groups in our society that we urgently need to understand, such as members of other cultures, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and lesbians and gay men” (Nussbaum 1997: 99-100). Citizens should feel (and not only know), similar to Maurice, that there are other “human beings with feelings akin to his own.” From this point of view, reading novels and intelligently thinking about them is not a fancy or an elitist form of entertainment but a *sine qua non* element for every developed, mature, and fully functioning democracy in today’s trouble-ridden world.

3. The “Silent Crisis” of Literature and The Humanities

There is a sense of urgency in all of Nussbaum’s books, starting as early as *Love’s Knowledge*¹², notably when she emphasizes the place of literature and the humanities in today’s Western societies and, by implication, their education.

¹² Nussbaum warns against the devastation of the literature and humanities departments in the universities under the pressures of the profit-oriented neoliberal economies, even in an essay in *Love’s Knowledge*, twenty years before the publication of *Not for Profit*, when she compares the so-called “Aristotelian education” with the educational models and ideals in Britain during the rule of Margaret Thatcher: “Technical and quantitative analyses of social reality will be presented as tools, frequently very valuable, but incomplete in themselves, incomplete without the richer study of human ends that they cannot themselves perform. This would mean, for example, a public educational policy that moves in a direction roughly opposite to that now being taken by the Thatcher government in Britain, where humanistic studies (and also basic scientific inquiry) are being demoted and squeezed in favor of the development of technical and entrepreneurial abilities. This impoverished and impoverishing conception will not, the Aristotelian claims, prove able to sustain a democratic citizenry. Perception is fully compatible with democracy. But it does have material and institutional necessary conditions; and it is the responsibility of legislators to put these in place” (Nussbaum, 1990: 103).

The reason for that is quite simple and obvious. The humanities, she argues, are in “silent crises” promoted by today’s all-pervading concern for economic growth, which puts all “disinterested” activities (to use Kant’s phrase) on the margins of education. Almost every nation in the world, argues Nussbaum, concentrates on the increase of its gross national product per capita (GDP) as its basic and almost only criterion for determining the progress of the country and the well-being of its citizens. The underlying premise for this line of thinking (based almost exclusively on economic premises) is that the increase in GDP will automatically bring the improvement which we conventionally ascribe to democratic countries: education, health, economic and social equality, social and political responsibilities, etc. The consequence of this is a wide range of changes in the curriculum that swap almost everything that the humanities have to offer in terms of education for practical knowledge and skills that can make an immediate impact on the economy. That is especially valid for literature. When Nussbaum talks about today’s dominant view of literature and the arts — in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* — she paints a rather bleak picture: „What about the arts and literature, so often valued by democratic educators? An education for economic growth will, first of all, have contempt for these parts of a child’s training because they don’t look like they lead to personal or national economic advancement. For this reason, all over the world, programs in arts and the humanities, at all levels, are being cut away in favor of the cultivation of the technical” (Nussbaum, 2010: 99-100)¹³.

Nussbaum’s problem with this line of thought is twofold. First, the economy and the humanities (both in the broadest sense of the word) are not antagonistic by their very nature. Quite on the contrary, narrow minds lacking imagination, critical thinking, and a basic understanding of different cultures are usually poor businessmen. Potential business culture, argues Nussbaum, needs imagination and creativity (what is usually called “thinking outside the box”), skills and potentials that are cultivated precisely by the humanities. By depriving their future businessmen and entrepreneurs of a broad liberal education, nations are actually dealing a huge blow (without being conscious of it) to their economies (Nussbaum 2010: 112)¹⁴. Second, as we have already

¹³ In *Not for Profit* Nussbaum writes: “Meanwhile, the pressure for economic growth has led many political leaders in Europe to recast the entirety of university education— both teaching and research—along growth-oriented lines, asking about the contribution of each discipline and each researcher to the economy. Take Britain, for example. Ever since the Thatcher era, it has been customary for humanities departments in Britain to be required to justify themselves to the government, which funds all academic institutions, by showing how their research and teaching contribute to economic profitability” (Nussbaum, 2010: 127). But, she adds, the humanities are not the only sector that is falling under the pressure of the all-pervading economism — researchers of every kind which can’t immediately justify their results are also under attack by the present system (Nussbaum, 2010: 121-143).

¹⁴ In the first chapter of *Not for Profit* Nussbaum puts her claim quite bluntly: „Thus we are not

stated in the previous part of our paper, a deep and thorough education in the humanities, and especially in literature, is a necessary prerequisite for reproducing citizens with a strong sense of democratic responsibility and civic imagination. By cutting out the humanities programs in the universities and putting literature on the margins, nations are destroying the basis of their democratic systems. An exclusively practically-oriented education, narrowly concentrated on producing skilled workers and efficient businessmen who are going to boost the GDP of their country is not going to lead to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the well-being of the country. Still, it may lead to the opposite — to the devastation of the already fragile political stability¹⁵.

If we take up Piere Bourdieu's terminology for a moment, we can say that Nussbaum is arguing that literature (and the humanities in general) is a potent tool for building up (or cultivating) an appropriate democratic *habitus* that can both reproduce and improve the frail democratic institutions in our society¹⁶. Adults without a developed imagination and a wide sense of empathy cannot live up to the ideals of modern democracy and cannot reproduce the democratic system, even if they want to. The question of the place of literature in education is not only about keeping jobs in schools and universities or nurturing a vibrant intellectual culture; it is a question of the life and death of democracy itself:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If

forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship. A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship, and thus the proponents of what I shall call "education for profit," or (to put it more comprehensively) "education for economic growth," have adopted an impoverished conception of what is required to meet their own goal" (Nussbaum 2010: 10).

¹⁵ „Proponents of the old model sometimes like to claim that the pursuit of economic growth will by itself deliver the other good things I have mentioned: health, education, a decrease in social and economic inequality. By now, however, examining the results of these divergent experiments, we have discovered that the old model really does not deliver the goods as claimed. Achievements in health and education, for example, are very poorly correlated with economic growth. Nor does political liberty track growth, as we can see from the stunning success of China. So producing economic growth does not mean producing democracy" (Nussbaum, 2010: 15)

¹⁶ The *habitus* is defined by Pierre Bourdieu (in *The Logic of Practice*) as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). It's important to emphasize that the *habitus* always functions in correlation with the *field*, which it helps to produce and reproduce. That means that a so-called "democratic field" can neither function nor exist without an appropriate *habitus*. For Bourdieu's notions about the genesis, structure and reproduction of the democratic *habitus* and field we refer to his lectures *On the State* (Bourdieu, 2014).

this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance" (Nussbaum, 2010: 2).

This is why we must not abandon the fruitful idea of broad liberal education and think about its implementation in today's education, which is increasingly trying to create one-dimensional "useful machines" with small capacities for critical judgment and cold and calculating minds devoid of narrative and artistic imagination. Literature is our ready-made helper in today's silent crises. We must learn (or remember) how to utilize this powerful cultural and symbolic capital to help us create and recreate our democratic institutions. Literature, argues Nussbaum, with the support of Henry James, Lionel Trilling, Wayne Booth, Aristotle, and the long novelistic tradition that runs behind her, are our unexpected but necessary helpers.

Conclusion

In this paper, we presented and analyzed Martha Nussbaum's ideas about the necessary interrelation between literature, ethics, education and democracy. Literature carries different kinds of knowledge from philosophy or science without being inferior to either of them, argues Nussbaum. In a way, it fills the gaps left by them, mostly by its powerful way of noting qualitative differences, concentrating on the individual case, thinking through feeling and vice versa, and by leaving room for the unforeseen and the uncontrollable in the human condition. Because of that, and because literature is an eminently ethical and political activity (both for the writer and the reader), it has to have a vanguard and permanent position in contemporary education. Literature can help us become more sensitized to the reality of the differences of other people and mold us (by cultivating our imagination and helping develop "public rationality") into being better citizens who not only think but also feel democratically. Finally, we also emphasized that Nussbaum's theories are urgently needed in our profit-oriented, utilitarian society, which seems to leave no place for the humanities in general and literature in particular. The humanities are in a "silent crisis," which might have larger consequences than the removal of literature from the curriculum — the devaluation of literature may even lead to the weakening and disintegration of democratic institutions as well.

Although *Not for Profit* was written almost fifteen years ago, and *Love's Knowledge* was written nearly twenty-five years ago, Martha Nussbaum's thoughts and political interventions are more pressing than ever. Her urgency and vision of moral seriousness are more than needed in today's society when

the hegemony of the profit-oriented logic of the market economy is widening and deepening its reach in every part of society — education, humanities, and literature included. Nussbaum's strongest card is not only the urgency of her thought in defense of the place of literature in contemporary education but also her claim that the future of democracy is tightly related to the often marginalized question of the reading of good books.

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**КЊИЖЕВНОСТ КАО СРЕДСТВО ЗА НЕГОВАЊЕ ХУМАНОСТИ:
МАРТА НУСБАУМ О МЕЂУСОБНОЈ ПОВЕЗАНОСТИ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ,
ЕТИКЕ, ОБРАЗОВАЊА И ДЕМОКРАТИЈЕ**

Апстракт

Овај рад анализира схватање Марте Нусбаум о узајамној повезаности књижевности, етике, образовања и демократије. Полазећи од њене тврдње да се одређени аспекти људског рационалног, емоционалног и етичког искуства могу адекватно разумети само кроз књижевне наративе, рад показује на који начин књижевност пружа специфичан облик етичког знања који није доступан ни филозофији ни науци. Посебна пажња посвећена је концепту „наративне имагинације“ као кључној компоненти либералног образовања и предуслову за развој демократски одговорних грађана. У завршном делу рада разматра се Нусбаумова дијагноза „тихе кризе“ хуманистичких наука и значај књижевности за очување и обнову демократских институција у савременом, профитно оријентисаном друштву.

Кључне речи: теорија књижевности, наратив, образовање, либерално образовање, филозофија, морална филозофија, емоције, неолиберализам.