

Portugal : The Use of Literary Texts in Doing Philosophy with Children and Youth in secondary school

Maria J. Figueiroa-Rego, University of Porto, Institute of Philosophy - FLUP

Texts are usually used as a didactic resource in philosophy classes. This article aims to reflect on the use of literary texts in two different educational settings. One relates to the practice of doing philosophy with children and youth where a text is introduced with a view to its philosophical discussion. The second case is that involving philosophy classes in secondary school. Philosophy teaching at secondary level exists mainly in Francophone countries or of French cultural influence (mainly Europe), or Latin-influenced ones (Europe and America), whereas in Anglo-Saxon countries, philosophy is only officially taught at university level. If in Philosophy with Children and Youth, or in any other method of doing P4C, texts are not, by definition, philosophical texts, what can be said about texts used in philosophy classes in secondary school? In any case, what role could be played by literary texts in the teaching/practice of philosophy?

Key words : Philosophy, Literature, Didactics, Inquiry, (Life) Experience

Lipman was once approached by someone claiming that his P4C novels were not literary texts. He was not troubled by this judgment for his only concern in writing them was that they would serve a purpose. That purpose was to encourage students to engage in philosophical inquiry in the classroom. Nothing else mattered or guided his writing. But this episode raises several questions :

- "And what if they were?";
- Does it have to be an either/or issue: "If you have philosophically provocative texts can they not then be literary texts?" - And vice versa - "Is a literary text, by definition, not a philosophically provocative one?";
- "What relationships can there possibly exist between Philosophy (or philosophical inquiry / philosophical education) and literature?";
- Last, but not least, "What can be understood as a literary text?" and "What differences and similarities are to be found when compared to a philosophical one?".

In this paper an attempt to address these questions will be made, taking into consideration two different educational settings - one related to the practice of philosophical inquiry with children and youth; the other concerning the teaching of philosophy as a subject matter within secondary school curricula.

How can a literary text be defined as such? Aside from academic definitions, there are several aspects to be taken into account concerning a literary text. In his work, "Ways of Worldmaking"¹, Nelson Goodman reflects on some of them - style, subject, structure, sentiments and emotions, as well as matters of convention and content. There are undoubtedly academic issues related to quality

standards in writing a literary text. Yet, there is one aspect that interests us the most within this specific context of using a literary text in doing/teaching philosophy: independence. However Lipman listed independence as a characteristic of creativity that is not to be applied to his novels, for they serve a specific purpose. If by independence we mean nothing but an open text in the sense that it does not convey any indoctrination, then yes, Lipman's novels are indeed open texts. But one might consider this "independence" in a more radical light, that of absolute freedom. According to this concept of independence, a literary text is characterized as serving no other purpose than the exercise of writing in itself. This does not imply that a literary text should reflect on itself exclusively, it only means that it is not written specifically to fit a certain purpose. Art can of course have different aims as long as its essence is not compromised by the ends it is supposed to serve. IAPC novels were created to fit a purpose: to allow students to engage in philosophical inquiry. This is only possible because those texts are not innocent in the sense that they contain in themselves several problematic topics from which students have to pick by means of raising questions for discussion.

We thus claim that a literary text it is not a manipulative one. Literature, like reality, shows the world as it is viewed through the eyes of its maker, the author. It does not necessarily and artificially lead the reader to certain highlighted issues. To work a text within philosophy classes should also contribute to train students to tune into the philosophical contents of life, which freely present themselves.

We subscribe to Tolstoy's² view on Art when he separates Art from Beauty, as opposed to Baumgarten's view on this subject(1714-1762), for instance. In this respect, and still subscribing to Tolstoy's approach to this matter, a literary text as a work of art, ought not necessarily be a beautiful one but it must convey feeling in the sense that its reader should not remain "untouched" by it. Art changes people, it moves those who approach or experience it³. For someone to be moved by a work of art, more than merely "naked" pure ideas are required. It implies conveying life experience that one can relate to. A literary text does not speak only to one's reason - it has to speak to one's humanity. That is the richness of the literary text. "Primum vivere deinde philosophari", wisely expresses the classic maxim incorporated by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), in his work "Leviathan". And in the field of Education, Dewey states that "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory (...)"⁴.

Exception made for "Pixie", the characters in Lipman's novels are little more than names given to certain viewpoints, thus the criticism about his stories not being truly literary texts, for they convey not life but good and/or bad reasoning.

There are several ways of doing philosophy with children and youth. With the same intensity that we are critical of Lipman's materials, we recognize and appreciate the methodology followed by the creator of P4C (Philosophy for Children). And why is this so? Because his methodology enables that which his texts lack, that is, reflecting on life experience, by bringing the individual as a whole into a philosophical discussion. The real challenge has to do with the materials. The question is: "Could

literary texts do it just as well or even better?" Answering this question is the same as searching for a balance between his methodology and the materials to apply it to.

Due to the lack of reliable (or otherwise) translations of the creator of P4C in the Portuguese book market, we were left with two choices : to give up on the P4C methodology given the lack of materials or to create new ones. Creating new ones provided the freedom to experiment with the relationship between Literature and Philosophy applied to the practice of doing philosophy with children and youth. There was however another factor that had to be taken into account, - the cultural context. The contents of Lipman's novels are rich in elements strange to our way of life, to the way of life of many countries other than the United States, like pledging allegiance to the national flag in the classroom at the beginning of each school day. In combining philosophical inquiry with literature, to choose texts (short stories or poems) from our national literature seemed like a natural choice. As an attempt to deal with the problem of how and what to select in the midst of such richness and variety of texts, a conceptual framework was created to serve as guidance in such a task. The purpose was to give the project some unity as well as consistency. This conceptual framework is strongly focused on anthropological issues. If one aims to introduce students (namely children) to philosophical thinking, one might as well present them with something which is at once interesting, puzzling but also familiar in the sense that they have first-hand experience of it : human nature.

Three major lines of inquiry were established: I_ Personal Identity (addressing aspects that would help answer the question "Who am I?"; II Others ("Who are those just like me?" or "Who are those that are so different from who I am?"), and finally, III _ Interaction, covering aspects of space and time coordinates in my action within my universe.

Once the texts were selected according to this framework, apart as from taking into consideration the age level they were intended for, another task emerged, that of creating a Teachers' guide containing didactical suggestions for teachers to use to work each of the texts included in the anthologies.

Thus, the Portuguese Curriculum for Doing Philosophy with Children and Youth encompasses four age levels (level I (ages 5 to 7); level II (8 to 9); level III (10 to 11); and finally level IV (12 to 15)). Materials were not created for secondary school considering that there is already an official philosophy program to be applied at that level. Although they would not be redundant given the differences in terms of materials, aims and methodology, they would inevitably overlap.

Within a secondary school context, the use of texts is usually the most frequent didactic resource in philosophy classes. Two kinds of texts are often used within the Portuguese educational system_ technical texts introducing aspects of the history or the nature of philosophy, on the one hand, or texts by philosophers, on the other. In both cases, students already know beforehand that they are philosophical texts; they are not surprised by the philosophical elements they find in their reading. Thus, they are not trained to select and distinguish what elements are of philosophical interest from those that are not. This skill is not to be worked given the kind of texts used in philosophy classes. If philosophy classes in secondary school are clearly not meant to engage students in academic

philosophy, is this not a contradiction? This is not to say that technical texts should not be used in philosophy classes in secondary school, or texts by philosophers (although some might be too complicated to understand without the skills sharpened within the specific context of academic philosophy which they are not familiar with).

Descartes is cynically right in his Discourse on the Method 5 - common sense is the most widely distributed commodity in the World since everyone claims to possess it enormously. In this sense and applying it to philosophy classes in secondary school, a balanced choice of different kinds of texts would be welcome. This would mean that literary texts (excerpts, for instances) could be equally considered as valid resources in the practice of philosophical thinking. For example, in working towards a definition of what constitutes art and considering its relationships with beauty, philosophers like Adorno, for instances, could be considered, but writers such as Oscar Wilde (The Portrait of Dorian Gray) or Thomas Mann (Death in Venice) could be introduced as well. Indeed, these texts present the reader with two opposite views on art in relation to beauty. In The Portrait of Dorian Gray, art is meant to satisfy one's senses through the pleasantness resulting from aesthetic appreciation; no other end or function is admissible so that the essence of art matches its useless nature. Death in Venice places art in the realm of ideality, rationality. In its association with beauty, art guides or introduces Man to the ideal of perfection leading those who contemplate it to overcome themselves in striving to reach a glimpse at that ideal. If Wilde's hedonistic view on art leads to lust, Mann's idealistic views on this matter lead to platonic love. From this example, we could conclude that in Literature, as in Philosophy or in life itself, a diversity of lines of inquiry can be found, as well as conflicting perspectives on a given issue. This would imply that students need to take a stand on these matters and/or perspectives based not only on pure reasoning (theory) but on their life experience as well, given the experiential contents literary texts convey while telling a story. This is no doubt a more appealing context to work philosophically on. It would be easier to show its purpose when applied to daily life experience or even to self-experience or self-referential, as Taylor6 claims [Taylor : 2002:82]. By making literary texts an ally of philosophy classes it is possible to bring their charm into the discussion of ideas. Stories have an incantatory power that draws us into another universe where we relate to characters and virtual situations7 (Carrière [1998:7-8]) Thus, authenticity could be achieved in philosophical inquiry for it has to do with stands that students portray in identifying with whatever questions are in stake since they can relate to them8. It requires empathy at first, then analogical reasoning in applying that which is self-referential to a broader picture. Therefore, philosophical inquiry needs not to be doomed but to abstract aspects; life would be placed in its realm.

One can only ask what sort of relationships can be established between these two educational settings concerning Philosophy as a practice or as a subject matter. That is to say, how can philosophy with children and youth and the teaching of philosophy in secondary school be related. Perhaps this will depend largely on the options taken by each country concerning educational policies. Furthermore, this ultimately depends on a personal level, on the profile and philosophical sensitivity of the teacher. Taking into account the influence of philosophy classes in secondary school

on P4C sessions, this would help to support a certain level of rigor and philosophical quality in philosophical inquiry with the young people, differentiating clearly philosophical dialogue from small talk. The problem is that philosophy classes in secondary school, given the different approaches enshrined in teacher training paradigms, are not always conducive to the exercise of philosophical thinking, focusing - rather on introducing students non-critically to the History of Philosophy. Therefore, secondary school philosophy classes have much to benefit from importing some didactic strategies used in P4C classes, namely in terms of hermeneutic matters, citizenship, and philosophical dialogue. With regard to the use of text, reading in turns, instead of asking or appointing one or few students to perform such a task, would be beneficial in fostering the students' involvement in class development. The same could be said about constructing an agenda for discussion on the text read in class, or civic habits acquired by taking part in philosophical discussion, like tolerance or mutual respect among participants.

In conclusion, and paraphrasing Tolstoy⁹, the place we give to literature (Art) has to do with our conception of human life. In the context of either teaching or practicing philosophy, it has to do with a broader concept: the place of Humanity itself and personal life experience and to what extent they should be considered of philosophical (and didactical) value.

(1) (1978) *Ways of Worldmaking*.

(2) (1918) *Qu'est-ce que l'Art ?*

(3) "Et si nous n'avions pas la capacité d'être émus des sentiments d'autrui par le moyen de l'art, nous serions presque plus sauvages encore, plus séparés l'un de l'autre, plus hostiles l'un à l'autre". Tolstoy, 1918:57.

(4) "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely even as a theory." Dewey, 1966:144.

(5) *Discourse of the method, Part I*.

(6) "Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be my orientation. But this doesn't mean that on another level the content must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfill my desires or aspirations, as against something that stands beyond these." Taylor, Charles, (2002) *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 82.

(7) Si le conte (...) c'est sans doute qu'elle renferme quelque vertu- , quelque singulier principe de permanence. Sa première force est évidemment de nous transporter en quelques mots dans un autre monde, celui où nous imaginons les choses où lieu de les subir, un monde où nous dominons l'espace et le temps, où nous mettons en mouvement des personnages impossibles (...) un monde

sans limite et sans règle, où nous organisons à notre gré les rencontres, les combats, les passions."
Carrière, 1998:7-8

(8) "If authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own "sentiment de l'existence," then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole." Taylor, o.c., p.91.

(9) L'art n'est pas une jouissance, un plaisir, ni un amusement: l'art est une grande chose. C'est un organe vital de l'humanité, qui transporte dans le domaine du sentiment les conceptions de la raison. Tolstoy (1918 : 208).