Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation by Erin Elizabeth Greer

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Ever since John L. Austin's exclusion of poetic utterances from his consideration in *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975: 22), literary theorists have strived towards connecting his theory – and Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) in general – to the realm of literature. Two recent examples are Toril Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Moi 2017) and Eric Lindstrom's *Jane Austen and Other Minds* (Lindstrom 2023). These literary readings of OLP are made possible by Stanley Cavell's philosophy, and Erin Greer follows Sandra Laugier (Laugier 2005) in considering Cavell's relation to Austin and Wittgenstein as central to the constitution of OLP. *Fiction, Philosophy and the Ideal of Conversation* is the latest addition to this strand of literary readings of OLP and distinguishes itself by building on Cavell's ideal of conversation to define what Greer calls a "conversational outlook". Through literary interpretations that span across 200 years of British literary history, from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) to Ali Smith's *There But For The* (2011), Greer shows how literature can clarify this conversational outlook and how philosophy can enact it. She thus brings into dialogue philosophy and literature, without identifying one with the other, following Cavell's famous question at the end of *The Claim of Reason*: "Can philosophy become literature and still know itself?" (Cavell 1979: 496)

Even though the ideal of conversation is not a radically new method in literary theory, one of the greatest merits of Greer's book is to connect it to Hannah Arendt's philosophy, thus bringing OLP on an ethical and political terrain that is not primarily its own. In so doing, Greer turns conversational criticism outwards, towards the world, rather than inwards, towards the literary itself. Through conversation with and between texts, literature helps us recovering the world from which the sceptic attempts to cut us. Throughout her literary analyses, Greer highlights various components of conversation by showing its relation to other notions such as form of life,

performativity, and aesthetic judgement.

Greer's interpretation of Austen's *Persuasion* in Chapter One demonstrates that conversation is a form of life that we shape by negotiating its limits. By connecting her reading of Austen to Cavell's perfectionism, she shows that the aim of a conversational form of life is not to compare itself to a model but to discover what it can become through conversation. Conversation and perfectionism do not aim towards a specific end, but, as Greer argues, "there is nonetheless a direction, a tendency towards social critique" (p. 41). This social dimension of her reading of Cavell brings her to discuss John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and Cavell's idea of democracy as "a society that affords perfectionist conversation at both individual and institutional scales" (p. 57). This focus on social justice and democracy already hints towards the political dimensions explored in Chapters Four and Five.

Analysing George Meredith's *The Egoist* (1879) in Chapter Two, Greer connects conversation to performativity. She shows that the main problem is not how we use words, but how others understand (and are willing to understand) our words. Her reading thus reminds us that language is always used in a shared context, in a community that structures the norms of speech. While many literary theorists inspired by OLP have aimed to show that literature is performative and that it has illocutionary force, Greer considers that the performativity at play in conversation is rather perlocutionary. She builds her conception of perlocution on Cavell's analysis of "passionate utterances" to show the opposition between a language of convention and a language of passion in *The Egoist*. The question Greer raises at the end of Chapter Two is thus of central importance for the transformative aims explored further in her book:

> How can conversation be world making without reproducing repressive interpretive norms, yet also without repressing the truth of scepticism, our reliance on shared forms of life to mean anything at all? (p. 94)

Answering this question involves investigating the question of aesthetic judgement. Through her reading of Virginia Woolf's works in Chapter Three, Greer argues that aesthetic judgement presupposes a shared world, and that conversation is a form of communion through a *sensus communis*. The multiple perspectives that we hold in our aesthetic judgments do not resolve in a synthesis but bring us to create a shared world in which we can hold a conversation. Rather than positing the existence of the world and norms, aesthetic judgment asks that we create the conditions for conversation, namely that we create the world we share and the norms we use to judge it.

This idea of creating a world in which we can converse leads Greer to investigate Arendt's philosophy and her understanding of perspectivism. In so doing, Greer highlights the ethical and political dimensions of

conversation that were only implicitly present in Chapters One to Three. The question of judgement relates conversation to politics: An aesthetic judgment and a political one require that we can hold conversations about them. Reading Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) in Chapter Four, Greer considers that this conversation shapes a common world and helps understanding how newness comes into the world. This newness is central for democracy as it builds a world in which "new voices, claims and interpretations" (p. 161) can be expressed and disagree with other voices. In our contemporary world, a place where such voices can find expression is the digital realm, that Greer explores in her analysis of Ali Smith's *Then But For The* in the last chapter of her book. In contrast to political conversation, digital conversation involves a social dimension of representative thinking built through an imagined *sensus communis*. This form of thinking follows a memetic interpretation that differentiates itself from aesthetic judgment by being social rather than public.

Greer's book is a valuable addition to the discussion of the relation between OLP and literature that offers a renewed way of reading literary texts. Its strength lies in the conversation that she establishes between philosophy and literature, not imposing a philosophical theory to analyse literary texts, nor using literature as mere exemplification of a philosophical theory, but attuning philosophy and literature to show how issues raised by literary texts can enlighten our philosophical understanding and vice versa. It further enriches the understanding of OLP by revealing its ethical and political dimensions: by recovering literature, OLP recovers a transformative power on the world.

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