Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophy of Literature: Four Studies*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018, Paperback, 150 pp., $20.00, ISBN 9781532641732.

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There is an irreplaceable delight: it is the delight of thought, the delight that occurs only when consciousness touches the world, enjoys it in the contemplative act and understands it. It is precisely in this way that consciousness is one with the world and, even more, when it arranges the world in a meaningful order that calls forth beauty. This delight differs from everything else. It is a bold heuristic and unexpectedly powerful enjoyment because, unlike all other passions-pleasures subjugating and enslaving human beings, it gives freedom, and provides consciousness with an amazing means for exhilarating spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and even existential emancipation.

It looks like the main challenge confronting all those who professionally deal with aesthetic issues is how to overcome the self-enclosedness of meaning, its "narcissistic" selfishness, limited to the circle of self-understanding and enjoyment, even as it provokes the longing for sharing with others. This longing should accomplish understanding-enjoyment without subjection to the stereotype of unified taste or restricted to a general impersonal and multi-purpose aesthetic ideal. Since the intimacy of aesthetic experience does not simply imply sophisticated taste and culture but depends on personal development. It also implies a certain counterpart in the social environment that supports the emergence and realization of communication. Beauty is never limited to a discussion of the subject's experience, although, undoubtedly, aesthetic disinterestedness is the deepest and the spontaneously purest expression of the subject who is selflessly contemplating or creating a masterpiece.

Hence it is worthwhile to define our field of study within the framework of the general philosophy of art and the philosophical topic of thinking about the expression and the expressive forms that today we call, after Alexander Baumgarten's general concept, aesthetics. The philosophy of literature consists of a self-defined field, namely the artifact

of art itself, "fiction," which uses one of the most original features of human nature, language, the communicative impulse, and the natural tendency to exchange beyond the common meaning of man as "a social animal" (ζ□ον πολιτικόν), in Aristotle's words. Therefore, the philosophy of literature, as a sub-domain of the philosophy of art, dealing with language and language's intrinsic ability to express and to communicate expression, also reveals expression as the opportunity for play and for freedom of the imagination. The literary imagination creates its own forms loaded with literally "readable" content, which besides being read, understood and comprehended, offers pleasure and disinterested aesthetic contemplation.

It seems to me that the above theoretical suppositions lend force to the vibrancy and overall impetus of Donald Phillip Verene's new book, *The Philosophy of Literature: Four Studies*. In this concise book, Verene raises the challenging question that has haunted the development of philosophical thought since its dawn: what can philosophers learn from the poets? Subtending this is the question of the kind of wisdom that poets can claim, when wisdom belongs to philosophers as their natural privilege. According to Verene, the most important question is the difference between poetic and philosophical wisdom, and what poets can teach philosophers. Why should they listen to each other at all?

Verene adopts an elegant and somewhat safe research model. In the tradition of aesthetics, two methodological approaches have been established. The two approaches imply different goals and naturally achieve quite different results. The first approach derives from Plato; it is powerful and uncompromising. This approach informs every possible normative aesthetics, which is structured around a basic law and is itself legislative. This approach is purely normative and sets the rules that have to be inferred directly from "the theory," from the top down, regardless of their spontaneous nature. It implies a paradigm inherent in every work of art that guarantees and preserves its essence. The second approach is related to Aristotle's poetics; it is much milder and more relevant to the context of a given situation. It proposes first to observe a work of art *per se* in its own spontaneity and intimacy, and only then to reflect and summarize theoretical ideas or to form independent concepts.

Verene's overall approach seems closer to the second type of method, which implies both a broader understanding of the literary field and a wider understanding of philosophical questions as a whole. That is

why his style is more akin to a dialogue, seeking arguments in the overall picture of cultural and spiritual development to achieve a new and unexpected rethinking of the cultural heritage. Verene's main goal is to rethink the significance of old stereotypes, the authority of ossified basic truths, and to look at them from a perspective of greater ease, freedom, and thoughtful detachment.

This might explain why his book begins with an extensive "Introduction" that raises the theme of Plato's notorious controversy with the poets, not only on the terrain of his emblematic dialogue and peculiar vision of utopia, *The Republic*, but also concerning Homer's poetic wisdom. In Verene's own words, language and literature are the very heart of human knowledge, so it is necessary to admit that speculative imagination and poetic imagination have a common *topos*, a common place from which they arise, and this is the mythological imagination that is best revealed in the spontaneity of the narrative literary forms appearing in all historical periods and societies. The arguments pursued in the book touch upon such thinkers of Antiquity as Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and such titanic Renaissance minds as Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico (to the extent that the latter can be considered a figure of the Renaissance); from there, the study flies freely through the ideas of the Enlightenment and Immanuel Kant and reaches Georg Hegel's concept of art as possessing its own history and mission in human culture.

The first chapter discusses Jorge Luis Borges's *The Immortal*; the second, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; the third, Carl Sandburg's epic prose poem *The People, Yes*; and the fourth, Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*. It is not by accident that Verene chooses these literary works; they serve not only as illustrative material, but also as an embodiment of human consciousness and imagination. For, as he himself asserts: "Language is a master key to the human world."[1] According to Verene, the literary work gives direct access to the very mechanism of thinking, and hence, to the metaphysical justification of truth. Thus, fictional and speculative approaches artistically help each other, through their spontaneous linguistic essence, in constructing credible argumentative statements. In the midst of the expressiveness of language and its ability to create metaphors, Verene reveals the fundamental intellectual operation

[1] Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophy of Literature: Four Studies* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 18.

of "imagination" as an intellectual power capable of choosing, judging, sifting, comparing, and ultimately realizing the important mental refinement of available ideas. Through the literary image, the literary narrative, literary tropes as well as through general artistic techniques, Verene attempts to highlight the complex relationship not only between philosophy and literature, but also between the individual and the societies that men build in the world that unfolds before their senses. Thus, Verene finds himself at the cutting edge of some of the most recent problems in ethics, metaphysics and politics: "Wisdom is a knowledge of the things divine and human, a knowledge of the whole, and eloquence is to put the whole in words, as 'wisdom speaking' (*la sapienza che parla*). We must experience eloquence to be eloquent, and that can be acquired only by the study of the canon."[2]

Verene's *The Philosophy of Literature* is an inspired erudite virtuoso play of philosophical consciousness that desires to achieve literary elegance, metaphorical depiction, and immediacy. The book being written with ease, the reader perceives it with the same ease and pleasure. Furthermore, it somehow unnoticeably manages to present a new concept of human wisdom; a new understanding of what we call wisdom, humanism, philosophy, and poetry, due to the lucid consciousness that man is first of all a being of thought and language. Thought and language having a common root, imagination, which is man's only means for understanding and expressing the world and the only effective means to salvation. Only with words do we reach ourselves; with that unexpected freedom that otherwise turns out to be completely unattainable. Words are our strength and our longing; they help us to remember and give us beauty, salvation, pleasure, and hope in an otherwise very cruel, meaningless, and chaotic world. For philosophy, eloquence, and even language itself are much like Homer's Muse who sings about what was and what will be, but leaves us free to create what we must learn and know now. Humans need words, which serve as mirrors to help them achieve not only knowledge about the world but also self-knowledge and, even more importantly, self-naming.

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[2] Ibid., 19.