

On Agreeing with Martha Nussbaum: The Tyranny of Outside Theory

By Deirdre Nansen McCloskey*

My friend Martha Nussbaum’s comment on *Crossing: A Transgender Memoir* (McCloskey [1999] 2019) is characteristically classy and humane – one might even say womanly. Would that we all, men and women, partook of such womanliness, with manliness, too.

What is hard to grasp about anyone’s self is of course exactly how it feels from the other side. Martha works at it, with her usual Socratic wisdom and Platonic eloquence. She knows that humans are not merely complicated, which is the usual analysis, prefatory to simplifying. “Oh, I see, you are a woman, or a Bernsteinian revisionist, or a rightist. Got it.” No: what is most puzzling, but essential to be acknowledged for a liberated and creative society (it is the main point she and I are making), is that humans are changeable, at any rate if they’re allowed to be. The fact challenges the dismal identity politics of both the left or the right, the notion that your place in a class or in a tradition is unchangeable, and suffices to end the argument: “Ah, comrade, I see why you say that – after all, you are objectively bourgeois.” Or, “Ah, child, I see why you say that – you are objectively French.”

Some people don’t allow themselves to change and become cross and start shouting “disgusting” and “shameful” when other people do change. The only book of Jean-Paul Sartre I have been able to understand is one he wrote in white heat late in the War, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (1948), in which he noted that most people eventually become marble-like, “the durability of a stone,” unwilling to change. In their early twenties all people are flexible and promising. Then by their thirties most people have decided who they are, and call a stop. (The irony, and *mauvaise foi*, is that Sartre was a leading case in point, taking to his grave the cherished Stalinism of his youth.)

It’s not only about gender, or politics. In science and scholarship most people learn their little trick in their twenties and then become marmoreal. The best, like Martha, keep learning. But most people want to be, as Harry Truman said, experts – who don’t want to learn anything new, because then they wouldn’t be experts. It’s true for in-

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stance of two very different fields that between us Martha and I know pretty well, economics and gender studies.

The problem in both fields – and, come to think of it, in everything else a speaking species does, from marital relations to writing “The Idea of Order at Key West” – is the unbridgeable gap between words and things. It’s the gap between a woman’s voice singing and the sea about which she sang. “She sang beyond the genius of the sea. / The water never formed to mind or voice. . . / Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The maker’s rage to order words of the sea.” (“Maker” from the Greek for “poet.”) We have a rage to order words of ourselves and of others in ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds, but of course we fail to close the gap. Characters in a novel for example must be more consistent than people actually are, or else the reader loses the plot. Real people are not consistent (Samuelsonian economics to the contrary), and the best and entrepreneurial are not marmoreal. The European novel gestures towards ethical change in the main characters, Emma Woodhouse or Pierre Bezukhov. But it is the tragic-gestured person who is real, beyond words.

The modernist swerve on or about December 1910 was to retreat into the words themselves, or to 12 tones, or to colored shapes, or to mathematics, or to Theory, alone. They suffice, after all, to get tenure, or to publish a Workshop poem in *The New Yorker*, or a theorem in the *Journal of Economic Theory*. The modernist dogma in many social sciences is that we must forget about human meaning, and retreat into a positivistic behaviorism, insisting on looking at humans only from the outside, from Theory, as though they were ants. Yet we have, Martha points out, the sea itself to look at, and the person herself, and must not let Theory take up all the space. That is, “theorists can and should be held accountable, and not the other way round.” I agree, and would apply it to my own science, too. In the 1970 s the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago held itself accountable to the thing in itself. Now the joke on a t-shirt is, “That’s all right in practice, but does it work in Theory?”

One of the numerous contradictions of the Theory of positivistic behaviorism, which I once espoused, is that, in ignoring the meaning-making of human speech, the behaviorist inexplicably ignores one sort of behavior, while passionately asserting a meaning that you must not listen to meaning. Another is the metaphysical assertion by him (I choose the gender with care) that metaphysics is meaningless. Another is to use words to argue that only numbers are meaningful. Another is to declare that numbers carry their own meaning, as in tests of statistical significance, an assertion that the Supreme Court rejected in a 9 to 0 vote.¹ I could go on.

Stanley Fish (1999) notes cleverly that the only true biography is autobiography, not because the subject gets it right – as Martha says, we don’t, much – but because the

¹ *Matrixx Initiatives, Inc. v. Siracusano*, 563 U.S. 27 (2011), and “Brief for Statistics Experts Professors Deirdre M. McCloskey and Stephen T. Ziliak in Support of Respondent,” Nov 12, 2010, No. 09–1156, oral argument Jan 10, 2011.

very statement exhibits this or that truth.² “An autobiography,” she points out, “can show what a philosophical article can’t.” Show, not tell. Consider Donald Trump telling about himself. So we have Martha’s showing of a loving father, one interested in the aesthetics of women’s clothing.

But on that point she says, “I share McCloskey’s lifelong fascination with women’s clothing.” Yet I was not fascinated, not exactly, and certainly not in an aesthetic way. Until about December 1810, of course, male clothing in Europe was that of the aristocratic peacock, not the bourgeois businessman. Martha and I join in Dr. Johnson’s sentiment: “Greek, sir, is like lace; every man gets as much of it as he can.” Thus it was in 1780; then remarkably in 1810 it started to change. (She and I admire Anne Hollander’s account of the change.) But in my case sex was the point, and that episodically, not beauty. When I was a man, I wore the uniform with pride – khakis, red tie, cordovan shoes, oxford broadcloth shirt, Harris tweed sports coat. Boring, but it took me only half an hour to buy clothing.

She is correct to say that any “identity is both found, demanding to be let out, and laboriously constructed.” The contrary Romantic and then modernist fancy is that essences are permanent and therefore have nothing to do with “mere” choice of style. Saying so is a piece with the assault on the rhetorical tradition since the hard men of the 17th century. Recently Virginia Postrel’s (1998; 2004; 2013; 2020) glittering books have made the self-fashioning point. Before the Romantic movement, people knew this. George Washington, for example, made himself into the leader of the nation by following an advice book for gentlemen (“Give not advice without being asked and when desired to do it briefly”), like Ben Franklin’s table of virtues (he added Humility later: “I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the *reality* of this virtue, but I had a good deal with regard to the *appearance* of it”).

Martha asks then, “Why do many people think that gender change is weird or bad or crazy, when they do not think this way about religious or cultural change, or change of profession?” Yes. She channels the irritated question by the marmoreal Romantic: “Why would you do it, usually well after childhood, if you were not already that?” It is supposed to be the one thing, already known from birth, an essence. But she takes the marmorealist too seriously, complaining that “neither Bettcher nor Deirdre offers a view about where the sense of urgency comes from: is it social? Biological? Something else?” Well, it is all these, as it is for changing profession or race, sometimes also violently enforced by punishment for not passing – and also for the sheer delight, which I am allowed now to share with her, in the daring of women’s (and once upon a time, men’s) attire. But she in this is asking the Why Question, which I wish she would not – right after telling the charting story of her American friend who just delights in writing philosophy in French, and has no answer as to Why.

² “Autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not.” He also likes celebrity bios, because “contingency and accident are pretty much the content of celebrity lives,” and are not forced into a Theory.

And her own autobiographical remarks make the point. She offers “thanks to my women’s school, which did not teach me how to be inferior, thanks to my father, who never let me sell myself short.” Like Yentl in the tale, encouraged by her father, “I have always wanted to be a man, i. e. one of the ones with ideas that change the world, the ones with the best lines in the best plays.” My mother was the same, teaching her son to venture. Among other venturing like her Viking ancestors over her long life, when Donald was an adolescent he watched her passionately studying Greek through Xenophon on the kitchen table. But like Martha she wanted the man’s part for the lines only, not for the sex or the lace.

The liberal vision that Martha and I share, of wholly unoppressed individuals permitted to change, drives the left and right to distraction. Yet it made the modern world, as against the naturalization of imposed differences, such as Aristotle declaring that some are born to be slaves or Marx declaring that the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.

Liberalism is under attack worldwide. Martha and I join in urging you, as we have in our lives, to change, and to welcome it. You come, too.

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