

Maria Pia Lara.

Moral Textures: feminist narratives in the public sphere

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Stephan Meyer



Maria Pia Lara's *Moral Textures: feminist narratives in the public sphere* is a long overdue and thus most welcome study which bridges the gap between insights drawn largely from Jürgen Habermas' intersubjectivist theory of rationality and action in the public sphere to literary and cultural studies which are not fixated on the isolated text. Noises in that direction have been made before, but Lara's study is the most extensive to date. Precursors in this line have been tentative remarks by literary theorists¹; or philosophers detecting a lurking interest in the aesthetic in Habermas' writing in the mid eighties² and more lately feminist theorists who identify the potential derived from linking the good and the right, private and public, culture and society.³ Lara's book is unique though in that it covers these aspects in their interrelatedness, in greater depth, and with its main empirical reference anchored in feminism. As the subtitle suggests, she specifically concentrates on women's life writing and its impact on the public sphere. The main theoretical building blocks in her argument besides Habermas are Arendt (minus Heidegger), Ricoeur, Wellmer, Nussbaum, and Habermas' sympathetic feminist critics, to wit Benhabib and Fraser.

The book consists of articles which previously appeared in various publications, with some of them printed here for the first time in English, and some new chapters written specifically for this occasion. As the articles are however reworked and the arguments cross-referenced, the book is not merely a collage, but unfolds a larger picture. In a two-phase thrust, Lara first traces the shift from the aesthetic to the moral, and then from the moral to the political spheres. Thus she draws an extended trajectory in the life of (auto)biographical narratives, beginning with the writing of a narrative of the self and terminating in changes initiated in political institutions. Tracking the production and reception of feminist narratives she makes halt at the author reflecting on, and organising her experiences, the

¹ Peter Bürger *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt an Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) and 'Kunst und Rationalität' in Axel Honneth et al *Zwischenbetrachtungen in Prozeß der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989); Patrocínio P. Schweickart 'Reading ourselves: Toward a feminist theory of reading' in Elaine Showalter (ed.) *Speaking of Gender* (NY: Routledge, 1989); Terry Eagleton *The ideology of the aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 39.

² David Ingram *Habermas and the dialectic of reason* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. xvii – xx); Albrecht Wellmer *The persistence of modernity: essays on aesthetics, ethics, and postmodernism* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT, 1991).

³ For example in the collection edited by Johanna Meehan *Feminists read Habermas* (NY: Routledge, 1995).

text, the reading individual, different reading publics, civil society and the political public, always keeping in mind that these are not discrete entities.

While Habermas' hovering presence in the background is always felt, Lara departs from him at various significant points. The first distinction is in her focus on culture, and the cultural twist she gives to the notion of illocutionary force as the result of reading Habermas in an Arendtian light (12). She argues that this shift to a more cultural understanding of communicative action corrects Habermas' failure to account for the mediation between the good life and justice (170). Whereas traditional speech act theory takes single sentences as the bearers of illocutionary force, Lara uses the term illocutionary force more widely for the impact of whole narratives on the symbolic domain. The second distinction is a result of the first. Lara holds that 'cultural space' constitutes 'an arena where societies can change their self-understandings precisely because moral, aesthetic and political issues are intertwined' (170). Whereas Habermas earlier insisted on a clean cut between the moral and the ethical, and the moral was excluded from intersubjective rational scrutiny, Lara notes the shift in *Between Facts and Norms* according to which deliberation is possible about the interpretation of needs and desires, and in which the law operates as mediating transformer between the two (34). Her own position is however to emphasise the role of social movements and culture in this mediation, and as domains in which not only notions of justice, but also notions of the good life are intersubjectively challenged. This shift from social action to culture however brings its own problems regarding accounts given of causality and action as I point out below. Whereas her notion of illocutive force is illuminating in explaining the impact that narratives have on the symbolic resources at our disposal, unfortunately Lara's own neglect of Habermas' speech act theory leaves a certain potential untapped. This has two consequences: firstly, like most critics, who merely follow Habermas in this, she fails to inquire into the validity claim intelligibility (*Verständlichkeit*) which, so Habermas, deals with the appropriateness of a speech system to the interpretation of needs.⁴ Secondly, the neglect of Habermas' speech act theory with its single sentence bias, means that the gap between illocutive force on the micro level of the sentence and illocutive force on the macro level of narratives remains unclosed, and the transition from illocutive force from sentence to text unexplained.

While reproducing in her work the lacuna around the validity claim intelligibility in Habermas' writing, Lara greatly improves on another silence, namely the expressivistic aspect of communication. Habermas distinguishes between constatives, regulatives, and expressives aligning these with theoretical-scientific, moral-legal, and aesthetic-practical claims, but focuses his attention on the regulatives at the cost of the constative and the expressive for themselves, and in their connection to each other. Lara's aim is to illuminate the major role played by the expressive in the 'creation, expansion and self-understanding of the identities of social actors in the public sphere' (50). Arguing with Wellmer (who is closer to Adorno), against Habermas, she notes that art is not 'the opposite of the rational' but 'a specific form of rationality: expressive rationality' (53). In the same way as public

⁴ Habermas, 'Wahrheitstheorien' in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 176.

communication and intersubjectivity guarantee the rationality of ethics, it also makes it possible for us to view 'aesthetics as a form of rationality,' and to detect a 'dynamic flow between the moral and the aesthetic dimensions,' which takes the form of 'growing subjectivities' (53). In both art and the receiving subject there is a 'simultaneous expansion of boundaries' (56), or in Wellmer's words: "the reflexive opening-up of literary forms of representation triggers a playful to and fro between identification and differentiation on the part of the reader, which effectively works toward a genuine expansion of subjective boundaries" (56). There is thus a correlation between the modern notion of the subject as autonomous and authentic and the role of modern art in opening the subject to new experiences thereby expanding her boundaries (55).

Insisting on the integration of the world of art into the life of the recipient, Lara holds that participants in discourses about the rightness of a work of art have to bring their experience to the evaluation by mobilising it into arguments: 'In aesthetic discourse, the truth-potential of art and its truth-claims are understood only when we appeal to the various dimensions of truth in the experiences of individuals, in their transformations and in their changing ways of perceiving and interpreting themselves' (58). But this individual reception is not the end of the line. Life narrative understood as performative dialogues take place 'simultaneously in the public sphere and in the individual's reception of literary works, which are inextricably fused in the cultural domain' (59). So, once integrated into the context of a life of the reading individual, and into the cultural and public spheres, in which several individuals interact communicatively, an interconnection between the aesthetic and the ethical results. This connection between art and life seems to me to call for further clarification, necessitated by, amongst other things, terminological ambiguities which go back to Habermas' writing. While the expressive validity claim is sometimes connected to authentic living, in others, it is connected to artistic authenticity.⁵ Although Lara's point is that the two are related when integrated in the life of an individual or in the cultural domain, on the whole makes sense, it seems to me necessary that what threatens to be more than a terminological ambiguity needs to be sorted out in order to avoid conflation rather than correlation. In this regard following up Welsch's revival of Baumgarten's use of the term aesthetic might be promising in clarifying these interconnections.⁶

Although Lara departs from Habermas in relating the normative to the aesthetic, she does not mean it as an erasure of the distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical, or as the aestheticisation of the moral sphere. She seeks rather to illuminate the interconnection between them (11), thus avoiding Habermas' criticism of the avant-garde which fails to distinguish between different logics and criteria of evaluation for art and ethics, as well as for art and life. Because of this, she rejects Taylor's 'undifferentiated mixture of the aesthetic and the moral spheres,' demanding instead an account of the 'translation between one validity sphere or another' (125). What she finds lacking in Taylor's

⁵ Compare figures 16 and 19 in Habermas *The theory of communicative action* vol. I (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), pp. 328 and 334.

⁶ Wolfgang Welsch *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990).

reliance on the aesthetic domain, is the realisation that 'choosing one's life project and the struggle for its public recognition must be firmly grounded in the normative sphere' (ibid.).

It is Arendt who furnishes Lara with three specific characteristics with which to theorise the connection between the public sphere and narratives. Firstly, in her notion of the public sphere, Lara takes account, not only of consensus, but also of 'the interpretative struggles to resist domination and *agonistic* performances to attract the attention of other groups' (Emphasis added. 8). She secondly shares Arendt's valorisation of speech as the highest form of action. Although the 'disclosure of the "who" is implicit in everything one does and says,' (41) 'action revealed through speech is the most intimately related to the "public part of the world common to us all"' (44). Finally, drawing on Benjamin's influence on Arendt, Lara takes narratives of the past as 'vehicles of human aspirations and desires for a possible future' (43). Storytelling, she holds, 'can project us into the future through our learning from the past, and provide new meanings that give rise to a beginning. [...] The past is not something fixed and final, but is continually refigured and updated in the present' (42 - 43). In this final constructivist remark, two things need however to be distinguished: (i) the forming of a subject's identity through the discursive categories at her and others' disposal in the *process of her becoming*; and (ii) the discursive categories at her disposal in reflecting on this original process *in the act of writing*. The new beginnings exist in new discursive categories which impact on how the subject interprets herself as she is now and how she interprets the process of her becoming during the act of writing. However, just as little as god can change the past, just as little can her formation by discursive categories in the past be changed. Learning consists, not in wiping out the past, but in expanding on it. Therefore, updating the past means giving an account of the discursive categories available in the past using new discursive categories, which explain why and how these old ones needed to and could be overcome.

Habermas' use of the Heideggerian vocabulary of disclosure provides an impulse for Lara to transform it from its monological, aestheticised, and ontological use, into intersubjectivist, moral, and cultural terms. Thus she not only fills a gap in Habermas' own failure to explicate what he means by disclosure⁷, but she also gives it an interpretation which harmonises with the premises of his theory in general. According to her, disclosure refers to 'symbolic innovations which create new ways of conceiving the social world' (111). Although she grants that 'social criticism has always taken images, metaphors and visions from expressive language in the same way that art displays a new perception of life' (113) she insists that art does not however hold a monopoly on disclosure. In fact, disclosure is 'related to the "expressive" effect and the aesthetic dimension of speech' which occur as much in ordinary as in poetic language (112). Thus 'it is not only artists who provide new frames for social criticism. If one understands the major role of art itself in the dialogically constructed social world, and that there is feedback between different validity spheres, then anyone capable of finding a new way of

⁷ Jürgen Habermas *The philosophical discourse of modernity* (Cambridge : Polity, 1987), 45 ff.

framing things can attain a disclosive effect that strengthens their arguments through the influence of other validity spheres' (113). In this she concurs with Fraser against Rorty.⁸

Not only does she not restrict disclosure to the aesthetic, but she also insists on the relations between its intersubjectivist and its individual moments, pointing out that disclosures, 'cannot be self-verifying or self-justifying; they can only legitimate themselves through the filter of public opinion' (113). Lara cites feminist narratives as exemplary source of such disclosing terms like gender, care, and difference, that provide 'new ways to symbolize self-understanding and self-interpretation,' which 'not only illuminate once repressed truths but create possibilities for relationships that were never envisioned before' (70 and 171). These symbolic innovations are connected to the development of identities and the demand for recognition. According to Lara, the 'creation of new vocabularies of needs, the new understanding of values that are presupposed in these new needs, and the wider and deeper interpretations of life and respect for it – these are the really critical elements to be discussed in any model of recognition' (126). This prioritisation of new vocabularies over new arguments raises some questions. Lara herself provides neither a theory of truth, nor a theory of argument. The problem is that she cannot simply fall back on Habermas when dealing with fictional narratives (like Austen's novels (94 ff.)), because Habermas himself explicitly excludes non-serious (i.e. literary) speech acts from his theories of argument and truth. In line with his differentiation thesis he furthermore holds that each cultural domain (in this case the literary one) has its own logic of argumentation, which neither he nor Lara has explicated. What is needed is clearly a theory of the specific logic of aesthetic argumentation aimed at providing a bridging principle between, what Habermas (using Toulmin's terminology) calls backing and claims. In discourse ethics the universalisation principle plays this role. In theoretical arguments this role is played by induction. Until a theory of aesthetic argument is provided, the claim that aesthetic discourse constitutes a form of rationality, remains vacuous.

Drawing on Habermas' views on the place of autobiography in the development of the modern public sphere, and Arendt's concept of storytelling, Lara holds that autobiographies are performative actions in the quest for identity (37). She then combines the idea of 'narratives as self-presentations' with a theory of culture 'that sees moral identities as products of performative narratives between social groups and civil society that simultaneously create and reconfigure the symbolic order' (23). Narrative has a special status in this because, as Nussbaum says, 'certain truths about human life can be expressed only in a narrative, that is, by means of the specific language of literary forms' (100). Lara's understanding of autobiography is thus in terms of its connection to (western) modernity, and its interrelated notions of emancipation, autonomy and authenticity. As in the Enlightenment, autobiography still continues to offer women and women's issues which are excluded from the political public the opportunity to transform themselves by entering the public sphere through the literary public. These texts can gain power to the extent that they are broadcast 'within the institutional framework in

⁸ Nancy Fraser *Unruly practices* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 93 ff.; Richard Rorty *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), especially chapters 4 and 6.

the very same space produced by the normative ideals of the Enlightenment, with its dialogical character' (77).

Rousseau's autobiography is paradigmatic of the modern reshaping of 'facts into performative discourses' (69), as authenticity begins to outweigh empirical evidence in the wake of the French revolution. This assertion of authenticity constitutes a shift to a demand for double recognition: firstly the right to be considered unique, and secondly 'the moral worthiness inherent in the struggle to become a moral person occupying a place in the symbolic and cultural order as a result of her acceptance by public opinion' (83). Thus what seems intensely private, namely a specific conception of the good life, only attains value if it survives intersubjective public scrutiny: 'the concept of individuality was performatively displayed and detached from its descriptive function. In justificatory self-presentations, a totally 'new meaning' was revealed in claims for individuality put by a first person to a second person in a dialogue. It was an act of disclosure. Such confessions raised the validity claim of authentication. Only others could accept the project as authentic' (87). The double outcome of this is the modern fostering of "individualism" in personal life projects, and "pluralism" in collective forms of life' (85).

With this explication of the interconnectedness of individual authenticity and public recognition, Lara illuminates the core thesis of the intersubjectivist paradigm which is easily ignored because it is so simple, i.e.: 'we need others to become ourselves' (117); or paraphrasing Ricoeur 'the understanding of one's own identity is not possible without the concept of otherness' (136). Because of the networks of linguistically mediated interactions, and because 'performative knowledge is expressed by the very act of disclosing it – that is, narratively' the 'creation of individualities contains an intersubjectivist core' (88). In the same way in which Apel has argued that even private monological arguments are performed as if in dialogue with others, Lara holds that, even if one does not actually enter into written dialogue about her life projects with others, there is a frequent internal dialogue constituting a quest for identity (156). Not only are intersubjective relations central to our lives, but intersubjectivity is also constitutive of both the production and the reception of life narrative. Author's performances of their claims to authenticity demanding public recognition means that the reading individual is drawn into a reading community which results in him bridging the existing demarcation between private and public, '[r]eciprocal understanding and recognition thus become the basis of the community in a much more powerful way' (79).

Despite her sympathy for Ricoeur's intersubjectivist approach which also pays attention to the disclosing element of speech, Lara does however miss two things in his theory: firstly, an account of how 'when one "reads others", the affective and cognitive dimensions are intertwined in the process of creating new understandings of life' (144); and secondly a sensitivity for the institutional channels of communication and interpretation. Concerning the first point, she is clearly right on insisting that an intersubjectivist account of narrative in the public sphere has to explain the transformation of the authorial and the reading subject through narrative. She herself explains this in terms of reflexion, understood as 'an exploratory moral quest for identity' (16). Such a self-reflexive exercise of

authenticity, often requires a break with 'conventions and external prejudices' in order to allow the author to determine her 'identity through self-knowledge' (87). What still remains open though is an explanation of *how* (in addition to the claim *that*) linguistic innovation works, and *how* it and the expansion of subjectivity hang together. Also, her theoretical claim that the institutional channels of communication and interpretation need to be considered would have benefited immensely from the insights of Paul Bourdieu and John Thompson⁹, who do not feature in her analysis.

Intersubjectivity does not stop at the relatively private sphere of individual reading, but spills over into the public sphere which is the 'centre of self-understanding' (109). Here narratives (of the self) impact on culture, influence public opinion, and in turn have an 'effect on public institutions as well as the public's self-understandings'. The result of this is new conceptions of the 'interrelations between justice and solidarity' (108). To the extent that autobiographical performance claims public recognition, it submits itself to rational (read intersubjective) scrutiny. Contrary to those who describe life narratives as 'explosion of desire or effects of power,' Lara thus holds that narrative identities 'are guided by a cognitive role – a "praxis-oriented" discernment' (71).

Not only does intersubjectivist scrutiny in the public sphere mean subjection to the test of rationality, but, since rationality for Habermas is equated with universal assertability, for autobiographical accounts of specific lives it also implies claims to universality for specific notions of the good life. This makes clear the 'interplay between the uniqueness of the moral agent' on the one hand, and 'the universality of the claim for recognition when related to disclosive performance' (84) on the other. As Lara points out, the demand for recognition of particularity can only accept public approval if the parties that seek recognition can show that theirs is 'a new project of universalism' (121). Not only do they demand recognition for themselves, but this demand is also connected to the expansion of the self-understanding of the society which grants this recognition. Movements for recognition 'must somehow convince others that, by accepting their own point of view, other members of society can, at the same time, enlarge their own notions of who they are' (122). Although Lara describes these transformations with the (Gadamerian) term of a 'fusion of horizons' (157) she goes further than Gadamer in connecting intersubjective understanding with a drive to universality. A definite advantage of describing successful emancipatory social movements in this way, is that it accounts for their effects on both 'oppressors' and 'oppressed'. The women's movement would only have been limitedly successful if it had achieved equality for women while allowing for difference. Its success rests on the extent to which it has gone beyond this, also changing men's conceptions of themselves.

The claim to universal acceptability and the impact the granting of recognition has on the self-description of all effected are best described as an expansion of the we, which is not to be confused with a homogenous conception of identity (108). Lara takes this normative conception of universality as 'a falsifiable concept that accepts the exclusionary character of given historical articulations of its

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu *Language and symbolic power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); John B. Thompson *Ideology and modern culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

universality, and that also relates to the possibility of extending and rendering “substantive” new notions of universality’ (154). With this formulation Lara is actually closing the distance between her and Rorty who would support many of her views on the definition of universalisation in terms of extending the we, and on the role of literature in this process.

Not only do narratives impact on the identity of the writer and reader, but, so Lara, new narratives of the self have also been guides for action by providing ‘projections, expectations and memories derived from a multiple repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives’ (71). According to Lara, the ‘cultural dynamics established when a narrative is successful produce a kind of transformational energy that moulds subjectivities and provides collective images that shape the cultural self-understanding of society and the self’ (152). This brings us to the problem mentioned earlier in the context of Lara’s shift in emphasis from action to culture. It is not clear to what extent Lara oversteps the boundaries of possibility set by her culturalist approach. It seems to me that the domain of culture is so diffuse that it is difficult to empirically sustain the claim of causal interconnection between specific changes in individual as well as collective vocabularies on the one hand, and action mediated through it on the other. In other words, what is gained by the culturalist shift is lost in terms of explaining action. Lara’s claim that culture impacts on political action, while plausible, seems to me very hard to prove. One needs even more concrete references than the empirical basis in feminism Lara constantly refers to, so as not to leave one’s claims powerful but not backed. Tracing a single text (or texts) from production to dissemination, reception and then establishing its influence on the political sphere and possibly even legislation only might deliver the goods. But can such causality be established, or is it not rather the very quality of culture that it disperses rather than directs input from subjects and output to political decisions, making causal claims hard to either verify or falsify, thereby making Lara fall short of her own claims to theoretical rigour (1). Although it too suffers from these shortcomings as proof of her thesis, my hunch is that it might be worthwhile to take collaborative autobiography (like that of Malcolm X co-authored with Alex Haley) Lara herself mentions, as empirical reference. An inquiry into the dynamics of the relation between a narrator and author pre-empting the product of their collective presence in a public sphere may in fact provide some soft empirical backing for Lara’s views on the intersubjective workings of autobiography in the public sphere.

Lara’s strategy to link up her study of the impact of narrative on the public sphere with a specific social movement, namely feminism, has multiple advantages. On the one hand, it provides concrete examples illuminating her theoretical claims. On the other, she sees her account as one of ‘how social movements enlarge, expand and transform democratic institutions by challenging previous collective meanings and self-representations’ (170). As such it her theory approaches the domain of the falsifiable, which is a clear plus. What might have further bolstered her argument would have been a comparison of non-feminist (women’s) and feminist writing to see what is necessary for feminists to successfully do these things she says they are doing. Although this might have dampened her own optimism regarding the emancipatory potential of women’s writing, it would have protected her from sweeping statements like, ‘[e]verywhere, biographies have become the vehicle of identity projects

linking the moral and the aesthetic spheres' allowing women new forms of self-expression and emancipation (Emphasis added. 49).

Although Lara, who is professor of Philosophy in Mexico (currently at Stanford) refers to Latin American as well as US American and European life narratives, her project is clearly indebted to (western) modernity and its dependence on print. While she convincingly argues the transformative power of women's books on the lives of women and men, she leaves open the question as to the extent and differences in leverage at the disposal of women in predominantly oral cultures to have a similar impact. This is not so much meant as an accusation of narrowness on Lara's side as that it points to persisting questions regarding the connections between print and an emancipatory and democratic public sphere, or put differently, between the material and political culture of modernity and the possibilities and forms of emancipation is available in traditional, non- and semi-literate societies.

The questions I have raised above are less quibbles with the soundness of Lara's undertaking as such, than calls for elaboration due to the fact that Lara is breaking new ground. In theorising the impact of new vocabularies she herself provides innovations in the symbolic domain. These are less on the level of vocabularies, although this too applies to her use of illocutive force, as on the larger level. The strength of her book lies in its syntheses of elements, which philosophers, literary, and social theorists have dissembled into minute and discontinuous part. By weaving together producer, text, reader, public sphere, the good life, ethics, the law, the private, and the public spheres, rather than in analytically dissembling them, Lara reveals them in their interrelatedness to which we have largely become blind. This weaving together results in a density of concepts and aphorism like theses, which are not so much individually unteased, as they are instead collectively assembled, evoking a larger picture which is worth a close reading - more than once.