

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Argumentative Analysis Of Literary Works And Its Importance In Teaching Argumentation



Teaching argumentation not only serves the purpose of making us aware of the ways we use to resolve controversies in a rational manner. It also aims at making us more reflective about the general understanding we have of things. In order to achieve this it is convenient to put argumentations in a different context and treat them as part of a process in which different protagonists make known and defend their points of view. In other words, each argumentation should be considered as a segment of a longer dialogue in which the participants not only accept that their points of view can be questioned, and, eventually, refuted, but also submit themselves to critical norms in order to reach this goal.

My purpose is to show that establishing this frame of reference for argumentation analysis takes the form of a philosophical dialogue.

In a philosophical dialogue it is assumed that the arguers are motivated by the search of truth and, consequently, are interested in determining whether their points of views are indeed correct. In view of this objective they seek the interlocutors' collaboration, expecting them to provide alternative points of view and in this way enrich the questioning of the arguments offered. From this perspective, arguments come to be part of a cooperative dialogue in which, together with offering reasons, the interlocutors' objections have to be pondered. This dialogue is philosophical in that it leads to a broader reflection on the subject in question, that is, it leads to questioning ourselves about all possible viewpoints on the subject, not just the ones originally formulated. Moreover, dialogue has thus a specific direction: it is aimed at providing a global overview of all the aspects that ought to be considered in analyzing a given argumentation.

Therefore, in teaching argumentation, a reconstruction effort is required. When examining argumentation, one ought to act as if between the proponents of the argumentation and oneself a dialogue was taking place and one should,

consequently, be able to question them. This can be accomplished by means of presenting alternative arguments and making conjectures about the possible answers to those objections. By means of this procedure, some presuppositions can be made explicit which permit to reflect about what really is at stake in the proposed argumentation. Thus, the teacher can guide a process of reflection that emerges from the discussion. If, on the other hand, the teacher fails in conducting this process, the student tends to close his/her mind. In other words, instead of getting a broader vision of things, that leads to a better understanding of the problems, the student usually learns the strategies that serve to reinforce his/her own beliefs, without having to submit them to critical questioning. The student doesn't feel stimulated to develop a process of reflection that allows him/her to criticize his/her own prejudices.

In order to understand how this ultimate educational goal of argumentation analysis can be frustrated, it is necessary to consider the usual strategies that are followed in the course of a class on argumentation.

Undoubtedly, learning to argue well requires, above all, training. The principles permitting to decide whether or not an argumentation is reasonable, ought to be contrasted with the usual ways of arguing in everyday experience, so that the student can appraise by his/her own judgement the value of those principles. In order to facilitate this training, it is necessary to have a great number of examples at hand. In this respect, the written press is a never ending source of examples of argumentations that can be analyzed. From a pedagogical perspective, using these examples has the additional advantage that it permits to connect the issues debated in the press with the students' interests and in this way help them develop a critical attitude towards the press. If everything works as expected, the students analyze the argumentation examples, just as they appear in the press, and, by means of the dialogue process that the teacher organizes, are guided to reflect using their own critical judgement on the various standpoints on the issue at hand.

Unfortunately, what happens in practice is that the press fails to provide the plurality of perspectives required to produce a sufficiently broad reflection on the issues that are being debated. What the press exhibits, I refer specifically to the Chilean press, are usually argumentations that have not been formulated in view of generating dialogue. On the contrary, those who formulate them are usually trying to put an end to the discussion by expressing what they think to be the last word on the issue, banning further reflection and quite often concealing the real

interests and prejudices that are at stake. For this reason, the most debated issues are presented in a superficial, unilateral and depressing way. Besides, they quite often consist of personal attacks or disqualification of the opposing view. The little importance ascribed to reflection leads to the reiteration from time to time of almost the same argument almost in the same way. This is especially frequent as regards to issues like abortion, divorce, death penalty and pornography. Because of this, the press abounds in fallacious argumentations. In this context, it is difficult to produce the kind of reflection at which the teaching of argumentation aims. It is hard for the student to connect the principles that permit to judge an argumentation's correctness with a process of reflection that entails putting in question the student's own assumptions.

I would like to quote the following example in order to illustrate more clearly this difficulty.

Background: From 1994 on, the lack of interest of Chilean young people to participate in the democratic process initiated in 1989 became manifest. Despite the fact that the percentage of young people who fulfill the age requirements for voting is so high that they could be decisive in the outcome of any election, the young people do not participate in them and many do not even register for voting. This fact motivated an ample discussion on the causes of this juvenile lack of interest in politic participation. As a reaction to it, a young person wrote the following letter to the editor.

Juvenile apathy

Mr. Editor: As a young person I was attracted by the article on juvenile apathy and thought about writing you a letter in relation to it. But I got bored.

This example illustrates, I think, that in using the press as a means for training people in argumentation strategies, there is the risk of separating these strategies from the process of reflection that constitutes the final goal of that teaching. Moreover, the reading of the press without the guidance of an accompanying process of reflection may help to disseminate a skeptical conception of life in which every point of view is equally valid and, as a consequence, every person has to limit him/herself to care for his/her own personal interests.

This result is paradoxical, since what the teaching of argumentation aims at producing is an enrichment of the student's personal experience, which means getting a broader conception of things, considering a plurality of perspectives and permitting a more autonomous reflection about which perspectives are more

reasonable and deserve to be adopted.

What has been said could be misunderstood as a suggestion in the sense that the teacher should guide the student to adopt a desired conception of things. Of course, the risk of conducting an indoctrinating process is always present, but what I am trying to propose is very different from it. It does not aim at imposing a given conception, but at providing a plurality of viewpoints, in order to bring into light and discuss their presuppositions. The problem is: how can the teacher bring up this plurality of perspectives if the different viewpoints required for it are not available in the actual argumentations that are found in the press?

My suggestion in this respect is that we ought to be able to rescue the issues debated in the past that are preserved in the literary tradition. There we can find, exposed in literary language, points of view that can be relevant to the present situation. In this way, if we manage to incorporate those argumentations from earlier times into the present debate, we could promote a discussion of many of the cultural presuppositions that are on the foundations of present argumentations.

As stated earlier, to give sense to a set of argumentations we may consider them as a part of a fictional dialogue. In the same way as we are able to do this with the present argumentations as they appear in the press, we should try to reconstruct the argumentations explicitly present in the literary tradition and incorporate them into this dialogue. In this case, since the purpose is to provide new perspectives, the danger of indoctrination on the part of the teacher is kept away. In many cases, a literary work, especially a novel, develops a dialogue which refers, implicitly or explicitly, to a controversy. In that case, we can assume that the author expects the reader to go beyond the character's private ideas and try to understand the intersubjective truths that he/she believes.

In other words, in some cases, in order to understand a character we have to understand which conceptions of things he/she is willing to defend as an objective view of reality. Consequently, it is necessary to understand the argumentations that he/she develops in support of his/her views.

On the other hand, the argument developed in a literary work constitutes a guide to introduce us into (and, therefore, to stimulate us to understand) the reality created by such literary work, since the argumentation analysis reveals the objective reality reflected by the perspectives of the different characters.

To exemplify the strategy that I am suggesting, I shall refer to two important works of literature that belong to the universal patrimony. "Don Quijote de la

Mancha" by Miguel de Cervantes and "The Name of the Rose" by Umberto Eco. By means of them, we can see some of the difficulties that can be faced and resolved.

In the work "Don Quijote" we find the following passage:

"All this is so, answered Don Quijote; but we cannot all be monks and many are the roads through which God conducts his own people to heaven; chivalry is religion; many saint knights are in (God's) glory.

Yes, answered Sancho, but I have heard that there are more monks in heaven than wandering knights.

That happens, answered Don Quijote, because the number of religious men is greater than that of knights. Many are the wandering, Sancho said.

Many, answered don Quijote, but very few are those who deserve the name of knights." (Don Quijote, Part I, chapter 37).

Commentary: Don Quijote wants to defend the cause of wandering knights, as far as an authentic road to sanctity. His argumentation is quite simple. It shows that, although there are few wandering knights that are saint, this is due to the fact that the sample considered (all the wandering knights) is also small. Therefore, the conclusion he infers is reasonable. Nevertheless, in order to make his argumentation clearer, it is necessary to supply an implicit premise stating that "Not all monks are saint".

To Sancho's rebuke that there ought to be considered a greater sample of wandering knights, Don Quijote replies that the cases to which Sancho refers are not relevant. Therefore, he cannot be accused of committing a hasty generalization.

Don Quijote's argumentation, then, despite the fictional character of the context, satisfies the requirement of a reasonable argumentation. Through his argument, Don Quijote attempts to compel us to see the world in a spiritual perspective, even though this perspective is not supported by a large number of people. To decide whether such perspective is correct it is necessary to examine the rules of behavior that it proposes. In other words, it is not enough to say that only few people behave in that way.

What is most important for our purposes is that the premises from which Don Quijote starts in his argumentation not only show the presuppositions that he considered to be true, but, in addition, that he assumes that all people should consider them in the same way.

What the premises do, in short, is to describe the reality in which Don Quijote is

immersed. In other words, the argumentation shows us the kind of comprehension of things that Don Quijote as a literary character has. But this is not only a personal way of looking at things, but a conception that he expects to be shared by all and that can, therefore, be submitted to judgement by general norms. This is the reason that he aims at consistency in his argument. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask oneself not only what is the reality that the character sees, but also what are the conclusions that he would be ready to draw from his conception.

Nevertheless, Don Quijote's argumentation leaves some points unresolved. In fact, since the argument is developed by means of a comparison, from the fact that few wandering knights deserve the name of such, it would follow, by analogy, that few monks deserve the name of such. Whether Don Quijote aimed at asserting this or not is something to be debated. At this point the argumentative analysis must be completed by a literary analysis.

I am obviously not intending to maintain that only by means of an argumentation theory can we clarify the sense of a literary text. A different kind of analysis is required for this purpose. Nevertheless, the presence of argumentation, even in a literary context, makes the use of argumentative analysis legitimate, in the sense that in that analysis we apply the norms that we use to evaluate everyday argumentation. Furthermore, the conclusions that can be derived constitute an important clue to help us understand the literary character that is arguing and, in general, to understand more clearly the sense of the text.

In other words, the otherwise predominantly descriptive approach to literary analysis constitutes no obstacle for analyzing the argumentative fragments of a text from a normative perspective. In the above example, although Don Quijote's argumentative intention is not altogether clear, I imagine that the critics may nevertheless consider that the implicit consequence that I have pointed out ought to be added to the many other resources that Cervantes uses to criticize the church of his time. Let us turn now to another example taken from Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose".

Background: The Inquisitor Bernard de Gui has just finished the process in which he condemns the cellarist as heretic. He reflects then on the process.

"There are five probatory clues that make it possible to recognize those who are in favor of heresy.

First: those who visit in disguise the heretics when they are in prison;

second: those who lament their being imprisoned and have been their intimate

friends during their lives (in fact, it is difficult that the heretic's activities had passed unnoticed to someone who has been his acquaintance for long time);

third: those who maintain that heretics have been condemned unjustly, despite the fact that their guilt has been demonstrated;

fourth: those who look with bad eyes upon and criticize the men who persecute heretics and preach successfully against them. And these can be discovered by their eyes, their nose, the expression they try to dissimulate, because it reveals their hatred towards those for whom they feel resentment and their love for those whose disgrace they lament.

Fifth and last clue is the fact that, once the heretics have been burnt, they collect their bones turned into ashes and make of them an object of veneration...

But I also attribute a great value to a sixth sign, and I consider clearest heretics' friends those in whose books (although they do not offend directly against orthodoxy) the heretics find the premises from which they derive their evil reasonings. And while he said that, his eyes were fixed on Ubertino. All the franciscane legation understood perfectly what Bernard was saying". (From the Spanish translation, 1989, p. 474-475).

Commentary: Bernard de Gui's observations can be considered as a mere pretext to shed guilt on Ubertino, and to all franciscans, in passing, because their works can be considered as a starting point for the heretics' propositions. Gui's discourse is undoubtedly a threat, but it is expressed in the shape of an argument. If we submit it to analysis, we can understand - by means of the conclusions that he is ready to draw - de Gui's peculiar way of understanding the world.

Seen from an argumentative perspective, Bernard de Gui is trying to arrive at a conclusion by means of irrelevant symptoms. In so doing, he commits the fallacy of "guilty by association". One may suppose that this is only a strategy he uses to put his enemies against the wall. But this does not seem a thorough interpretation, although a more careful analysis of the literary text should provide the final word on his real intentions. In my interpretation, Bernard de Gui does not distort reality on purpose as a strategy that permits him to defeat his opponents. Just as it was the case with Don Quijote, he presupposes that reality is as he sees it and that everybody should, consequently, see it in the same way. In other words, if he distorts the facts, it is because he sees them distorted. In his worldview reality is divided between the enemies and the partisans of the church. His authoritarianism and the personal attack he directs to the church's opponents is a consequence of his way of seeing things, a way in which there is no room for

a humanitarian attitude: everything has to be submitted to the black and white test.

From a pedagogical perspective, knowing Bernardo de Gui's personality, and specifically his manner of arguing, help us to understand what happens to all persons who commit this fallacy, that is, it helps us understand their mind and to make explicit the presuppositions that allow them to reduce, in such a drastic manner, the complexity of things.

To sum up, when analysing a literary work where argumentation is present, we can use the same kind of analysis that we would use in contemporary everyday argumentation. However, in order to grasp the meaning that this argumentation has in view of apprehending the whole sense of the literary work, of course, one has to go beyond the mere argumentative analysis. Nevertheless, their ways of arguing, and especially our being able to determine whether they are correct or not, are fundamental clues for understanding how the characters perceive reality. My contention is that literary works can, in certain cases, help to make manifest some cultural presuppositions. That is, they can provide us with alternative points of view which help us by contrast become aware of our own way of understanding things. This brings us back to our starting point.

In contemporary controversies in Chile that touch upon moral aspects, there is a predominant tendency to argue from positions based on the belief that there are only two mutually exclusive alternatives. For instance, on the one hand, the family's protection and, on the other, the individual's autonomy. Thus, the controversy takes the shape of a dilemma: either you accept moral tradition and take a conservative position, or you accept a modern moral and are in danger of maintaining a relativistic position. Stated in this black and white fashion, the debate becomes stagnated and it becomes impossible to present new perspectives that may lead us to criticize and to reconsider both positions.

My proposition is that the presentation of an argumentation taken from literary sources may be provocative of the reflection needed to overcome this stagnation. Chilean literature preserves certain postulates that are basic to our moral tradition. In some Chilean novels, that are known to all Chilean students, the characters discuss in certain passages about moral behaviour. I think that if one could extract those argumentations from their literary contexts, they could serve to formulate different points of view that could contribute to enrich contemporary controversies.

In order to supply an example of how this is possible, I have taken some excerpts

from "Martin Rivas" by Alberto Blest Gana. This is a very important Chilean novel, published in 1862, that narrates some facts occurred between 1850 and 1857 and which are related to the failure of a liberal revolution. The moral position portrayed by Martin Rivas, however, will not be affected by the political changes and so, it expresses a standard moral position that will persist in Chilean society. My intention is to select a few passages and reconstruct them as an argumentation that is not alien to the literary context.

Background: One of the main characters, Rafael San Luis, a bankrupt aristocrat, introduces Martin Rivas, the main character of the novel, to the house of Mrs. Bernarda Molina, who is the mother of Adelaida, Edelmira and Amador. Although Mrs. Molina was not a member of the aristocracy, she used to give parties at her home that imitated the aristocratic gatherings, in the hope of marrying our her daughters to someone important. Despite her intention, since the girls did not belong to the aristocracy, they were exposed to be taken as objects of amusement and seduction by the young aristocrats who came to the house looking for entertainment. The situation furnishes a portrait of the Chilean society of the time and, consequently, Martin Rivas' judgement of that situation becomes a moral judgement of his time's society, which probably could be extrapolated to contemporary Chilean society.

The novel's relevance for Chilean culture is confirmed by the critics who consider that Martin Rivas is the work most read in Chile by the most diverse social groups (Goic, 1976). Martin Rivas' moral judgement must be extracted from the dialogues in the novel. All the relevant ones however take place in a single night.

"Martin Rivas looked upon his friend from this new perspective, which contrasted with the melancholic seriousness that he had always observed in him before. He thought that he could perceive something forced in the impulse that San Luis put in pretending to experience an unparalleled joy.

Are you really having fun?, asked Martin.

Real or faked, it doesn't matter too much, answered San Luis with a little exaltation in his voice, what really matters is to be able to stultify yourself" (p. 71)
"(...)Among this people (said San Luis), loves proceed faster than through the studied preliminaries that lovers use in the large ballrooms before they go on to the first declaration of love. The resort to gazing, resource that bashful and silly lovers employ, is almost superfluous in this setting. Do you like a girl? You just tell her directly. Do not think that her answer will be as frank as you may expect. Here, and in relation to matters touching upon the heart, the woman wants to be

forced and she will not answer but halfway.

I must tell you Rafael, said Rivas, that I cannot find much amusement here.”
(p.74)

“There was a chair next to Edelmira (Mrs. Bernarda’s daughter) and Martin sat on it. I have not seen you taking much part in the entertainment, said the girl.

I am not very much fond of noise, Miss, said he.

Then I gather you must have been displeased.

No; but I realize that I do not have the character for these entertainments.

You are right; I, who have seen so much of them do not seem to be able to get used to them.

Why?, asked Martin feeling his curiosity aroused by the girl’s words.

Because I feel that we lose our dignity in them and that the young gentlemen, who, like yourself and your friend San Luis, come here, only see us as an entertainment and not as persons worthy of yourselves.

I think that you are mistaken in this respect, at least as far as I am concerned. And since you speak to me so frankly, let me tell you that a while ago, when I looked at you I thought I could guess from your expression exactly what you have just told me.

Oh! Then you noticed it.

Yes. And I must tell you that I liked your displeasure. And I thought with deep feeling that you were suffering for your situation.

As I told you before, I have never been able to get used to these parties that my mother and brother like. There is too much difference between gentlemen like you and us. Therefore, there cannot be uninterested and frank relationships between us.”(p. 77)

“(…) For us, answered Edelmira sadly, there is not love like the love you offer to the rich girls. Maybe those on whom we are so crazy as to put our eyes on them, are the ones who most offend us which their love and who make us know the unhappiness of not being able to be contented with those who are around us.” (p. 77)

“Haven’t you had a good time at all?, asked him (Rafael San Luis).

I saw you a while ago talking to Edelmira. She is a poor unhappy girl who feels ashamed of her own people and hopes for someone who may consider her worthy, at least in matters of the heart.

What I have been able to gather about her feelings from the short conversation we had, has made me feel sorry for her, said Martin.

Poor girl!

Do you feel sorry for her?

Yes. She seems to have delicate feelings. And she seems to be suffering.

That is true. But, what can you do? It will be one more heart that will be burnt for coming to close to the light of happiness, said Rafael with a sigh.

And later, slipping his fingers through his hair, he added: It is the story of the moths, Martin, those who do not die keep forever the marks of the fire that burnt their wings. Well! I seem to be making poetry, it is the alcohol speaking through my mouth." (p. 83)

My purpose, of course, is not to make a literary analysis of these dialogues, but to reconstruct them as a fictitious conversation between Rafael San Luis and Martin Rivas that is congenial to the literary context of the original.

Dialogue

Are you having a good time?, asked Rafael San Luis.

Not much, answered Martin, What about you?

Of course I am, answered Rafael.

Your joy doesn't seem real to me, insisted Martin.

And so what?, said Rafael, If you are able to stultify yourself, it does not matter whether your fun is faked or real.

Don't you really mind to seduce Adelaida, continued Martin, although you are really in love with another woman?

Rafael did not answer but remained thoughtful.

Don't you think that she may suffer?, insisted Martin.

No. I think she is enjoying it, answered Rafael. And don't think that she is an easy woman to conquer, she is not the kind that surrenders easily. But she belongs to a different social class. In respect to love affairs, she likes direct questions, but she enjoys giving halfway answers.

Even if it is so, said Martin, I don't think that what you do is correct.

Why?, asked Rafael.

Because she may suffer, said Martin. You treat her as if she were an object for your entertainment. You don't worry whether she feels humiliated or lowered in her dignity.

I don't think so, said Rafael.

You don't think that love requires a frank and sincere relationship between two people?

I don't think there can be love, answered Rafael, between people from such different social backgrounds. Besides, if she really were to fall in love, she is

bound to suffer, as all those who fall in love are.

Martin kept quiet immersed in his own thoughts.

Don't you think that you would enjoy seducing Edelmira?, asked Rafael.

Why do you ask that? said Martin.

Because I know that you like her, answered Rafael.

Yes, I find her attractive, said Martin, but I must treat her with respect, as she deserves to be treated.

Do you think that if you fell in love with her, asked Rafael, you would marry her?

I don't know about that, answered Martin.

This interpretative dialogue is not aimed at interfering with the literary meaning of the novel. Whether Martin Rivas personifies a romantic hero representing a naive morality or an ideal of romanticism more moderate or more realistic in opposition to Rafael San Luis, whether he portrays love in opposition to social interests or simply the reject of the bourgeoisie's ideals, is something that escapes our analysis. It belongs to the literary analysis.

What the dialogue intends is to make manifest Martin Rivas' moral position. As we can see, the dialogue ends with Martin Rivas' confusion about his own feelings. In the novel, Martin Rivas does not marry Edelmira. He marries Leonor, an aristocratic girl whom she really loves. So, it remains unclear whether he thinks that Edelmira, because of her social position, and despite the feeling of respect that he has for her, ought to remain in a situation of inferiority.

Argumentation

Martin Rivas' argumentation can be developed in the following way: Martin Rivas proposes the view that "It is incorrect to seduce a woman". He supports his view giving three different reasons: (a) "You can hurt her feelings", (b) "You can lower her dignity", as a response to San Luis's suggestion that some women, as Adelaida for instance, might enjoy being seduced, and (c) "Every woman deserves to be treated with respect", as a more solid moral reason.

The reason (c), however, is unclear because it is too basic and general. Of course, it is a good support for (a), but its connection with the implicit proposition (d) "Every woman deserves to be loved", which is a consequence of a more egalitarian moral principle, is ignored in the novel.

In this way Martin Rivas can establish a basic criterion to judge the morality of human relationships. This criterion is very specific about some kind of moral damages, like hurting people's feelings, but ignores those other moral damages

that come from social class discrimination.

Martin Rivas' doubts can be introduced in the Chilean contemporary discussion and be used to present the dilemma whether or not we are willing to create a completely egalitarian society and to accept all the consequences derived from this. This approach would provide a different perspective to analyse the moral arguments that come up in public debate in Chile.

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