

IULIA GRAD

**“REMEMBER US TO LIFE”.
MUSICAL STORIES ABOUT THE OTHER**

Iulia Grad

Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj, Romania

Email: iuliagrad@gmail.com

Abstract: The paper proposes an analysis of the music of Regina Spektor, from the perspective of the essential relation between the narrative and the moral imagination. In the first part of the paper I present some general aspects that are important for the understanding of the concept of moral imagination, resorting, mostly, to the works of Martha Nussbaum. The second part of the article focuses on the songs of Regina Spektor, conceived as stories which explore the “other’s point of view” and which attempt to give voice to the ones that are unheard.

Keywords: music, moral imagination, literature, Regina Spektor, the other, vulnerability.

**“REMEMBER US TO LIFE.”
POVEȘTI MUZICALE DESPRE *CELĂLALT***

Rezumat: Articolul își propune să analizeze muzica Reginei Spektor, din perspectiva relației esențiale dintre narațiune și imaginația morală. În prima parte a lucrării, voi prezenta câteva aspect generale importante pentru înțelegerea conceptului de imaginație morală, făcând apel mai ales la lucrările Marthei Nussbaum. A doua parte a articolului se axează pe cântecele Reginei Spektor, privite ca povești care explorează

„punctul de vedere al celuilalt” și care încearcă să dea voce poveștilor neascultate ale celui *diferit*.

Cuvinte-cheie: muzică, imaginație morală, literatură, Regina Spektor, celălalt, vulnerabilitate.

1. Introduction

It is in the human cultural DNA to tell stories; this is an idea with a very long and important history. The story, in all its forms, is essential for our survival. The story is constitutive for us, as a species, but also for us as individuals. The questions "who are we?" and "who am I?" always demand a story. "Every life is in search of a narrative. We all seek, willy-nilly to introduce some kind of concord into the everyday discord and dispersal we find about us."¹

The "narrative imperative" has become, in the postmodern world, an even more acute demand, given the fact that the identities have lost the traditional structures that would substantiate them. Not being convinced by the arguments supporting the death of the narrative in the world of the simulacrum, where the story loses its essence through its reduction to the superficial and through its commodification and its digitalization, Richard Kearney states that postmodernism doesn't mark the end of the narrative. He believes that the new conditions could offer "novel modes of storytelling quite inconceivable in our former cultures",² stories told by different voices and via different media, "truncated or parodied to the point of being called micro-narratives or post-narratives", but still belonging to the narrative family.³

A special function of the story comes up when the narrative is approached from the perspective of its relevance for the morality. When addressing the relation between the narrative and the moral reasoning and moral development, a consistent number of philosophers⁴ are sharing the view that states that "imagination is a kind of wizard for moral theory: it can do an amazing amount of tricks and it appears to open up a new perspective on moral experience and moral reasoning."⁵

Not only that art contributes, as we known already from Plato, to the formation of the character, but it also "offers a rich model for understanding the social imagination that is essential to moral

deliberation.”⁶ Also, the introspective function of the narrative is essential; the stories of a culture embody its features, the ideological reading of media stories, for instance, are illustrative in this respect.

2. Imagination and moral reasoning

*But I am not a number, not a name
But I am a carefully laid plan
Regina Spektor, "Ballad of a Politician",
Album What We Saw from the Cheap Seats*

The moral reasoning process cannot be understood only through the appeal to reason, detached from the personal dimension of the individual's life. Thus, at the source of the interest towards the role of storytelling in morality, we find the dissatisfaction with the traditional moral theories, both the utilitarian and the deontological ones, which underestimate the essential part of moral imagination⁷ and which fail to understand the limits of the image of the self as "nonrelational, as capable of existing independently of any concern for others."⁸

Therefore, the image of the human beings understood as "*fundamentally* imaginative moral animals"⁹ is depicted, and the endeavor of Martha Nussbaum in this respect is fundamental. One of the main ideas that underline the thought of Martha Nussbaum is that literature plays an essential role for morality, assuming that "the responsibility of the literary artist is to discover the forms and terms that fittingly and honorably express, adequately state, the ideas that it is his or her design to put forward; and to bring it about that the reader, led by the text into a complex artistic activity 'in his own other medium, by his own other art', is active in a way suited to the understanding of whatever is there for understanding, with whatever elements of him or herself are suited to the task of understanding."¹⁰ Nussbaum stresses the importance of acknowledging this fact and of acting in accordance to this role, especially in reference to the

educational system.¹¹

For Nussbaum, the literature allows a specific kind of access to the other that forces us to respect his/her difference and, at the same time, to recognize our similarities, as beings that share the same vulnerabilities. The narrative imagination, referring to the ability to put ourselves in the other's shoes, doesn't develop automatically. Education and instruction in arts and humanities are essential, since they foster the empathy and compassion, and cultivate a certain attention to the other, that respects his/her alterity. Nussbaum describes the need for a specific way of regarding the other that is possible by means of literature, among others, because its function is "to remove the veil to allow us to hear the voices silenced by injustice."¹²

Therefore, the ethical reflection conceived as artistry allows us to better understand the role of an expansive imagination in the relationship with others, has a powerful impact on the individual's experience and it gathers diverse elements in a unified experience.¹³

In the next part of the paper, I try to approach the music of Regina Spektor from the perspective of the relation between the narrative and the moral imagination, starting from the premise that her songs can be read, or better said heard, as stories, or, as Richard Kearney says, as postmodern micro-narratives that still have an essential link with the moral life.

3. Unheard stories

*May I propose
A little toast
For all the ones
Who hurt the most
Regina Spektor, The Party,
Album What We Saw from the Cheap Seats*

"When I finish a song, I've got the feeling that I just finished a story. But I didn't have to say it," says Regina Spektor in an interview

for The Guardian. She surely is a great storyteller, and not a traditional one. She tells all kinds of stories and all are wonderfully strange; "quirky" is not the right word, in my opinion, even if it is usually used to describe her and her music, because it doesn't grasp the songs' depth.¹⁴ Her stories are playful, sometimes funny, but despite that, almost always grave and, sometimes even tragic.

Regina Spektor was born in 1980 in Russia, in a Jewish family. Her family emigrated in the US when she was nine and a half years old. The experience of being "the other" seems to be one of the most defining ones for her work. "I was the Jewish girl in a Russian school, than I become a Russian girl in a Jewish school. I knew I'd stay the different girl forever."¹⁵ The feeling of being different and her love for stories¹⁶ are the aspects that essentially influence her music.¹⁷

However, the stories she tells are not autobiographical, they do not necessary speak about events that happened to her. Regina Spektor describes herself as "more like a science fiction or a fiction writer than a diarist or an essayist." Yet, her songs are genuine, emotionally involved, because, she says, "I don't believe that who writes diaries or memoirs is more emotionally involved (in their work) than someone who writes fiction."¹⁸ She specifically mentions that, for her, art comes from a different place than the author's experience and daily struggles and thoughts; it comes from "a bigger place", "a place of feeling rather than conscious thought."¹⁹ In another interview, Regina Spektor says that for her "the story is more real than maybe what I eat for breakfast or what I did autobiographically, because I tap into it with more than my whole being, rather than just my body on planet earth at that minute. You live in that world with your writing."²⁰

All the albums released until now are characterized by a complexity of the themes and of the styles adopted by Regina Spektor; moreover, she deliberately avoids labels that would describe her work. Yet, I identify, in many of her songs, a constant, in the form of a voice that speaks about *the different one*, that tells the unheard stories of the different one surprised in various situations and circumstances. And this constant is the interest of my analysis. She sings in a fearless

way the unheard voices of the ones that are neglected or forgotten, of the small daily events, so common that usually are ignored, but which receive special meanings in the light of her stories.

Many of the stories sang by Regina Spektor give voice to those that are forgotten. It can be the violin exposed in a museum, "But the most special and the most lonely / God, I pity the violins / In glass coffins they keep coughing / They've forgotten, forgotten how to sing."

²¹ Or, it can be Delilah, whose truth lays "beneath the sheets of paper", and who tells her own story in the song "Samson", a story forgotten by the history books, and not even once mentioned in the Bible. ²²

This constant effort to tell the unheard stories finds one of the most powerful forms in the song "Us", a song about the immigrant status, about those whose story is stolen "in a den of thieves", is emptied of its lived concreteness and is transformed in a show materialized in statues whose "noses begin to rust", put at the disposal of those who are always "rummaging for answers in the pages" and also at the disposal of the tourists that "come and stare at us / Blow bubbles with their gum / Take photographs of fun, have fun." ²³

The magic trick made by Regina in her song fits in the definition of imagination, as "the ability to redescribe the familiar in unfamiliar terms" ²⁴ and it's not difficult to detect this ability in the songs that tell stories about the vulnerable, a special category in Regina's characters. With simple little words, she describes moments of deep vulnerability, with which every one of us resonates. The vulnerable, portrayed in different instances, is often present in Regina's work. Yet, characteristic for her is the fact that vulnerability is not associated with the essential moments in ones' life; she usually doesn't describe the decisive moments of falling in love, of breaking up, or the grandiose setting of revelations or big decisions, but the unnoticed moments, when we are hit by the precariousness of our human condition, wonderfully surprised in "Open", as "potentially lovely, perpetually human/ Suspended in open." ²⁵

In these songs, she describes the moments of the hard questions, as in "Blue lips", the story of a man that "stumbles into faith and thought/ God, this all there is?"²⁶. But also the moments of the hard

answers: "No one's got it all/ I'm the hero of the story, don't need to be saved/ It's alright, It's alright, It's alright..." as she does in "Hero", where the cold comfort of the repetition of "It's alright" only re-enforce the desolation of the hero, which has to prepare himself for the impact with the realization of the human impurity: "Hey, open wide, here comes original sin."²⁷

In "Prisoners", a song about the people about whom the society thinks that "there's nothing wrong with them / That a thousand bucks can't fix / That a thousand arms can't hold down", Regina Spektor shows, once again, her ability to see what usually go unnoticed, proves that she has the "dilated eye (...) an amplified receptivity to the potential of the present",²⁸ the moral artist must have, according to Steven Fesmire. Furthermore, she has a daring attention towards the particular and its relation with the structure that has the force to annihilate it: "They want to run through the air with no barriers or obstacles / Gunmen or guard dogs or priests / And to rise from the mud and start over and over / With the people all dead."²⁹

The stories told by the songs of Regina Spektor contain this "imaginative activity of exploring another inner life" that is a crucial ingredient of a healthy moral relationship to others.³⁰ This exploration involves also what Martin Buber calls "imagining the real", the capacity to grasp the other in order to confirm him, that occurs in an I-Thou relation, but describe, in fact, the core event of the moral imagination, the ability to imagine what the other feels in a certain moment, not as a detached content, but in its reality, as a process in that person.³¹

And this is another magic trick in the work of Regina Spektor. Her artistry is at its best when she tells stories about perspectives and possibilities. Many of her songs describe the "what if?" moments; such as "Fidelity", one of her best known songs, a happy one, about the hazards and the little decisions that make our life what it is. A rather grim story about the "what if?" moments is told in the "Sword and the pen", where she describes the terror in the face of the possibility that our fears become reality and the human comfortlessness in face of death: "What if the sword kills the pen / What if the god kills the man /

And if he does it with love / Well then it's death from above / And death from above is still a death." ³²

The poetic manner in which Regina Spektor explores the realm of the possibilities and the difference of perspectives is powerful also in the song "Laughing With." It is a song about vulnerability and it contains several stories about characters that are in difficult situations, scared and vulnerable, situations in which "no one laughs at God." The amusing stories about God, who "can be funny / At a cocktail party when listening to a good God-themed joke" followed by the lyrics "God can be so hilarious / Ha ha / Ha ha" (sung in an even and gloomy voice), emphasize the strong message of the song, that we are all in the same boat: "No one's laughing at God / We're all laughing with God". ³³

In order to explore the layers of the songs of Regina Spektor in the light of the vital connection of the narrative to the morality, the importance of the idea that "the great moral vice (...) is obtuseness" ³⁴ must be underlined. To exercise the ability and to put yourself in another's shoes, to open yourself towards the other, in order to understand and accept him/her, represent the essential elements of a healthy moral development and have a crucial relationship with the development of moral imagination. There are some (not few) of her songs that offer the musical possibility of this kind of exercise. She underlines, in the most simple, but really effective way, the importance of acknowledging the other's point of view and of accepting the other without judging her/him. "Firewood" is a song about difficulties, possibly about depression, and about the moment where you have to contemplate the last option that could save you, metaphorically expressed through the image of the piano becoming firewood. This is a terrible image, especially since Regina Spektor is a classical trained pianist, yet the story tells us: "Don't look so shocked / Don't judge so harsh / You don't know / You are only spying." ³⁵

The epistemological humility implied by the fact that we are always spying on the other, knowing only bits and pieces about her/him, is an essential aspect of moral imagination and it forces us to acknowledge that "the other has suffered some significant pain or

misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame." ³⁶ There are several poetic images of this limitation in the songs of Regina Spektor, such as the image of the prisoner who comforts himself, by saying that "if Hans Christian Andersen could've had his way with me / Then none of this s**t would have ever gone down." ³⁷

The music of Regina Spektor cannot be, of course, reduced to the themes analyzed in the paper. However, I consider that an important part of her songs reveals an interest for the voice of the other and a specific way of seeing and understanding the difference that should be addressed in the reading key of the moral imagination.

4. Conclusion

Starting from the idea that one of the themes that constitute the core of Regina Spektor's work is the exploration of the "other's point of view" and the attempt to give voice to the ones that are unheard, I tried to analyze some of her most relevant songs, from the above mentioned perspective, of course, in the reading key proposed by the concept of moral imagination and its relation with the narrative, as described by Martha Nussbaum.

"I came with the refugee status – I was a legal alien", says Regina Spektor and, thus, explains this constancy in her songs. By resorting to the framework that can be resumed through the affirmation of Mark Coeckelbergh that "the model for the perfect moral reasoner in this approach is not the human computer, but the artist (author, story teller, painter, director)" and that "moral reasoning becomes art...",³⁸ the paper explores this dimension of the songs of Regina Spektor and presents them as postmodern micro-narratives that are relevant for understanding the essential relation between the narrative and the moral imagination.

Notes:

¹ Richard Kearney, 2002, *On Stories*, (London: Routledge): 4.

² Richard Kearney, 2002, *On Stories*, 11.

³ Richard Kearney, 2002, *On Stories*, 126.

⁴ Such as John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, Alasdair McIntyre or Paul Ricoeur.

⁵ Mark Coeckelbergh, 2007, *Imagination and Principles. An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning* (New York: Palgrave): 13.

⁶ Steven Fesmire, 2003, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press): 108.

⁷ Solange Chavel, 2011, "L'imagination en morale dans la philosophie contemporaine de langue anglaise", *Revue philosophique*, no. 4 (136): 544; Mark Coeckelbergh, 2007, *Imagination and Principles. An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning*, 11.

⁸ Christopher J. Voparil & Richard J. Bernstein (eds.), 2010, *The Rorty Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell): 427.

⁹ Mark Johnson, 1997, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press): 1.

¹⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, 1992, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press): 6.

¹¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, 2008, *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

¹² Mark Coeckelbergh, 2007, *Imagination and Principles. An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning*, 77.

¹³ Steven Fesmire, 2003, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, 110.

¹⁴ Regina Spektor even says in an interview that she used to think that 'quirky' was "a clever way of keeping down anything creative and adventurous. There are things people say that are condescending to difference", in Eva Wiesman, 2016, "Regina Spektor: 'The only reason I'm Jewish is antisemitism'" (interview), *The Guardian*, 13 November.

¹⁵ Eva Wiesman, 2016, "Regina Spektor: 'The only reason I'm Jewish is antisemitism'" (interview), *The Guardian*, 13 November.

¹⁶ This love is very often mentioned by Regina Spektor in her interviews. An example is this confession: "I don't know. I just love fiction. I love it. I love stories. I love myths. I love fairytales. I love Kafka. (*laughs*)" in Matthew Weiner, 2016, Regina Spektor, *Interview*, 30 September.

¹⁷ Regina Spektor released seven albums: 11:11 (2001), Songs (2002), Soviet Kitsch (2004), Begin to Hope (2006), Far (2009), What We Saw from the Cheap Seats (2012), Remember Us to Life (2016)

¹⁸ Caspar Llewellyn Smith, 2010, "Regina Spektor: 'Art comes from a different place'" (interview), *The Guardian*, 2012.

¹⁹ Caspar Llewellyn Smith, 2010, "Regina Spektor: 'Art comes from a different place'".

²⁰ Matthew Weiner, 2016, Regina Spektor, *Interview*, 30 September.

²¹ Regina Spektor, 2012, "All the rowboats", the album "What We Saw from the Cheap Seats".

²² Regina Spektor, 2002, "Samson", the album "Songs".

²³ Regina Spektor, 2004, "Us", the album "Soviet Kitsch".

²⁴ Christopher J. Voparil & Richard J. Bernstein (eds.), 2010, *The Rorty Reader*: 432.

²⁵ Regina Spektor, 2012, "Open", the album "What We Saw from the Cheap Seats".

²⁶ Regina Spektor, 2009, "Blue Lips", Album *Far*.

²⁷ Regina Spektor, 2006, "Hero", Album *Begin to Hope*.

²⁸ Steven Fesmire, 2003, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*: 115. Not exactly related with Fesmire's idea, and of course in an anecdotic tone, I mention Regina's Spektor confession about her being a "criminal starrer", a habit she thinks she got when she arrived in the US and when she didn't speak English, in Matthew Weiner, 2016, *Regina Spektor*, Interview.

²⁹ Regina Spektor, 2002, "Prisoners", Album *Songs*

³⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, 2008, *Not for profit: why democracy needs the humanities*, 109.

³¹ Martin Buber, 1988, *The Knowledge of Man*, (New York, Humanities Press): 70.

³² Regina Spektor, 2009. "The sword and the pen", Album *Far*.

³³ Regina Spektor, 2009. "Laughing With", Album *Far*.

³⁴ Steven Fesmire, 2003, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics*, 107.

³⁵ Regina Spektor, 2012, "Firewood", Album *What We Saw from the Cheap Seats*

³⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, apud Mark Coeckelbergh, 2007, *Imagination and Principles. An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning*, 76.

³⁷ Regina Spektor, 2002, "Prisoners", Album *Songs*.

³⁸ Mark Coeckelbergh, 2007, *Imagination and Principles. An Essay on the Role of Imagination in Moral Reasoning*: 14.

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