

Chapter 1

Art

This is a book about literature written by a philosopher from a philosophical point of view. What interest a philosopher might have in literature, writing *as* a philosopher? What is distinctive about a philosophical point of view on the subject? The task of this chapter is to give special attention to the nature and bounds of the inquiry.

First Steps

There is a vast body of writing *about literature*, from analyses of individual works, descriptions, interpretations, evaluations, recommendations, to general reflections on what the term “literature” means and whether there is such a thing as literature in the first place. Such writing is described in different ways, including “literary criticism,” “literary history,” “literary biography,” “critical theory,” “literary theory,” “poetics,” “metacriticism.” Literary critics themselves have engaged a seemingly limitless number of “approaches” to literature, from the psychological, historical, sociological, or political to the linguistic, stylistic, or rhetorical. This outpouring, if nothing else, attests to the extraordinary amount of interest that the literary realm evokes.

“Philosophy of literature” reflects one kind of interest although this designation is relatively new and largely unfamiliar. In fact the inquiry designated by the phrase “philosophy of literature” is not itself new and dates back to the ancient Greeks. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, one of the most influential works in the canon of literary criticism, is an exemplary instance of philosophy of literature in the modern sense. It is not just written by a philosopher but exhibits a quintessential philosophical methodology: a careful delineation of the subject matter – the nature of poetry in general, its modes, aims, and objects – then a detailed analysis of one literary genre, tragedy, outlining its constituent parts (plot, character, action, thought, diction) and the key concepts for describing its aims and effects, concluding finally with remarks about and comparisons with another genre of poetry, the epic.

Surprisingly, however, in spite of this model set by Aristotle, there has been little systematic interest in literature by philosophers. Even Plato's treatment of poetry, although immensely important, is hardly systematic and more often than not occurs in discussions where other, non-literary, issues are to the fore, like the education of the guardians or the good of the state. Many philosophers make passing reference to literature, either to particular works or (following Plato) to the moral effects of the literary or (like Hume, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer) to genres such as tragedy, but detailed philosophical explorations of the very practice of writing, reading, appreciating, and valuing works of literature are rare. The history of "theoretical" writings about literature is not primarily a history of philosophical writing. More common, at least up to the beginning of the twentieth century, are reflections by poets or critics: for example, offering advice to poets in the manner of Horace's *Ars Poetica* or, as with Sidney and Shelley, defending poetry against Puritans and moralists, or through prefaces and critical essays (Fielding, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold) proposing new ways of showing the importance of literature in human life.

In philosophy of literature the first task – already a philosophical task – is to position this newly designated inquiry among other inquiries about literature. Is it a species of criticism or theory? Is it another "approach" to literature alongside those mentioned? Is it a study of individual works? In fact it is not really any of those things. Above all, it is, as is obvious, a *philosophical* inquiry, a branch of philosophy, with all that that entails. As Aristotle showed, this is a foundational inquiry into the very nature of the literary, classifying the subject matter, delineating aspects, analysing concepts, exploring norms and values, locating the whole practice of writing and reading literary works in its proper place among related but distinct practices. More on this will emerge in due course.

It is not hard to find *some* connections between philosophy and literature, yet not all such connections can count as philosophy *of* literature. A good place to start in explaining the aims and scope of our inquiry is to compare it with some other philosophical interests.

Philosophy in Literature

To begin with, philosophy *of* literature is not the same as philosophy *in* literature, although it has indirect connections with that conception. This is not a book that will be mining individual novels and plays for their philosophical insights.

The presentation or exploration of broadly philosophical themes in poetry, drama, or the novel is widespread and well acknowledged. Underlying

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a philosophy of history and of human destiny; there is existentialism in the novels of Sartre and Camus; mysticism versus rationalism in Blake's poetry; pantheism in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; atheism painstakingly debated in Dostoevsky; divine providence and free will in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; egoism in George Eliot and George Meredith, and so forth.

Philosophical themes in literature can figure in reflections on literature in at least three different ways.

First, they can be characterized in direct critical readings, as in this brief observation by a literary critic about *War and Peace*:

since Tolstoy's approach is always *sub specie aeternitatis*, he has created human beings working out their destiny in accordance with the eternal implacable laws of humanity. . . . It is a pantheist philosophy, and Tolstoy is obsessed by the thought of man's greatest efforts and best hopes being defeated by death.¹

This is a summary comment making a claim about central themes in the novel. The identification and characterization of these themes are not part of a philosophical exercise but an attempt to make sense of the novel and its aims. The content identified might be philosophical but the skills in eliciting this content are more literary critical than philosophical. It is enough for the critic to notice the themes and connect them to incidents in the novel. The validity of the critic's interpretation rests not on the philosophical validity of the ideas themselves but on the support offered from the details of the work. At this level, then, the level at which a literary critic identifies themes, there is a clear distinction between philosophy *in* literature and philosophy *of* literature.

At a second level, though, philosophical skills and philosophical interests are directly engaged. Philosophers look to the literary exploration of philosophical ideas to help clarify, deepen, or expound a philosophical topic. Philosophers interested in Sartre's views on the "absurdity of existence" or the relation between objects and consciousness would do well to read his first novel *Nausea*. That novel is a philosophical novel in the sense that it uses a fictional (and literary) context to provide an imaginative realization of a conception of consciousness that Sartre presents in his non-fictional philosophical writings.

Another example might be the purported contributions to moral philosophy in the novels of Henry James, as claimed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum:

there are candidates for moral truth which the plainness of traditional moral philosophy lacks the power to express, and which *The Golden Bowl* expresses

¹ Rosemary Edmonds, "Introduction," in L. N. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, vol. 1, trans. and with an introduction by Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. x–xi.

wonderfully. Insofar as the goal of moral philosophy is to give us understanding of the human good through a scrutiny of alternative conceptions of the good, this text and others like it would then appear to be important parts of this philosophy.²

For Nussbaum, it is not just that James's novels have philosophical themes but rather they are supplementary works of philosophy themselves. Although Nussbaum makes a strong case for this kind of reading of James, it is not uncontroversial, either as Jamesian interpretation or as a general view of literature as philosophy.³ Arguably this is more an *appropriation* of literary works into philosophy than an illumination of the works as literature. The issues are taken up further in Chapters 6 and 7.

There is a third level, however, at which philosophy *in* literature intersects with philosophy *of* literature. That is the level at which the very possibility of using fictional works to expound, develop, or challenge philosophical ideas is addressed. How could a work of fiction, a product of the imagination, be a vehicle for conveying serious theses? How can fiction support truth? Is it part of the very essence of literature that it "instruct" as well as give pleasure? These are the kind of issues that go to the heart of philosophy of literature for they explore not just the purpose of literature but the question of how it relates to other kinds of discourse and what special values it possesses.

The Philosophy of _____

Many branches of philosophy are characterized by filling in the blank in "philosophy of _____" with the name of another area of inquiry: for example, science, history, law, psychology, religion, mathematics, linguistics, or logic. Sometimes, though, the blank is filled with a concept such as mind, knowledge, action, language, morality, freedom, or art. Perhaps the difference is not always great: e.g., between philosophy of psychology and philosophy of mind. Yet there is a difference even in that example. Where a discipline or area of inquiry is highlighted then the philosophical investigation looks at

² Martha C. Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 142.

³ For a discussion of Nussbaum's reading of James, see Richard Posner, "Against Ethical Criticism," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1997), pp. 1–27; and Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 386–394.

foundational issues in the inquiry itself, its methods, aims, presuppositions, modes of argument or evidence or reasoning, the status of its central claims, and its basic concepts. It also inquires into how this area relates to adjacent areas. But where a concept is more directly invoked – mind, action, language – then the analysis begins there, with the concept itself and theoretical reflections about it. A philosophical study of the nature of mind is not quite the same as an inquiry into the foundations of psychology.

The position of philosophy of literature is complicated. First of all, crucially for how we are to proceed, it is to be understood as a sub-branch of the philosophy of art, standing on a par with philosophy of music, of dance, of film, of the visual arts. This is not to say that there might not be other conceptions of the philosophy of literature which do not take literature to fall under the general category of art. There are, as we shall see, branches of literary theory which make no such assumption, indeed would challenge it (although literary theorists rarely lay claim to the expression “philosophy of literature”). However, the field is not so well established that there is clearly a right or wrong way to define it, and it seems inevitable within philosophy of art that we should have some way of bracketing the literary arts in the way that philosophy of music, of dance, etc., gives specific focus to the other arts. If need be, we can simply stipulate that for the purposes of this inquiry philosophy of literature will be a sub-branch of philosophy of art, with the implication that literature so considered is an art form. What this *means* is a key issue in our investigation. Although this is a stipulation about a kind of inquiry it is hardly an arbitrary one, for the literary arts (*ars poetica*) have been recognized as such since the ancient Greeks.

Philosophy of literature and philosophy of literary criticism

Philosophy of literature seems to fall somewhere between those inquiries that investigate other disciplines (philosophy of science, philosophy of history) and those exploring fundamental concepts (philosophy of mind, philosophy of action). In philosophy of literature it is not just the concept of literature that is under investigation but rather the wider practice – involving complex interactions between readers and authors – within which literature acquires its identity and value. Yet it would be misleading, without further explanation, to redescribe this focus as the “philosophy of literary criticism.”

A simple tripartite division is sometimes proposed to explain the status of “philosophy of _____” inquiries where subject disciplines are involved. Take, say, the philosophy of physics. At the base level, according to this proposal, are physical events in the natural world; at the “first-order level” are the statements, hypotheses, reasonings, experiments of physics itself; at a

“second-order level” the philosopher of physics investigates the methods, presuppositions, etc., at the first-order level. The distinction is helpful in a rough and ready way in distinguishing the roles of the physicist and the philosopher. The latter is not a scientist and need not undertake experiments or test physical hypotheses.

However, the distinction looks far less clearcut when probed further. For example, the separation of data and theory, between the ground level and the first-order level, is by no means straightforward. What counts as data “in nature” might depend essentially on the theoretical framework within which it is classified. It should not be assumed that there is a simple “given,” nature “carved at the joints,” waiting to be investigated. Nor is the first-order/second-order distinction entirely secure, resting, in some instances, on a dubious dichotomy between conceptual statements (by the philosopher) and descriptive statements (by the scientist), and also on an assumption that reasoning about methodology is not a valid part of physics itself.

In philosophy of art or aesthetics a parallel tripartism is sometimes proposed, where the base level is works of art and the activities of artists, the first-order level the pronouncements of art critics, and the second-order level reflections on the first-order level by philosophers.⁴ This translates in obvious ways to philosophy of literature, with the poet, the critic, and the philosopher assigned their distinct roles. Although there are strong reasons, as we shall see, for being wary of this simple division of labour, there is also something appealing about it that should not be lost. It highlights, for example, distinct kinds of expertise. The ability to write a poem is different from the ability to write about poetry, and skill at the former by no means converts into skill in the latter. Poets are not necessarily good critics, nor of course critics good poets. But more fundamentally the modes of “discourse” are entirely different. Novelists or poets on the one hand and critics on the other are all users of language, but their aims and the norms for judging what they write are obviously different. Attempts to blur the kinds of achievement at these levels, by promoting the critic’s writing to an “art form,” fail to acknowledge deep differences in the aims and expectations involved. Somewhat similar remarks can be made about the first-order and second-order levels. Philosophers do not necessarily make good critics, where criticism is seen as a mode of commentary on and assessment of works of literature, nor critics necessarily good philosophers.

⁴ This picture of the role of aesthetics is clearly laid out in Monroe C. Beardsley’s *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), pp. 3–7: e.g., “As a field of knowledge, aesthetics consists of those principles that are required for clarifying and confirming critical statements. Aesthetics can be thought of, then, as the philosophy of criticism, or *metacriticism*” (pp. 3–4).

Whatever its initial appeal, though, the tripartite conception of philosophy of literature should be rejected. Difficulties begin at the base level. Literary works are not “natural kinds,” they have no existence apart from the nexus of activities and judgments within which they are identified and evaluated. To put it somewhat more tendentiously, the works are not just the objects of critical discourse but in some sense also the products of it. Literary works acquire their identity as literature partly through the kinds of interest they invite from literary critics. There is an internal or logical connection between the works and the discourse dedicated to them, so merely to put these on different levels, as if they were logically distinct, is not satisfactory.

There are problems too with the first-order and second-order levels, between the criticism and the philosophy. The philosopher of literature, conceived as an investigator of the logic and aims of literary criticism, is not in a comparable position to, say, the philosopher of physics because the field of inquiry, “criticism,” is too diverse to present a methodologically coherent and unified subject. The view of philosophy of literature as “metacriticism” seems doomed to fail in either of its two primary manifestations: as a descriptive or as a normative exercise. Viewed descriptively, metacriticism sets out to identify the underlying principles of criticism by observing current practice and abstracting from it. But confronted with the array of critical “approaches,” the best such an exercise could deliver would be a set of principles relative to each “approach”: principles of psychoanalytic or feminist or deconstructionist or historical materialist readings. This could not form the basis of an interesting philosophy of literature.

The alternative, normative metacriticism, seeks not merely to abstract from the array of critical practices but to formulate principles that *ought* to be in place even in cases where they are not. Normative metacriticism is most likely to arise when one particular critical methodology is in the ascendancy, as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s with New Criticism.⁵ At that period it seemed natural for philosophers or metacritics, like Monroe C. Beardsley and others, to formulate principles, such as the Intentional Fallacy, the Affective Fallacy, the Heresy of Paraphrase, etc., which underpinned New Criticism, and present them as universal principles of criticism. In fact subsequently, with the declining influence of New Criticism, the validity of such principles has itself become the focus of debates within philosophy of literature. In effect these debates amount to challenges to the authority of New Criticism.

⁵ For a discussion of normative metacriticism, see Stein Haugom Olsen, “Literary Theory and Literary Aesthetics,” in *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 199–201.

But if philosophy of literature is not philosophy of criticism, or metacriticism, what is it? Clearly the answer will be revealed in the questions, debates, and discussions undertaken in this book. In summary, the inquiry is not concerned narrowly with the “concept” of literature, conceived as a merely definitional matter, but rather with what might be called the phenomenon of literature, the phenomenon, common to most if not all cultures, of elevating certain kinds of linguistic activities – notably storytelling or poetry-making or drama – to an art form issuing in products that are revered and of cultural significance. What kinds of qualities are required for linguistic works to acquire this status? What fundamental assumptions are in place for those who attend to such works as literature and as art?

Again, though, we need to focus this inquiry, for as described it might seem impossibly wide-ranging. The philosopher’s interest is not the same as the sociologist’s or the ethnographer’s. It is a perfectly valid and important exercise to examine the actual shaping of a literary tradition in some given society – the specific values, genres, styles, or interests that underlie that tradition. These might differ significantly from culture to culture. Not every culture has sonnets or tragedies or romantic novels. We will see in the next chapter that there are two radically different conceptions of “institution” to explain the ethnographer’s and the philosopher’s focus of inquiry. The literary institutions that the ethnographer investigates are particular to each culture, resting on local social and cultural facts, while the “institution” of literature investigated by the philosopher concerns far more fundamental structures, those that, in Kantian terminology, “make possible” any relevant interactions between participants in a practice. The philosopher of literature is not a historian of culture, nor a sociologist.

Nor in any other sense will the focus of this inquiry be historical. It will neither examine the history of any given literary tradition nor will it examine, in any detail, the history of previous philosophical attempts to inquire into literature. The principal method will be “analytical,” broadly conceived. It will seek to analyze the logical foundations of the “practice” of literature, rather as the philosopher of law examines neither particular legal systems nor the history of law but the grounds on which any such system depends, such as the putative justifications for punishment, the relation of law and morality, or the obligations of citizens to obey the law.

Literary Theory

Perhaps surprisingly, philosophy of literature has little direct connection with “Literary Theory” as that is normally understood. Literary Theory, as a heterogeneous collection of “isms,” flourished in literary studies roughly between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. A standard list of such theories would include: structuralism, feminism, Marxism, reader-response theory,

psychoanalysis, deconstruction, post-structuralism, postmodernism, new historicism, and post-colonialism, with the principal luminaries including Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Michel Foucault.⁶ It is widely assumed, even among its strongest supporters, that the heyday of Theory (as it became known) is past. Terry Eagleton begins his book, aptly titled *After Theory* (2003), by stating unequivocally “The Golden Age of cultural theory is long past.”⁷

Generalizations in this area are fraught with danger but it doesn't seem too cavalier to claim that a feature of Theory, as a whole, was that it rejected the notion of literature as art and also rejected the relevance of aesthetics and analytic philosophy in any investigation of the literary realm. As these are at the center of the present inquiry it is not surprising that the connections are weak.

A recent commentator has noted another but related feature of Theory:

What theorists of all these persuasions have in common, whatever their individual differences, is a decisive turning away from literature as literature and an eagerness to transmogrify it into a cultural artefact (or “signifying practice”) to be used in waging an always antiestablishment ideological political struggle.⁸

It is a curious consequence of this stance that Literary Theory became increasingly remote from literature as such. Admittedly this was not entirely unintended as Theory self-consciously adopted both an anti-essentialist and a reductive view of literature. The very concept of literature was thought to reside in a discredited “liberal humanist” ideology and in its place was substituted the more neutral and supposedly value-free notion of “text” or undifferentiated *writing* (*écriture*). We shall be looking in more detail at this move as we proceed. What it means, though, is that Theory is equally applicable to any kind of text and has no special interest in demarcating a sub-class as “literary,” far less trying to discern its fundamental aspects. Literary Theorists were happy to apply their methods to any texts, not just non-literary genres such as popular fiction but also newspapers, comics, films, even philosophy.

The critic and theorist J. Hillis Miller sees Theory not just as an attempt to kill off literature but as a symptom of its decline:

Literary theory arose in its contemporary form just at the time literature's social role was weakening. If literature's power and role could be taken for granted as still in full force, it would not be necessary to theorize about it. ... The efflorescence of literary theory signals the death of literature.⁹

⁶ The list is taken from Valentine Cunningham, “Theory, What Theory?” in D. Patai and W. Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. 1.

⁸ Introduction, Patai and Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire*, p. 8.

⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 35.

In the event, though, it is Literary Theory that has shown its mortality rather than literature. Arguably, the decline of Theory marks the revitalization of literature. A serious philosophy of literature will show that literature as an enduring social phenomenon is far more robust than this pessimistic prognosis suggests.

In the early days of Theory there was an undeniable sense of excitement at new possibilities: “New perspectives and ways of thinking opened up on issues such as human subjectivity, power, responsibility, gender, class, race, sexuality, mind, the construction of history, disciplinary boundaries, truth-effects, and the nature of the linguistic sign.”¹⁰ But as each theory settled down into its own methodology and styles of reading, a degree of staleness became inevitable; if you believe that all texts exhibit *aporias* (contradictions) or repression or class conflict or sexism, the chances are you will find this in any given text. “If, for example, semantic indeterminacy of a certain sort (e.g., the varieties yielded by ‘structures of supplementarity’) is one of the ‘always already’ or transcendental conditions of language, it comes as no surprise to learn that more of the same can be spotted in ‘the text of Baudelaire’ or anywhere else.”¹¹

However, it is no part of the purpose of this book to confront Literary Theory; indeed, described in neutral terms, many of the concerns of Theorists are also concerns of the philosopher of literature: about authorship, or meaning, or the limits of interpretation, or fictionality. In fact judging from a recent student-focused anthology on *Literary Theory and Criticism* (2006), there is evidence of a tamer post-theory theory emerging among literary critics which virtually coincides with the interests of the philosopher of literature. It addresses, for example,

questions about authority and authenticity: how do we know whose voice we are hearing when we read a poem? And what is the role of the critic in mediating or explicating the text? If we cannot access authorial intention, whose voice are we listening to? Are we actually in any more privileged epistemological relation to our own activity of interpretation? Do readers construe texts or construct them? Is the activity of criticism one of discovery or performance?

As soon as we begin to ask such questions, we are, in effect, ‘doing theory’; but is hard to conceive of a critical practice which could proceed in blithe ignorance or wilful suppression of such problems.¹²

¹⁰ Introduction, Patricia Waugh, ed., *Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 3–4.

¹¹ Paisley Livingston, “Literary Aesthetics and the Aims of Criticism,” in Patai and Corral, eds., *Theory’s Empire*, p. 659.

¹² Introduction, Waugh, ed., *Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 10.

It is very much problems of this kind that exercise the philosopher of literature, not least because they do relate directly to critical practice and to the special features of reading literature as literature. Theory, in its older manifestations, often seemed remote from such questions because the focus was seldom on literature as such (the concept was rejected) and the framework for discussion was defined by, and concentrated on, theories from quite distinct intellectual areas, such as psychology, politics, linguistics, or metaphysics. Furthermore, many of the specific theses or presuppositions from those areas that gave shape to Theory have been subjected to devastating criticisms from philosophers: radical meaning-skepticism, radical kinds of anti-realism and constructivism, radical relativisms about everything from truth to morality, radical attacks on objectivity, rationality, authority, liberal politics, the autonomy of the self, and the author.¹³ Of course just to state that these theories have been criticized is not enough in itself to undermine them, only a careful assessment of the arguments could do that, but it does suggest that Literary Theory might not be the most reliable starting point for a philosophical inquiry about literature. Where similar topics come up – as in the questions in that last quotation – it is best to see where the philosophical inquiry leads without constant reference to Theory which is either anti-philosophical or at times philosophically suspect.

Another danger with nearly all species of Critical Theory is also endemic in reflections on the nature of literature, one we will encounter in different guises: the danger of reductionism. When literary works are approached with a general all-embracing theory in hand, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, linguistics, or radical politics it is all too easy to reduce the works to mere instances of a wider class of phenomena which themselves possess no distinct literary qualities. Reduction here is a semi-technical term, often used in philosophy, although not always with a clear meaning. Reductive or “eliminative” materialism, for example, is the view that only material things are ultimately real, implying there is no distinct realm of mental phenomena and all reference to such can be eliminated in favor of descriptions of matter and its properties.¹⁴ Reduction in the literary realm can take different

¹³ Many of these criticisms have been collected in Patai and Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire*; see also David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1988); J. R. Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida,” *Glyph*, 1 (1977), pp. 198–208.

¹⁴ E.g., P. S. Churchland, *Neurophilosophy: Toward a Unified Science of the Mind/Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

forms, but one way or the other it denies the “autonomy” of literature. It either explains (“explains away”) the phenomena of literature – the writing, reading, and evaluating of works – in terms of causal processes (social, ideological, or psychological) or it treats the works themselves as manifestations of essentially non-literary phenomena like the “play of signifiers” or undifferentiated “writing.” We shall look in more detail at particular cases in later chapters. It would be wrong to maintain that all the principal branches of Theory are reductive; it is often the case that theories that began in crudely reductive forms – notably psychoanalysis and Marxism – developed much more sophisticated variants. In general, care has to be taken with the charge of reduction that it does not beg the question about what literary qualities are.

Literature as Art

The focus of our inquiry, as noted, is on literature as an art form. Our central question is what this means and what its implications are. This focus is rarely found within Theory, and where literature as art does get mentioned it is usually in dismissive terms. Yet literature – primarily in the modes of poetry and drama – has been designated an art form for over two millennia. Aristotle described it as “an art which imitates by language alone,” although he notes that there is no “common name” covering both verse and prose forms: “we have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic Conversation; and we should still be without one even if the imitation in the two instances were in trimeters or elegiacs or some other kind of verse.”¹⁵ Admittedly, Aristotle and the ancient Greeks did not have a conception of art directly comparable to our own. Aristotle’s term *techne* is usually translated as “art” but more literally means skill or craft. Nevertheless, by according poetry a special status among uses of language and indeed by offering a systematic study of one poetic form, tragedy, Aristotle established a clear tradition for elevating poetic art as a proper object of study in its own right.

The Roman poet Horace entitled his famous treatise on poetry (c. 18 BC), itself written in verse form, *Ars Poetica*. He drew an explicit comparison between the art of poetry and the art of painting, “*ut pictura poesis*” (as in painting so in poetry), a comparison that became a subject of ongoing debate, not least in the eighteenth century when Gotthold Lessing, in

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 2, 316.

Laocoön (1766), proposed a fundamental definition of the relations between the two art forms. Horace saw poetry not just as beautiful language but as an instrument for learning, thereby addressing Plato's charge that poetry does more harm than good. Horace writes: "It is not enough for poems to be 'beautiful'; they must also yield delight and guide the listener's spirit wherever they wish" (line 99). Also: "Poets wish to either benefit or delight us, or, at one and the same time, to speak words that are both pleasing and useful for our lives" (lines 333–334) [*Aut prodesse uolunt aut delectare poetae | aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere uitae*].

A more modern attempt to bring poetry in line with the other arts appeared in a landmark work in art theory *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746) [Fine arts reduced to a single principle] by Abbé Charles Batteux. This work was the first to offer a definitive grouping of arts under the heading "fine arts." Batteux listed those fine arts whose aim is pleasure as music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and dance. In another category, he added arts that combine pleasure and usefulness, namely eloquence and architecture, while theater is deemed a combination of all the arts. The "single principle" is "the imitation of beautiful nature," invoking again the ancient Greek conception of *mimesis*. For our purposes it is worthy of note that when the modern notion of fine art took shape one of the principal literary arts, poetry, found its place alongside more easily recognizable art forms such as music, painting, and sculpture. This served to consolidate the artistic standing of poetry already anticipated in Aristotle and Horace.

For G. W. F. Hegel (in lectures on aesthetics delivered in the 1820s), poetry was recognized not only as one among other arts but as the highest art of all, moving beyond the sensuous media of music and painting into a purer form of realization:

As regards the *third* and most spiritual mode of representation of the romantic art-type, we must look for it in *poetry*. Its characteristic peculiarity lies in the power with which it subjects to the mind and to its ideas the sensuous element from which music and painting in their degree began to liberate art. For sound, the only external matter which poetry retains, is in it no longer the feeling of the sonorous itself, but is a *sign*, which by itself is void of import. ... Yet this sensuous element, which in music was still immediately one with inward feeling, is in poetry separated from the content of consciousness. In poetry the mind determines this content for its own sake, and apart from all else, into the shape of ideas, and though it employs sound to express them, yet treats it solely as a symbol without value or import. ... [T]he proper medium of poetical representation is the poetical imagination and intellectual portrayal itself. And as this element is common to all types of

art, it follows that poetry runs through them all and develops itself independently in each. Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to its final realization in external sensuous matter, but expatiates exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings. Yet just in this its highest phase art ends by transcending itself, inasmuch as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought.¹⁶

It is easy enough to establish as a historical fact the longstanding recognition of poetry as one of the arts, indeed as a “fine art.” Of course nothing presented in this brief survey goes any way toward explaining what exactly the implications are in thinking of poetry as an art form. Indeed, surprisingly, although the New Critics gave primacy to poetry in illustrating their critical principles, when modern philosophers of literature examine the literary arts they give little attention to poetry as such. There is not a “philosophy of poetry,” and the issues that philosophers raise about literature in general – meaning, interpretation, cognition, morality – apply as much to prose narrative as to poetry narrowly conceived. In the chapters that follow, where the implications of recognizing literature as art are explored, poetry will figure in roughly equal measure with other literary forms.

When we speak of literature nowadays we do not restrict ourselves to poetry in the narrow sense. Literature in prose – the novel or short story or prose drama – is arguably seen as an even more important or central literary form. The idea of imaginative literature as it developed in the nineteenth century encompassed both prose fiction and writing in verse. It is a moot point, one that should not simply be taken for granted, whether there is a viable and clearly defined conception of literature that covers both poetry, as traditionally conceived, and the novel. However, it will be one of the arguments of this book that there is such a conception and that therefore a philosophy of literature does possess an overall coherence and need not fragment into a philosophy of poetry, a philosophy of the novel, a philosophy of drama, etc.

Does prose fiction qualify as an art? Novels, characteristically, are not obviously “artistic” in the way that poetry is. When the novel first developed in the eighteenth century, novelists looked less to poetry for their model so much as other styles of prose writing, such as histories, letters, journals,

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. with an introduction and commentary by Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 95.

biographies. To acquire the kind of verisimilitude they sought they gave their works titles like *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Clarissa: The History of a Young Lady*, *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. The authors sought to give the impression of telling the truth, not just good stories but stories that looked as if they were from journals or biographies. If anything they wanted to hide the artistic intent, perhaps to heighten verisimilitude or to distance their writing from fable or fantasy. Rather than relying, as had earlier writers, on mythology or legend or standard plots and stock characters, it was a feature of this new literary form that it used new and invented plots (hence the name *novel*) and particularized characters. Unlike poetic forms, such as the sonnet, the ode, the epic, or tragic drama, there were no fixed conventions for the novel. The critic Ian Watt explains this in terms of the early aims of the novelists:

When we judge a work in another genre [e.g., sonnet or ode], a recognition of its literary models is often important and sometimes essential; our evaluation depends to a large extent on our analysis of the author's skill in handling the appropriate formal conventions. On the other hand, it is surely very damaging for a novel to be in any sense an imitation of another literary work: and the reason for this seems to be that since the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience, attention to any pre-established formal conventions can only endanger his success. What is often felt as the formlessness of the novel, as compared, say, with tragedy, or the ode, probably follows from this: the poverty of the novel's formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism.¹⁷

But if the “artistry” of the novel rests less than that of poetry on the manipulations of formal conventions it does not follow that the novel exhibits no artistry at all. As the genre developed, now-familiar criteria emerged for judging better or worse novels: to do with plot, character, structure, good writing, thematic interest, verisimilitude, originality. Such criteria, which are not too distant from those proposed by Aristotle for tragedy, are artistic criteria in the sense that they concern the artifice of the whole and the pleasures to be derived from it. In an early review (1847) of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a reviewer remarks:

Almost all we require in a novelist she has: perception of character, and power of delineating it; picturesqueness; passion, and knowledge of life. The story is not only of singular interest, naturally evolved, unflagging to the last, but it

¹⁷ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), pp. 13–14.

fastens itself upon your attention, and will not leave you. The book closed, the enchantment continues.¹⁸

As the novel grew and diversified, it developed into an art form as readily recognizable as poetry, even if, like poetry, manifesting strikingly different modes. When Henry James published an essay describing “The Art of Fiction” (1884)¹⁹ there was no sense that the term “art” was unduly extended; and a hundred years later, at the height of Theory, when the idea of literature as art seemed at its most precarious, the title of Milan Kundera’s book *The Art of the Novel* (1988) was not thought to be unduly provocative or controversial. As with poetry, merely popular genres, which did not aspire to be works of art so much as ephemeral entertainments, developed side by side with self-consciously “artistic” modes.

What should be emphasized is that appreciating literature as art is not simply one among other critical “approaches.” It is more fundamental. Admittedly there are critics who do not give priority to reading literature as art – this might be true of deconstructionists, new historicists, or psychoanalytical critics. But proponents of such views might be reluctant to describe their readings as attending to the *literary* qualities of a work, or to the work *as literature*. In that sense their attention is not primarily to the work’s *artistic* aspects. Again it remains to be seen what this entails. But there is a conceptual connection between literature and art such that it would be paradoxical to speak of appreciating a work *as literature* but not *as art*. In contrast, there is nothing paradoxical in speaking of appreciating a work as literature but not in deconstructionist, new historicist, or psychoanalytic terms. Such categories, whatever independent merits they might have, do not seem essential to explaining the literary viewpoint.

Aesthetics and Literature

To think of literature as art is, minimally, to think of works as artifacts or designs of some kind, exhibiting “artistry,” comparable in certain respects with other arts, and capable of affording distinct kinds of pleasure. An initial question is whether the relevant kind of pleasure and the relevant

¹⁸ George Henry Lewes, Review of Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, *Fraser’s Magazine*, December, 1847. Extract reprinted in Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, edited by Richard J. Dunn (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 447.

¹⁹ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Longman’s Magazine*, 4 (September 1884), reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (London: Macmillan, 1888).

literary qualities are essentially explicable in *aesthetic* terms. Must we look specifically to aesthetics to give substance to philosophy of literature? The matter is complicated because it is at least not obvious that aesthetic appraisal – perhaps in terms of aesthetic experience or aesthetic qualities or aesthetic values – is indispensable in understanding what is distinctive about the literary arts. Yet notions like the pleasures of literature and the designs of literary artifacts seem indisputably aesthetic. In the end, as will be argued, we cannot escape reference to the aesthetic even though there are important properties of literary works, e.g., fictionality, only indirectly connected to aesthetic properties.

For some, the artistic and the aesthetic are conceptually related. P. F. Strawson asserts that “the concepts ‘work of art’ and ‘aesthetic assessment’ are logically coupled and move together, in the sense that it would be self-contradictory to speak of judging something *as a work of art*, but not from the aesthetic point of view.”²⁰ Marcia Eaton has proposed a definition of art that links it essentially with aesthetic perception or reflection:

This necessary component of the aesthetic [perception or reflection] must also be a necessary component of the artistic if artworks are to be distinguished from other things that are skilfully and intentionally produced. Thus I define “art” as follows:

X is a work of art if and only if X is an artefact and X is treated in such a way that someone who is fluent in a culture is led to direct attention (perception and/or reflection) to aesthetic properties of X.²¹

Yet conceptions of art have been proposed that distance the artistic and the aesthetic. Most famously, perhaps, Arthur Danto has made the striking claim that it is not how an object *looks* or how it is *perceived* that determines whether it is a work of art but rather its embeddedness in an “artworld.”²² Two objects, Danto suggests, could be indistinguishable to the eye but only one is a work of art. His well-known example is Andy Warhol’s facsimile reproductions of Brillo Boxes; Warhol’s Brillo Boxes are art but the ordinary Brillo Boxes,

²⁰ P. F. Strawson, “Aesthetic Appraisal and Works of Art,” in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 237. Originally published in P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 178–188.

²¹ Marcia Muelder Eaton, “Art and the Aesthetic,” in Peter Kivy, ed., *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 74.

²² Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

to which they appear identical, are not.²³ Conceptual art in general is often thought to be a challenge to any essential connection between art and aesthetic qualities.²⁴

There is no need in this context to examine or assess rival definitions of art. It is enough to note that the relation between art and the aesthetic is contested. Whatever is said on that front, however, there is a fairly broad consensus that a useful distinction can be drawn between purely aesthetic qualities and artistic or art historical properties. To describe a work as elegant or finely balanced or unified or beautiful is to characterize its aesthetic nature, but to describe it as a sonnet or alluding to Marvell or symbolizing hope is to offer an art-related or more broadly literary characterization. The former seem to rely on something analogous to perception, while the latter call on classification or interpretation.

It is sometimes thought helpful to distinguish a narrow from a more inclusive sense of “aesthetic qualities.” Berys Gaut has done so:

In the narrow sense of the term, aesthetic value properties are those that ground a certain kind of sensory or contemplative pleasure or displeasure. In this sense, beauty, elegance, gracefulness, and their contraries are aesthetic value properties. However, the sense adopted here is broader: I mean by “aesthetic value” the value of an object *qua* work of art, that is, its artistic value.²⁵

It is not just values but the qualities themselves that concern us, qualities that a work has *qua* work of art. If being a sonnet is such a quality then, in this broad sense, it becomes an aesthetic quality. Perhaps the terminology is not very important. It seems clear that being a sonnet is *relevant* to an aesthetic appreciation of a work.

Nevertheless, there are connotations of “aesthetic” that many critics find troubling in relation to literature. In particular they are the connotations of a specific kind of *experience*, a specific kind of *quality*, and a specific kind of *pleasure*.

Aesthetic experience

The idea that art yields a distinctive kind of experience and is valued as such is a commonplace in aesthetics. But the nature of that experience,

²³ Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld,” in Lamarque and Olsen, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*.

²⁴ See Peter Lamarque, “On Perceiving Conceptual Art,” in Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, eds., *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” in Lamarque and Olsen, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, pp. 283–284. Originally published in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182–203.

particularly when characterized as “aesthetic experience,” is subject to perennial controversy.²⁶ One idea is that aesthetic experience rests on a kind of disinterested contemplation of an object, a state of mind involving “psychical distance.”²⁷ There might be certain applications of this idea to literary appreciation, where forms of detachments are appropriate, but on the whole, conditions of disinterestness and distance do not seem to capture the essence of what is valued in literature, especially where serious reflection on subject and theme is demanded. Weaker notions of aesthetic experience might be more relevant. Noël Carroll, for example, defines aesthetic experience merely as “the detection and discrimination of aesthetic properties, on the one hand, and design appreciation, on the other.”²⁸ On the reasonable assumption that literary works exhibit design and are characterizable in aesthetic terms they would become amenable to aesthetic experience under this conception.

Paisley Livingston builds in a value component to aesthetic experience: “a direct, active contemplative attention to the qualities of some item, where this contemplation is an intrinsically valued experience.” He adds that it “embraces thought and imagination as well as perception and sensation.”²⁹ This last clause is particularly germane because the idea of experience defined narrowly in perceptual terms seems barely pertinent to literature. While a text needs to be perceived (by sight or by touch) to be read, no intrinsic quality of this perceptual experience is integral to literary value. As Hegel notes, poetry moves beyond the sensuous medium. Of course this is not to deny factors like the layout of a poem on the page or the mellifluous sounds of a work read aloud, both of which can aid appreciation, but only when the level of meaningful content is engaged can full poetic appreciation begin. By embracing thought and imagination as well, aesthetic experience can move more comfortably into central literary terrain.

The trouble is that thought and imagination do not naturally fall under the heading “experience,” and this is a major problem for aesthetic accounts of literature. The aesthetic realm is normally defined in terms of perception, or how things appear (not least through the etymology of *aisthesis*, meaning “sense perception” in Greek), yet perception is only incidental to literature, the art of language. Nevertheless, while it seems wrong to seek a distinct kind

²⁶ For a clear overview, see Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), ch. 4.

²⁷ The “classic” statement of this theory is Edward Bullough, “‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,” *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. 5 (1912), pp. 87–117.

²⁸ Carroll, *Philosophy of Art*, p. 201.

²⁹ Livingston, “Literary Aesthetics and the Aims of Criticism,” p. 660.

of phenomenology associated with reading literature, we should perhaps not too hastily throw out the notion of experience altogether. Reading is not characterized by any particular feeling or sensation, but there is a kind of “appreciation” involving directed attention to literary qualities that is at least analogous to “experience” and closely related to standard aesthetic considerations. That notion of appreciation will be explored in Chapter 4.

Aesthetic qualities

Aesthetic qualities are those qualities toward which aesthetic experience is directed. But what are they, in either the narrow or broad conceptions? Do literary works possess aesthetic qualities of a kind recognizably similar to those of other art forms like music or painting? If so, are such qualities of significance in literary criticism? Or are they, as some critics suppose, merely peripheral to the critical enterprise?

It is to Frank Sibley’s pioneering work on aesthetic concepts that one should first look for illumination. Sibley identified a range of concepts – *unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving*, etc. – which serve to characterize aesthetic aspects of art or other objects. On first viewing, such a list might not appear of much interest to the critic. However, one benefit of Sibley’s lists is to show that aesthetics is not exclusively confined to beauty. To speak merely of the “beauty” of literary works does indeed seem anodyne and outdated. Sibley showed that aesthetic appraisals, thus aesthetic interests, are considerably wider than that. Another benefit is his recognition of the subtly different ways in which descriptive and evaluative elements can interact in aesthetic concepts.³⁰ Aesthetic characterizations are not always or only ways of evaluating works; they also have implications for how the work *appears*, what *impact* it has, what is *salient* in it, what merits aesthetic *attention*. Aesthetic descriptions bring such matters to light.

There are also three more substantive theses in Sibley that seem especially significant in the literary context. The first is the view that aesthetic properties are “emergent” or *gestalt* properties that require something more than merely sensory perception for their discernment. Sibley maintains that only people possessing a certain kind of “sensitivity” or “taste,” itself subject to training and improvement, will be able to apply aesthetic terms correctly and engage in aesthetic appreciation. Something parallel is true in the literary case, namely that mere grasp of the language is not sufficient to appreciate a work aesthetically. Whether or not a particular sensibility is called for

³⁰ See Frank Sibley, “Particularity, Art, and Evaluation,” in Lamarque and Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Originally published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 48 (1974), pp. 1–21.

might be open to question,³¹ but that some skill is involved beyond linguistic competence seems certain. Literary appreciation is not a natural but a trained mode of discernment. To see how a literary work “hangs together,” where its interest and literary quality resides, a reader must have a holistic grasp of its achievement, which exceeds a sentence by sentence understanding of its component parts.

The second Sibleyan thesis relates to this, namely that there is no logical or even inductive relation between an object’s non-aesthetic properties and its aesthetic ones. No list of non-aesthetic properties – physical, structural, perceptual, grammatical – entails (or makes probable) the presence of an aesthetic property. The idea that aesthetic concepts are not condition-governed has been challenged,³² but there is at least a case for saying in the literary application that a work’s emergent aesthetic features, of a kind to be exemplified later, are not deducible from textual features alone. Merely noting the presence of metaphors, images, repetition, rhyme schemes, rhetorical devices of any kind, will not determine that a passage is effective or moving, any more than the use of a minor key in a musical work inevitably determines it as sad. It might be added too that the presence of such textual features is no guarantee that the work must count as “literature.” The point takes us back to Danto, for whom how a work *appears* will never alone determine its art status.

Thirdly, Sibley’s aesthetic “particularism” has an application in the literary context. This is the view that aesthetic judgments are not generalizable. If in this work this combination of non-aesthetic or textual features contributes to this aesthetic effect, it does not follow that there is a generalizable principle that states that whenever that or a similar combination occurs the same effect will follow.³³ For example, the use of the “same” poetic imagery – love as a rose, time as a tyrant – in different works never ensures sameness of aesthetic effect. The point might be put by saying that there are no hard and fast rules that connect linguistic features of syntax, rhetoric, or meaning to literary aesthetic achievement. There might be rules of thumb for would-be authors – do’s and don’ts of composition – but no success is guaranteed by imitating bits and pieces from other writers. A device that works so well in novel A might be entirely out of place in novel B.

It might be thought that aesthetic qualities of literary works are closely linked to formal features, and thus that an aesthetic approach is a kind

³¹ It is explicitly rejected by Olsen in “Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice,” in *The End of Literary Theory*, p. 7.

³² E.g., Peter Kivy, *Speaking of Art* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

³³ Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts,” in Lamarque and Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, p. 133.

of formalism. Only a full analysis of literary appreciation will show why this need not be so. But a first step comes from pondering the idea of “fine writing.” We all have a view about what counts as fine writing and could give our favorite examples. But in the literary context, matters are complicated because fine writing in literary art is seldom an end in itself, rather a means to some further end or effect. Mellifluous prose or delicately nuanced imagery will not always be appropriate in every context, say in a dialogue (in a novel) between drunken members of street gangs. Rhetorical or formal devices, like figurative language, imagery, alliteration, rhyme schemes, repetition, metre, do not have intrinsic aesthetic value but gain their effectiveness by the contribution they make to a desired end, be it emotional impact, realistic depiction, humor, or poetic insight. In the non-literary context, the use of alliteration, rhyming couplets, or enriched figuration might afford no aesthetic pleasure if used, for example, to convey bad news.³⁴

The important theoretical point, though, is that formal or rhetorical devices are in themselves *textual* features, identifiable independently of discursive aims and often subject to learnable rules. They acquire aesthetic significance only when assigned a function within an artistic structure. Consider a critic’s observations on certain rhetorical features in these well-known lines from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”:

... a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Some of the sweep of this passage is also to be explained by the repetition of ‘and’: ‘*And* the round ocean, *and* the living air, / *And* the blue sky, *and* in the mind of man’. In conventional prose ‘and’ would normally signal the end of a list, but here, no sooner has Wordsworth thought to end it than some other facet of nature’s multitudinousness occurs to him. The list is apparently

³⁴ Hume has noted the inappropriateness of powerful rhetoric on such occasions: “Who could ever think of it as a good expedient for comforting an afflicted parent, to exaggerate, with all the force of elocution, the irreparable loss, which he has met with by the death of a favourite child? The more power of imagination and expression you here employ, the more you encrease his despair and affliction” (David Hume, “Of Tragedy,” in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longman, Green, 1874–1875), vol. 3, p. 364.

endless, and Wordsworth's profligate way with connectives all adds to the sense of amplitude and prodigality. This impression is strengthened by a similarly extravagant use of 'all': 'All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things.' The omnipresence of the 'a'-sound is also worth noting: seven consecutive lines in this section begin with it, and all the singular elemental words — 'man', 'and', 'am', 'all', 'a' — contain it. When this ubiquitous sound is coupled with the way every aspect of the universe is merged together with connectives and embraced by repeated 'all's, we have the impression that man, language and the universe are merging together in a paean of ecstatic oneness.³⁵

What is striking about this passage is that it highlights a textual feature — the repetition of "and" and "all" — which might in other contexts be thought a defect, far less a mark of fine writing. But the critic identifies an aesthetic function for this rhetorical feature and assigns both significance and value to it. The aesthetic significance of the repetition *emerges* from the particularities of the poetic context and the construction put upon it. The example demonstrates a fundamental aspect of literary aesthetic effect: the consonance of means to end. The critic's aesthetic appreciation of the passage lies in perceiving a consonance between the formal means and the further poetic purpose of expressing "nature's multitudinousness" and the "ecstatic oneness" of man and universe. The appreciation does not rest on the rhetorical feature (the *textual* feature) alone.

Aesthetic pleasure

A third application of aesthetics is the idea of aesthetic pleasure. The association of pleasure with literature is, as we have seen, an ancient one. Horace's formula of *pleasure* and *usefulness* became standard and reverberated down the centuries, from Philip Sidney to Dr. Johnson to Percy Bysshe Shelley to Matthew Arnold. Sometimes the idea of usefulness is given substance in a theory of artistic truth; sometimes, though, it is just a way of emphasizing that the pleasures of poetry are not merely trivial but what John Stuart Mill called "higher pleasures."

Yet "pleasure," far less "aesthetic pleasure," is not a term that literary critics are comfortable with. A recent exchange between three prominent critics, Frank Kermode, Geoffrey Hartman, and John Guillory³⁶ shows not untypical

³⁵ Mark Rowe, "Poetry and Abstraction," in *Philosophy and Literature: A Book of Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 174–175.

³⁶ In 2004 Frank Kermode was emeritus professor of English at Cambridge, Geoffrey Hartman emeritus professor of English at Yale, and John Guillory chair and professor of English at New York University.

concerns. The latter two critics were invited to reflect on Kermode's Tanner Lectures at Berkeley³⁷ where his aim was precisely to relocate at least some notion of the aesthetic – specifically the idea of “aesthetic pleasure” – in the vacuum left by the demise of Theory from the turn of the twenty-first century. The ostensible focus is on canon formation and the extent to which judgments of aesthetic value, apart from what Kermode calls “collusion with the discourses of power,” could validly be thought to underlie the shaping of the canon.

Although Hartman and Guillory are happy to move with Kermode beyond the simplistic ideological analyses of 1990s cultural critics, they both express skepticism about aesthetic pleasure. Guillory notes “the pervasive embarrassment with the subject of pleasure [in the critical community], and the ease with which pleasure has been neutralized as the merely contingent effect of reception.”³⁸ His own unease with aesthetic pleasure stems from suspicion about “higher pleasures” and the traditional elevation of poetry among the literary arts. Although he accepts – more readily than Kermode himself – the specificity of aesthetic pleasure among other kinds of pleasures, he is inclined, against Kermode, to reject the link between pleasure and canonicity. Hartman finds the very concept of pleasure, in the literary context, “problematic” and “descriptively poor” and speaks of its “onomatopoeic pallor.”

The skepticism voiced by Guillory and Hartman about the role of aesthetic pleasure in criticism is probably widely shared, even if the extent to which this skepticism rests on an outdated or overly narrow conception of aesthetics deserves further investigation. However, Kermode is not entirely isolated. The critic Harold Bloom, for example, famously led an attack on fashionable Theory at its height in the 1990s in the name of the “autonomy of the aesthetic.”³⁹ Like Kermode, Bloom defends the canon on the grounds of aesthetic value while recognizing that “the flight from or repression of the aesthetic is endemic in our institutions.”⁴⁰

The “flight from the aesthetic” among critics can probably be traced to several sources. In summary, these include: the politicization of criticism in the heyday of Theory and the thought that appeal to aesthetic value is reactionary and tainted with unwelcome ideological accretions;⁴¹ a shying away

³⁷ Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), p. 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴¹ A view found, for example, in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984) and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

from value judgments of any kind; a belief that any reference to pleasure or emotion or experience or indeed to a phenomenology of reading is marginal to the critical enterprise; and, by implication, the thought that the very vocabulary of aesthetics, as exemplified in Frank Sibley's list of aesthetic concepts, is itself peripheral to substantial critical discourse. If we are to find a place for aesthetics – in particular aesthetic appreciation, aesthetic qualities, and aesthetic pleasure – within the philosophy of literature, as it seems the subject demands, then we must show how this skepticism can be met.

What might be involved in supposing literary works to be proper objects of aesthetic attention and aesthetic appraisal? Kermode and Bloom are no doubt right that some conception of *aesthetic pleasure* is integral to such an approach, but their literary critical opponents are also right to be suspicious of this. Kermode gets off on the wrong foot by seeking to naturalize the pleasures of literature, via Sigmund Freud and Roland Barthes, identifying them with a heady mix of sexuality (Barthes's *jouissance*), transgression, and what he calls "dismay." This is psychologism of a highly simplistic variety and apart from being vague is open to counter-example. It also seems committed, again, to the implausible idea that there is a distinct phenomenology associated with reading literature. A characterization of the aesthetic pleasure that literature can afford is not some empirical datum with which the inquiry starts but at best a destination reached from quite other premises.

If aesthetics is to be at all relevant to literature it must deploy recognizable features of aesthetic appraisal as applied to the arts more widely, but it must also capture something distinctive about literature as an art form. To do that it must avoid reductionism in several areas.

Avoiding Unhelpful Reduction

One of the principal lessons from the Sibleyan tradition is that aesthetic qualities, while related to textual qualities, are not reducible to them. The temptation to reduce literary works to instances of more familiar or more tractable kinds is the biggest obstacle to a successful characterization of literary appreciation conceived even partially in aesthetic terms. Only if literary works can be shown to be objects of a distinctive kind of aesthetic appraisal, and to promote and reward such appraisal, will it be possible to set apart the literary sphere as a subject worthy of its own treatment within aesthetics.

But the tendency to "naturalize" literature is strong, for example to see literary works as no more than pleasing pieces of language, or entertaining narratives, or utterances to be assigned meanings. If the philosophy of literature has any hope of offering a plausible characterization of literature as art

and finding a coherent, central, and defensible place for aesthetic pleasure, for aesthetic features distinct from merely textual features, for a *sui generis* mode of aesthetic appreciation, and for some conception of aesthetic value, then it needs to avoid the temptation of reduction on several fronts.

- (1) It must encompass all literary forms – lyric poetry, epic, drama, the novel, the short story – without giving implicit priority to one form over another (as New Criticism did to poetry, for example, and structuralism to narrative).
- (2) It must avoid attempts to explain literature in terms of linguistic properties alone (semantic, syntactic, or rhetorical), for in doing so it is likely to miss those essential features of design and artifice that qualify literature as art.
- (3) It must avoid pure formalism or “art for art’s sake” aestheticism. In characterizing the “love of literature,” for example, it should not seek to reduce the complex nature of a literary response to any one aspect of literary pleasure, such as poetic imagery or plot structure.
- (4) In characterizing aesthetic pleasure it should not be narrowly *hedonistic*. There have been attempts to explain the pleasures of reading in purely “sensuous” terms, or even as “erotic”: as with Roland Barthes, who distinguishes *plaisir* and *jouissance* to describe modes of reading,⁴² and Susan Sontag, who argued that “[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”⁴³ These ideas are playful and provocative, but neither is the basis for a *philosophical* account.
- (5) It should not give priority to intuitive, “natural,” or untutored responses to literary works. It should take seriously the Sibleyan idea (also found in David Hume) that artistic appreciation is a learned response, acquired through experience and training. We are not all equal as literary critics.
- (6) On matters of perennial debate – the aims and constraints on interpretation, the place for cognition (or “instruction”), and the criteria of literary evaluation – it should as far as possible recognize the “autonomy” of literature as a human practice with its own traditions and conventions and concepts. It should not too readily abandon the idea that in that practice interpretation, cognition, and evaluation have their own standards and are to a large extent *sui generis*. The danger otherwise is to reduce literature to hermeneutics, or philosophy, or ethics.

⁴² Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (*Le Plaisir du texte* [Paris: Seuil, 1975]); trans. R. Miller (London: Cape, 1976).

⁴³ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961), p. 23.

Although these points will largely structure the inquiry to follow it should be acknowledged that they are by no means uncontroversial. Arguments are needed, and will be given, in their support. But if philosophy of literature is committed both to the idea of literature as art and literary works as having their own distinctive characteristics among art works, then some such framework seems a *prima facie* promising and substantial basis on which to proceed. It is also a framework that resists the reduction of literature to something else.

Supplementary Readings

For classical approaches to philosophy of literature the best place to start is Aristotle's *Poetics*, of which there are many editions (e.g., *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* by Stephen Halliwell, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). Another important historical source is David Hume's essay "Of Tragedy," in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006; first published in 1742). A "classic" from the twentieth century is René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973; originally published in 1949). More recent works covering basic issues in the philosophy of literature are: Stein Haugom Olsen, *The Structure of Literary Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Peter Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Christopher New, *Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999); Ole Martin Skilleås, *Philosophy and Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001); Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes, eds., *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Mark Rowe, *Philosophy and Literature: A Book of Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

On the idea of literature as an art form and the role of literature in aesthetics, see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981). Another influential work from early in the development of analytical aesthetics is Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964). There are numerous encyclopedias, anthologies, companions, and handbooks on aesthetics, and most have sections on literature. Perhaps the most comprehensive is Michael Kelly, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Also useful, in collecting core papers in analytical aesthetics, is Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). Some overlap of topics in aesthetics from the "Continental" (i.e., French and German) tradition, can be found in Clive

Cazeaux, ed., *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000). Readings on particular aspects of philosophy of literature and literary aesthetics will be given at the end of other chapters and in footnotes.

For an excellent overview of current issues in literary theory, comprising commissioned survey articles, see Patricia Waugh, ed., *Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); a good collection of primary sources is Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001). On philosophical reactions to literary theory, the following are useful (note that most are critical in one way or another): Stein Haugom Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987); Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory* (London: St Martin's Press, 2nd ed., 1995); D. Patai and W. Corral, eds., *Theory's Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

On aesthetic qualities and aesthetic experience, the classic papers in analytic aesthetics are by Frank Sibley, collected in Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). Sibley's work is debated in detail in Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson, eds., *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). Two foundational works in early-twentieth-century aesthetics, which deal, among other things, with aesthetic experience, are John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 2005; originally published in 1934) and R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938). Further influential discussion is in Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, ed. M. J. Wreen and D. M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982). For contemporary treatment, see Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin, eds., *Aesthetic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2007).

On the idea of the "pleasures" of literature, see Christopher Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting, and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, new ed. 2005); John Carey, *Pure Pleasure: A Guide to the 20th Century's Most Enjoyable Books* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a rather different and provocative approach, see Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, new ed. 1990).