

Preface

What exactly is it to view literature as *art*? It is widely acknowledged that at least some poems, novels, and plays are genuinely works of art, but it is far from clear exactly what that means. Why does it exclude sentimental rhymes on birthday cards or risqué limericks or genre novels like murder mysteries or sci fi? Is this merely a bald judgment of taste or is it also a category judgment? Are there objective grounds for making these distinctions? What counts as “literature” in the first place? And once something has been recognized as literature in the relevant sense, what implications does that hold for how it is read, what is sought from it, what kinds of benefits it bestows, and what place it holds among other things humans value?

What follows is a philosophical exploration of these and similar questions. Why “philosophical”? Is this inquiry different from that of literary critics themselves? In fact it is not different in kind; literary critics can be, and often are, philosophical. But it can still seem an unusual perspective. The philosopher looks at fundamental principles, conceptual connections, unnoticed consequences of lines of thought, significance and insignificance, boundaries where these are possible and desirable. In theory-constructing mode, he or she might then hope to develop an overarching theory of the phenomena that helps unify, explain, and clarify diffuse elements. The philosophical investigation of literature is a probing into practices and procedures but it does not offer a history of those practices or a sociological analysis of them. It looks at the underlying conventions and assumptions that give the practices what distinctive identity they have and seeks to find a coherent perspective that makes sense of them. However, the investigation is of little use if it is too abstract, if it loses touch with the very works – either the works of art themselves or the works of criticism that comment on them – it purports to encompass. Throughout this inquiry these works will be to the fore. Any principles identified or concepts clarified or theories constructed will find their justification only among the familiar practices of readers and appreciators of literature.

The book is aimed not just at philosophers but at those – critics or “common readers” alike – with an interest in literature and a taste for pursuing questions beyond unreflective commonplaces. The method is largely “analytical” and tends to tackle philosophical problems head-on rather than through the history of the problems. But it seeks no confrontation with other methodologies. Styles of philosophizing are largely a matter of temperament and training. In the end what is important is the illumination that is afforded. It is hoped that those who are puzzled by certain aspects of literary creation and literary appreciation will gain some clarity, even some insight, from the treatment on offer.

In Chapter 1 the nature of the inquiry is set out, its methods and its aspirations. What does “philosophy of literature” entail? How does it relate to literary or critical theory? What is involved in thinking of literature as “art”? Can literature be accommodated within aesthetics or does that presuppose a hopelessly outdated conception of *belles lettres* or “fine writing”? Is there any room for talk of aesthetic experience or aesthetic qualities or aesthetic pleasure in relation to literature? In fact a warning is sounded early on against reductionist views of literature, views, for example, that take one literary mode as paradigmatic (the poem, the novel) or see the pleasures of literature in purely sensuous terms or give priority to “natural” or untutored responses.

In Chapter 2, detailed and critical examination is offered of attempts to define literature. Just what is distinctive about literary art? Is there some essence of the literary, its use of language perhaps or its “imitation” of the world or its powers of expression? If there is nothing intrinsic to literary works – properties common to all such works – that signals their literariness, might there be “institutional” factors that set them apart? This idea is carefully explored and different kinds of institutional analyses evaluated. The idea of the “mode of existence” of the literary work is also pursued. Could literary works be merely strings of sentences?

Chapter 3 examines the idea of the author. In twentieth-century literary criticism the author took quite a beating with the rejection of biography-based criticism, the promotion of “impersonality,” the emphasis on “autonomy,” all the way to the “death of the author.” What reasons might there be for demoting the author in this way? Is it not paradoxical that works ostensibly created by authors should be thought to have a life of their own apart from their authors? Arguments about the role of intention in criticism, whether there is an “intentional fallacy,” are also put under the spotlight.

Chapter 4 is pivotal in that it looks at fundamental principles of reading that seemingly must underlie any conception of literature as art. Far from being prescriptive, though, the chapter simply seeks to identify deep and common interests that readers have when approaching literary works of art



as art. Attention is given to “interpretation,” what it aims to do, what grounding it has, and what relation it bears to the “appreciation” of literature.

In Chapter 5 the many facets of fictionality are explored: for example, whether there is a clear line between fiction and non-fiction, what it is to tell a story or make up a character, how we can talk meaningfully about fictional events. What kind of reality, if any, do fictional characters have? What is a fictional world and how do we build up a picture of it? How similar are fictional characters to real people? How can readers get emotionally attached to characters knowing that they are merely “made up”?

Chapter 6 is about truth in relation to literature. Is truth an aspiration of literature: in poetry, perhaps, even works of fiction? What might it mean to say that a work of fiction expresses some profound truth about human life? Is propositional truth remote from literature? Are literary truths *sui generis*? Can we learn from fiction both facts *and* ways of viewing the world? Can the great works of literature give us a better understanding of ourselves and human life? Caution is advised here. It is not always clear how to sustain some of the grander claims of the “truth” theorists.

Finally, Chapter 7 directly examines other putative values of literature. What is the mark of a great work of literature? Can such judgments be made objectively? What is meant by a literary “canon”? Do works become canonical through their intrinsic literary merits or are there political factors at work? How does literary value relate to interpretation? Does ethics have anything to do with literary value? Could an unethical work be valuable from a literary point of view?

These, then, are just some of the questions that come up in the philosophy of literature. This book seeks to probe such questions in detail, not just characterizing the principal arguments on different sides – though it does attempt that – but also contributing to the debates and evaluating the arguments. The book is not entirely neutral in its stance but develops a line of thought that binds the issues together into an overall perspective which it is hoped the reader will find persuasive and congenial. But in the end, seeing what the problems are and thinking them through can be as important as settling on some final conclusions. The literary realm is one in which we all partake to some degree; reflecting on just what place literature does have in our lives can enhance our appreciation of it and make us all the more aware of the genius that underlies its greatest productions.

The ideas presented in this book continue and develop earlier explorations of mine on fiction and the aesthetics of literature, notably in two books: Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) and Peter Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).



I have also drawn on other previously published articles of mine, to a greater or lesser degree:

“The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1990), pp. 319–331; “Appreciation and Literary Interpretation,” in Michael Krausz, ed., *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2002), pp. 285–306; “Fiction,” in Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 377–391; “How to Create a Fictional Character,” in Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, eds., *The Creation of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 33–52; “Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries,” in Matthew Kieran, ed., *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 127–139; “The Intentional Fallacy,” in Patricia Waugh, ed., *Oxford Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 177–188; “On the Distance Between Literary Narratives and Real-Life Narratives,” in Dan Hutto, ed., *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 117–132; and “Aesthetics and Literature: A Problematic Relation?” *Philosophical Studies* vol. 135, no. 1 (2007), pp. 27–40.

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