

Prolegomena to Any Future Philosophy of Literature

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¹ See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2004); Jane Elliott & Derek Attridge, eds. *Theory After 'Theory'* (London: Routledge, 2011).

² Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004); also his companion volume Attridge, *J.M.Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For further comment see Peter Lamarque, "Replies to Attridge, Blackburn, Feagin, and Harcourt," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 99-106.

It is a commonplace in literary studies that "the moment of Theory has passed," that we are now in an era After Theory.¹ This does not mean that theorising about literature has come to an end, any more than art came to an end after Hegel's (or Arthur Danto's) End of Art. But it invites reflection on where theorising goes from here. The thought is that it cannot just be more of the same; that theory After Theory must in some way be reconfigured. A hint of a new direction came in Derek Attridge's much admired book *The Singularity of Literature* from 2004.² Attridge sought to advance beyond Theory by reviving notions long sidelined by Theory, like 'aesthetics' and 'ethics' in relation to literature, stressing creativity and form, and promoting responses to literature 'as literature' in place of instrumentality and reductionism.

Attridge's book, for all its explicit acknowledgment of earlier theorists like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, seemed to herald what might be described as a return to fundamentals in theorising

3 See Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); David Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature* (London: Continuum, 2007); Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

about literature. It is in just such a spirit that analytical philosophers have been developing ‘philosophy of literature’ as a branch of the philosophy of art.³ Of course there is no such thing as a presuppositionless enquiry and however hard one might try to get ‘back to basics’ on any subject one inevitably comes bearing baggage. That is as true for analytical philosophers as for Attridge himself. Nevertheless, it is worth trying to stake out the ground where a new start might be made and where some kind of convergence of competing paradigms is a credible aspiration.

It is in the spirit of a cooperative ‘fresh start’ that I offer a sketch of the contribution that an analytical philosophy of literature might make to this vexed arena. The sketch is largely in the form of a set of procedural constraints. Some will no doubt seem more controversial, more in need of justification, than others but if philosophy of literature is to make a significant mark on theory After Theory it must be founded on some determinate principles.

I
First, then, here are some basic constraints.

Philosophy of literature begins with the presupposition that literature (in the relevant sense—something that needs reflection no doubt) is one of the arts and should be characterised as such.

This should not be controversial—the idea is of ancient lineage (‘ars poetica’) and it underpins Attridge’s own approach—but the consequences have not always been foregrounded and the emphasis often neglected. For the analytical philosopher the idea signals a relation with other enquiries—philosophy of music, philosophy of film,

4 See Peter Lamarque, "Aesthetics and Literature: a Problematic Relation?" *Philosophical Studies* 135.1 (2007): 27-40.

5 Many of the prominent works by New Critics in which these terms are introduced, notably Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* and William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, deal exclusively with poetry.

6 This notion is systematically developed in Stein Haugom Olsen, *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). See also Peter Lamarque, 'Wittgenstein, Literature, and the Idea of a Practice,' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 375-88.

philosophy of visual arts, and so on—that have themselves acquired prominence in recent years. It also suggests, although does not strictly entail, the introduction of the aesthetic (aesthetic qualities, aesthetic value, etcetera) into a characterisation of 'literariness.' It does not entail this because the relation of art and the aesthetic is itself contested. Indeed conceptions of art without essential reference to the aesthetic have been the norm over the past half century. However, if treated with care and in a suitably refined sense, the idea of 'aesthetic value' or 'aesthetic interest' in connection with literature (literature as art) should not be eliminated out of hand.⁴

Philosophy of literature must encompass all literary forms—lyric poetry, epic, drama, the novel, the short story—without given priority to one form over another.

It seems all too easy in theorising about literature to promote, even if only implicitly, one literary form over others as somehow paradigmatic. This can distort the perspective on literature as a whole. An obvious example would be the implicit priority given by the New Criticism to poetry, thereby emphasising, as paradigmatically literary, qualities such as ambiguity, tension, semantic density, irony, metaphor, and so on.⁵ The New Critics themselves recognized that a focus on formal poetic features, grounded in linguistic complexity and figuration, did not transfer readily to the novel. Another example might be the priority that structuralism gave to narrative, thereby, in comparable measure, marginalizing lyric poetry. An adequate philosophy of literature should start out not by enumerating the qualities of individual works, as if literariness can only be inferred through induction across cases, but by attending to a

more widely conceived 'practice' grounded in loosely convention-bound interactions between author-roles, reader-roles, and text-roles; whatever particular forms might be at issue.⁶ The games analogy, to which we will return later, might help clarify the point. It might be possible to discern the rules of chess by painstakingly examining numerous games and thereby inferring what the rules demand or permit. But this would be a laborious and even unreliable procedure. Perhaps—by chance—in all the games examined one of the players castles on the queen's side within ten moves of the opening. Induction might suggest—wrongly, of course—that it is a rule of chess that at least one player must castle within the first ten moves. A more reliable way of finding out the rules of chess would be to look not at games themselves, but at the rule book! Admittedly there is no rule book for literature but the 'basics' underlying what can count as engagement with literature as literature do not depend on what particular forms literary works take at any point in history.

Philosophy of literature should retain a significant place for the 'pleasures' of reading literature as long as that concept is carefully qualified.

Whether or not 'aesthetic pleasure' is tentatively restored as a candidate for appropriate responses to literature it is wrong to think of the pleasure of reading as essentially 'sensuous' or even 'erotic' (the latter associated with Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag). There is no distinctive phenomenology in responding to literature, not least given the diversity of literary forms and aims. However, it is incumbent on the philosopher of literature both to acknowledge and attempt to characterise a distinctive mode of 'appreciation' that marks responses to literature ('as literature') as different from responses to music, painting or film, on the one hand, and specifically philosophical, historical or scientific works on the other. The temptation to follow an exclusively formalist route in this endeavour—emphasising formal linguistic 'devices' or structures or 'effects'—should be resisted. The appreciation of literature as literature is more complex than that.

Philosophy of literature should not give priority to 'natural' or untutored responses to literary works.

It should take seriously the idea, found in David Hume, that the appreciation of literature, at its best, is a learned response, acquired through experience and training.⁷ We are not all equal as competent readers, and the potential pitfalls of the untutored response are nicely illustrated by I.A. Richards' experiments with his students in *Practical*

7 David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste,' in David Hume, *Selected Essays*, eds. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

8 See Lamarque, "Wittgenstein, Literature, and the Idea of a Practice."

Criticism (1929). It might be supposed that there is no theoretically innocent account of what makes a 'competent reader' in the light of the seemingly chaotic array of 'approaches' to literature. But, at the level of 'fundamentals,' there does seem to be a sufficient grounding of shared assumptions to hold back radical scepticism about what counts as responding to literature as literature. After all, are not the following very broad focal points for reading common to all recognizably 'literary' approaches? An assumption of design or purposiveness in the elements of the work; an assumption that whatever the surface subject matter (story told or emotion expressed) there will be underlying themes that sustain a deeper human interest in the work, reflection on which, of an imaginative kind, will be integral to appreciation of the work. Also, connectedly, an expectation that the work will reward a process of interpretation which reveals its literary interest (and value), showing how the themes are developed through detail and design. Put simply, all competent readers will give focus (a) to what a work is *about* at both a surface and deeper level, and (b) to the linguistic means by which the surface or thematic content is realised. Needless to say, this can be carried through in practical terms in multiply different ways and with greater or lesser perspicacity.

Philosophy of literature should as far as possible recognize the 'autonomy' of literature as a human practice with its own traditions, conventions and concepts.

This constraint applies across a number of concerns. For example on matters of controversy, such as the nature and aims of interpretation, the place for 'truth' in literature, or the criteria of literary evaluation,

philosophy of literature should not too readily abandon the idea that within the literary 'practice' responses to and evaluations of literature have their own standards and to a large extent are *sui generis*. Without that acknowledgment there is a danger of reducing literature to something else: linguistics perhaps, or philosophy, or ethics. Not only should reductionism of that kind be avoided but also instrumentality, particularly in strong forms that locate the values of literature in its effects alone.

II

If these are some of the constraints under which philosophy of literature proceeds, where does it stand on matters of substance within theory? Here, though, one need not demand unity. Like any theoretical enquiry it would be wrong to expect there to be just one set of views characteristic of philosophy of literature when it gets into the details. There are, though, characteristic *areas* of concern which arise naturally from the grounding of the enquiry in analytical philosophy (and in philosophy of art). These areas, and the kinds of questions that they invite, are distinctive of the 'back to basics' approach encouraged by philosophy of literature. Let us look briefly at four such areas.

The first addresses the *concept* of literature and asks whether any substantial *definition* of the concept is either possible or desirable. Philosophers of literature are as likely to disagree on the prospects of a definition of literature as are philosophers of art about definitions of art in general. But a wider consensus is apparent in the thought that if there is an 'essence' to literature it is unlikely to reside in purely formal textual properties. There are no features of a *text* as such that are necessary or sufficient for the text to count as 'literary'; only the uses to which a text is put are relevant to the designation 'literature.' It is for this reason that a promising move has been to look not at intrinsic properties of individual works but, as mentioned earlier, at the role literary works play in a human practice or institution. On the Wittgensteinian game analogy, just as there could not be chess pieces without the rules of chess so there could be no literary works if there were not a practice or 'institution' which makes the existence of such works possible: a practice grounded in the attitudes, expectations, and responses found in authors and readers, along with broad conventions concerning how texts are created, appreciated, and evaluated.⁸ Just as chess pieces can take different physical forms and individual chess games can manifest a multitude of different strategies, so the institutional account of literature places no restrictions on the forms that literary works can take or the subject matter they address.

9 For a typical example, see Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

10 For example Gary Iseminger, ed. *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

11 This issue is pursued in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Such a framework needs to be worked out in detail but it seems to comply with the initial constraints and offers a middle path between radical anti-essentialism and the view that a strict definition of literature is out there to be found.

A second area is perhaps even more controversial: meaning. Analytical philosophers are used to putting meaning at the centre of their enquiries, but in the context of philosophy of literature the contribution from analytic philosophy has not been especially fruitful. Two faults are identifiable here: one in the focus given to ‘the meaning of the work,’ the other in the emphasis on paradigms of meaning drawn from philosophy of language, notably ‘utterance meaning’ from the theory of speech acts.⁹ What’s going wrong here, among other things, is that the constraint about autonomy is not being followed. Where we do talk about ‘meaning’ in relation to literary works—particularly in the context of interpretation—we must recognize the distinctive conventions under which meaning is sought in literary works. Of course there is a primary level at which simple sentential meaning is recovered, the level of ‘explication,’ but where the elicitation of a work’s themes is at issue then the model of ‘understanding an utterance’ falls well short and the very idea of ‘the meaning of the work’ looks either utterly misleading or curiously irrelevant. It is also hard to see how the ‘pleasure’ of reading could reside solely in the recognition of what a text means, as if it were a kind of anagram or crossword puzzle. The idea of appreciating a work as literature or as art seems to demand much more.

Another problem with the analytic philosopher’s reductive accounts of meaning in the literary sphere is that they encourage undue regard to the role of intention. The ‘Intentional

Fallacy' was coined by a philosopher, Monroe Beardsley, and has been an obsessive focus of debate among analytic philosophers of art.¹⁰ But arguably it distracts attention away from far more interesting questions about interpretation, notably the extent to which original interpretations are created or discovered, whether multiple interpretations, even contradictory ones, can be sustained, and the basic question of why literary works should invite the kinds of imaginative readings that other species of discourse discourage.

The third area in which analytical philosophers have found both interest and an issue of dispute is that of truth and knowledge in connection with literature. Again this is not surprising given the priority of philosophy of language and epistemology among analytic pursuits. However, the critical tradition itself is divided on the issue. There are those who have sought to defend the cultural legitimacy of literature in terms of moral truth, drawing on the time-honoured formula that poetry seeks to 'instruct' as well as give 'pleasure.' Others, though, from 19th-century aestheticists to late 20th-century post-structuralists, prefer to play down any referential role for literary works. In the light of the autonomy constraint it might be thought that philosophy of literature looks more naturally to the latter than the former position. But we have seen that philosophy of literature should not be committed to formalism and in autonomy seeks only to find distinctive features of literary works 'as literature.' It need not, and should not, deny referentiality as such in literary works (even works of fiction) or indeed the possibility of readers acquiring knowledge from literature, of a moral, philosophical or purely factual kind. That is not the heart of the issue, so much as whether there is some special contribution that works of literature can make to human cognition and whether it is a mark of what is valuable about such works that they should make such a contribution. It is sometimes thought that to defend a broadly 'humanistic' account of literature it is essential that literary works be accorded powers of moral or other learning. That is wrong, though, for literary works can retain their human interest—through their 'vision' or thematic content—without necessarily serving any didactic function. The 'pleasures' of literature, earlier discussed, are not purely formalistic or 'sensuous' pleasures but involve in part the pleasures of reflecting on what in another context Thomas Nagel has called "mortal questions," matters of deep concern to reflective human beings.¹¹ Philosophy of literature should seize the opportunity, in its 'back to basics' mode, if not to resolve questions of literature's cognitive potential, at least to clarify the commitments of the different stances on offer. For example, misunderstandings about fictionality—what a fictional

‘mode of utterance’ amounts to—can prematurely foreclose discussion about literature and truth, as can Nietzschean or deconstructive scepticism about truth itself.

A final, and related, area of substance with which philosophy of literature needs to grapple is that of literary value. On what basis are individual works valued and is there any value attributable to the practice of literature itself? Again, the issue is contested and the legacy of Theory has not encouraged the prospects of resolution. No more vexed question arises in Theory than, for example, the nature of canon formation, not least its relation to power structures, the ideological construction of national identities, the oppression of minority voices, and so forth. This politicisation of criticism has had a largely stultifying effect on the pursuit of more fundamental questions about what is sought from value judgments in this context, what ‘objectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ might mean, how far ‘relativism’ about value should extend, and the degree to which the practice itself is already deeply imbued with value.

Several of our earlier constraints have a bearing on the direction that philosophy of literature might take the debate. For one thing literary value cannot be independent of a conception of what makes literature distinctive among discourses. If the New Critics were right and *complexity of meaning* was the principal mark of the literary then that should be where literary value resides. But we saw that such a view fails the constraint of not prioritising one literary form over others. Likewise, if the ‘pleasures’ of literature, highlighted in the constraints, were narrowly defined as ‘sensuous’ or formalistic then literary value might be associated with ‘fine writing’ or ‘belles-lettres.’ That is too narrow a conception of ‘pleasure.’ In turn the autonomy constraint suggests that instrumental values, values tied to the effects (moral, political, educational) of reading, fall largely outside the focus on ‘literature as literature’ demanded by autonomy. (This is not to deny that there are such effects or that they might be valued, only that they belong strictly with ‘literary’ values.) If literature is associated with a distinctive (autonomous) kind of ‘appreciation’ then that itself brings with it a distinctive kind of value. Attending to literature as literature (and as art) offers rewards comparable to the rewards found in attending to other kinds of art. Such attention, as we have seen, involves reflecting often on matters of deep human interest imaginatively engaged through interpretation applied to finely crafted artefacts of language. Literary education is an education in how to read and appreciate works of this nature; it imparts skills and more than merely ‘understanding the meaning’ is involved. Value here is inescapable. Readers bring

an expectation of value to their reading and works reward that expectation to varying degrees. A further (intriguing) qualification is that often the quality and perceptiveness of the reading is closely entwined with judgments elicited about the quality of the work itself.

Philosophy of literature engages other issues besides these four—about fictionality, ontology, emotion, expression, ethics, humanism, and many more—but this sample shows how the basic constraints help focus the debates. Analytical philosophy has not had a prominent role during the rise and waning of Theory. But After Theory, as the decks are cleared and old problems confronted anew, perhaps it shows one way in which a new beginning might be envisaged.

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SUMMARY

The paper lays out some basic constraints for an approach to literary theory 'After Theory,' grounded in analytical philosophy. The presupposition that literature, in the relevant sense, is one of the arts suggests that a philosophy of literature can take a distinctive place within an analytical philosophy of art. The paper explores in outline what such a location might entail and briefly addresses some possible points of contention, relating to the very conception of literature and its involvement with meaning, truth, and value.

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