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Literature and the Question of Philosophy [Review]

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Literature and the Question of Philosophy, edited and introduced by Anthony J. Cascardi; xvii & 333 pp. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, \$29.50.

Discussed by Michael Fischer

HOWEVER DEFINED THEORETICALLY, literature and philosophy also designate two departments in most North American universities. The paths of these departments occasionally cross, say in a philosophy and literature course, then go their separate ways: toward logic, in the case of philosophy, and toward some variant of the still powerful New Criticism in literature departments, where poetry is considered as poetry and not as another thing. Combining literature and philosophy, or seeing them as always already intertwined, thus involves transgressing departmental boundaries and runs the risk of seeming dilettantish to those colleagues who remain within each discipline. *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, an important collection of thirteen essays ably edited and introduced by Anthony J. Cascardi, presents the work of several philosophers willing to read literature along with, or as, philosophy. The volume also features essays by several literary scholars interested in taking on what are usually regarded as philosophical questions and texts. In this book, as in the journal I am reviewing it for, contesting the boundaries between literature and philosophy takes many forms, some of them riskier and more promising than others.

One reason for seeing philosophy as literature derives from our inability to separate the two — or so Peter McCormick argues in his “Philosophical Discourses and Fictional Texts.” McCormick shows that neither speech-act theory nor genre theory — or even some combination of the two — can

establish what makes a text philosophical and not literary. McCormick's convincing analysis invites us to read "at least some philosophical texts with an eye to their fictional components" (p. 71), an invitation that Dalia Judovitz (in "Philosophy and Poetry: The Difference between Them in Plato and Descartes") and Harry Berger, Jr., (in "Levels of Discourse in Plato's Dialogues") readily accept. Plato and Descartes are appropriate objects — I could say victims — of such an analysis because both were of course bent on purging philosophy of literary qualities. In both writers literature returns not just to haunt but to found the very texts that would exclude it. By "literature" Judovitz means such things as the dialogical format of Plato's works as well as the several metaphors, rhetorical figures, and fables at work in both Plato and Descartes. Even the latter's hyperbolic doubt, for example, uneasily depends on the rhetorical figure of hyperbole.

For Berger "literature" implies textuality, a "level" of Plato's discourse that Berger wishes to distinguish from the "dramatic" and the "thematic." Berger credits commentators like Paul Friedländer, Leo Strauss, and Stanley Rosen for attending to the dramatic structure of Plato's work, thereby seeing Socrates and his various interlocutors as characters in a dialogue, not as direct spokesmen for Plato. Although advancing beyond a merely thematic or "ventriloquist" approach to Plato, these scholars, however, in different ways still claim to "recuperate the presence of the author [Plato] and to arrive at knowledge of his 'teaching'" (p. 94). As in the New Criticism, dramatistic considerations complicate, but do not finally subvert, a mimetic view. By appealing to the open-ended textuality of Plato's works, Berger wants to block the "mouthpiece" approach in both its forms — dramatic and thematic — in order to highlight what he sees as "a central theme of Platonic discourse, namely, the structural inadequacy and ethical dangers inherent in any method of teaching, and indeed in any institution — whether educational, political, social, or more broadly cultural — committed to the dramatic or logocentric level of discourse and grounded in the speaking presence of institutional actors" (p. 96). Within this general critique, Berger finds in Plato "an especially pointed and poignant critique of Socratic method and the Socratic presence" (p. 96) that previous readers have obscured.

Not surprisingly, Derrida figures prominently in all three of the essays that I have been discussing. (Roland Barthes plays a comparable role in another essay in the volume, Mary Bittner Wiseman's "Rewriting the Self: Barthes and the Utopias of Language," an intelligent, but strained, attempt to demonstrate that the later Barthes shows the way from

established opinion to "utopias of language.") McCormick's epigraph comes from *Margins of Philosophy* and his essay as a whole examines the question, asked by Derrida in "Limited Inc. . . , " "to what extent does traditional philosophical discourse . . . derive from fiction?" (quoted, p. 64). In addition to citing Derrida on Descartes, Judovitz can write sentences like these: "But this mark of absolute difference, which Plato seeks to establish between philosophy and all the other arts, is itself the trace of a series of differential operations that reinscribe and retrace the figure of philosophical discourse. However, the hierarchical exclusion, difference, and domination of poetry by philosophy in the Platonic text represses the very rhetorical and discursive structures that define it" (p. 27). And Berger appropriately praises Derrida's "In Plato's Pharmacy" for trying to show that the written text problematizes the argument and drama it seems to represent. None of these critics is a clone of Derrida, that position, or plight, having by now become fairly rare. McCormick and Berger, in fact, criticize him: Berger goes so far as to say that Derrida fails to see that Plato anticipates rather than resists the Derridean problematic. Berger, in effect, does here for Plato what Paul de Man does for Rousseau in *Blindness and Insight*, i.e., shows that a seemingly metaphysical or logocentric writer is more self-subverting than he first appears. Along similar lines, in "Post-modernism in Philosophy: Nostalgia for the Future, Waiting for the Past," the concluding essay in the volume, Berel Lang advises that "where logocentrism or reification is alleged, we look for the occasion of those charges in the dramatizing eyes of the beholder, among the historians of logos, rather than in the historical texts themselves" (p. 323). For Lang, the anti-logocentric or "postmodernist" longing to break with the past and thereby end philosophy may be internal to philosophizing, even a prerequisite.

Despite these critics' distance from Derrida, Berger especially seems vulnerable to some of the objections Derridean deconstruction has triggered. I for one find it discouraging that a critic on guard against thematic analysis can go on to identify a "central theme of Platonic discourse" in the passage already quoted. And I am not sure how Berger can earn his concluding claim that "the written dialogue [i.e., the Platonic text] represents deep-structural necessities woven through the speech within which the intentions of a presence who goes by the name of Socrates are sometimes, but only sometimes, inscribed" (p. 99). Even this cautious talk of presence would seem to resurrect the "mouthpiece theory" that Berger is at pains to bury.

But I will not press these familiar charges here. I am more interested in Arthur C. Danto's sharp comments on recent literary theory in "Philoso-

phy as/and/of Literature," the opening essay of the volume. As Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, Danto speaks from within academic philosophy, well aware of its tendency to pattern philosophy along the lines of science. From this point of view, style seems irrelevant "save to the degree that it enhances perspicuity" (p. 4); the standard literary form is the impersonal fifteen-page philosophical paper intended for a severely limited professional audience; and philosophy aims at solving well-defined problems and transmitting verifiable truths. Regarding philosophical texts as literary seems to jeopardize their intellectual seriousness: it feels like a demotion to philosophers accustomed to associating philosophy with science, much as, Danto says, regarding the Bible as literature has felt like an insult to those who take it as a body of divine revelation. Danto goes on to show that the wish of some philosophers to emulate science has encouraged in semantical theory a crude view of literature based on bloodless abstractions like "*Gegenstände*, intensions, fictive worlds" — "themselves as much in need of ontological redemption as the beings to whose rescue they were enlisted: Don Quixote, Mr. Pickwick, Gandalf the Grey" (p. 10).

According to Danto, instead of rectifying the impoverishment of literature by some philosophers, recent literary theory exacerbates it. Danto has in mind the theory of intertextuality, which he takes as arguing that literary works refer not "vertically" to reality but "horizontally" to other literary signifiers. Drawing on examples from the visual arts as well as from literature, Danto argues that "reference to the world works together with references to other art, when there are such references, to make a complex representation" (p. 13). Fortunately, "extratextuality" can coexist with "intratextuality" — fortunately because from Danto's vantage point outside academic literary criticism, intratextuality by itself reduces a poem to an object of "specialist knowledge" and makes criticism a "kind of hermeneutic contortion that earns interpreters of literature distinguished chairs in universities" (p. 13). "Why," Danto rightly asks, "since not ourselves literary scholars, should we concern ourselves with these intricate networks of reciprocal effects?" (p. 14).

Danto concludes by sketching a view of philosophy and literature that tries to do justice to the differences as well as the similarities between the two. Put very simply here, literature and philosophy aim at universality but construe this common goal in different ways. Philosophy wants necessity as well as universality, or "truth for all worlds that are possible" (p. 17). A literary text is universal in being "about each reader who experiences it" — in allowing each reader to discover "an unguessed dimension of

the self" (pp. 18–19) while reading, much as John Stuart Mill learned that he was not a stock or a stone while reading Wordsworth. (This example is mine, not Danto's.) The differences between literature and philosophy are not stylistic or grammatical — and here Danto would agree, I think, with McCormick — but apparently differences in intent. Ascertaining this intent takes us beyond Danto's essay but not outside this volume, as I will be discussing below.

Danto's essay shows how both philosophy and literary criticism can benefit from being brought together. While I do not want to exaggerate the completeness or novelty of Danto's remarks on literature, I think he is explaining the right thing, namely, why "literature, certainly in its greatest exemplars, seems to have something important to do with our lives, important enough that the study of it should form an essential part of our educational program . . ." (p. 10). And I would agree with him that neither intratextuality nor "the chilling tale of fictional reference" told by semantical theorists adequately accounts for this importance. If Danto thus provides literary critics a way of beginning to explain the significance of their subject, he gives philosophers a way of understanding philosophical texts that does not treat their literary status as "a consolation prize for failing to be true" (p. 21). For Danto, philosophical texts are literary to the extent that they exist for readers in search of the kind of self-discovery that literature rewards. In the standard academic philosophical paper, the longing to be scientific (i.e., not literary) accordingly involves overlooking the reader, or making "the reader ontologically weightless, a sort of disembodied professional conscience" (p. 23). Far from trivializing philosophy, Danto's concern for its literary qualities thus aims at revitalizing it.

I have been focusing on several essays interested in redefining philosophy as literature. Other essays in this volume move toward seeing literature as in some sense philosophical or at least illuminated by experience with philosophical texts. Denis Dutton's "Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away," Stanley Rosen's "The Limits of Interpretation," and Alexander Nehamas's "Writer, Text, Work, Author" apply philosophy to the theory of interpretation. In introducing Rosen's essay, Cascardi remarks that contemporary literary theorists have often turned to philosophers such as Gadamer, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and, again, Derrida for guidance in devising an adequate account of interpretation. Rosen sees this recourse to philosophy as a symptom of "decadence," a sign that for us reading is "no longer a pleasure or an illumination" but a problem that we mistakenly think the right theory or method will solve (p.

213). According to Rosen, we have lost confidence in what Husserl called the natural attitude and what Rosen calls "the pretheoretical talent of natural reason" (p. 239), renamed "insight" and "common sense" by Cascardi in his introduction.

I would agree with Rosen that some recent critics are guilty of relying on philosophy and theory in this submissive way but would argue that there is no going back to the days when a critic like R. S. Crane could count as one of the "crucial facts" in interpretation "the peculiar sequence of emotions we feel when we read the work unbiased by critical doctrine."¹ No one reads a work unbiased by critical doctrine; extending Lang, I would say no one ever has. Theory is thus here to stay and no appeal to "natural reason" is going to dislodge it. I suspect Rosen would concur: citing Nietzsche, he can call man "the thinking or theorizing animal, the animal who is looking for completeness" (p. 215). But although we cannot steer clear of theory, we need not be helplessly dependent on it, as Dutton and Nehamas in different ways show.

Dutton takes up the question of authorial intent in interpretation, a theoretical question if there ever was one, by which I mean a question that has tempted literary critics to turn for help to philosophers, often in the hope of establishing once and for all the place of authorial intent in criticism. Discussing questions raised by ironic texts, anachronistic readings, and miscategorized works of art, Dutton argues for the relevance of authorial intention despite the many different critical theories that have announced the death, or at least the unknowability, of the author. Dutton sensibly concludes that "since words and texts are used by authors for myriad purposes, their intentions will never be found generally irrelevant to some of the interesting and legitimate things that critics may sometimes wish to say about some texts" (p. 206). While I agree with this conclusion, I am more interested here in how Dutton arrives at it. He neither avoids philosophy nor expects definitive answers from it. Tacitly extending Wittgenstein, he bases his view of intention on critical practice, the contexts of which, he reminds us, "are as varied as those of literature itself" (p. 206).

Nehamas's strategy is similar. Again philosophy comes into play, this time in the form of Hobbes's claim that authors own their writings and Foucault's thesis that authorship thus defined is a repressive modern invention — repressive because it limits criticism to restating what the author presumably meant instead of producing new meanings. Nehamas wants to distinguish the author from the writer (the historical person producing the text) without, however, reducing the author to a fictional character or

some other immanent effect of the text. From Nehamas's point of view, while all texts are written, only some have authors, where having an author means being construed as an action whose meaning we are interested in figuring out. Distinct from the writer outside the text as well as from a fictional character in it, the author is "the agent postulated in order to account for construing a text as the product of an action" (p. 281). Not all texts are so construed, but we cannot specify in advance or with certainty what texts will count as literary works, that is, as works with authors or works that we want to interpret. To put one of Nehamas's own statements a bit differently, interpretation — or assigning a text an author — begins when interest is stimulated, not when certainty is achieved (see p. 278). As Nehamas points out, the possibility that we might treat a text as having an author does not mean that we do. Though not "an independent constraint, forbidding in an a priori manner desired but unlawful interpretations" (p. 289), the author is also not arbitrary. Although I endorse this conclusion, I am most attracted to the appeal to practice supporting it. Nehamas refuses to brand as "arbitrary" everything that cannot be supported by demonstrative argument. For Nehamas, "to show that a well-established practice is arbitrary [here, assigning certain texts authors and interpreting them accordingly] entails showing that at least one alternative practice, truly distinct from it, actually exists and makes a claim to being followed. . . . The mere possibility of alternatives never shows that actuality is dispensable" (p. 285).

I would call Nehamas's essay as well as Dutton's "Wittgensteinian" not because they obsequiously cite Wittgenstein (they don't) but because they extend his respect for practice to literary questions. These two essays show how literary theorists can use philosophy without seeking from it the authoritative answers that Rosen rightly suspects. Again to quote Nehamas, "it is a fruitless task, which some might call 'metaphysical' [or philosophical] in a pejorative sense, to try to determine the nature of a discipline independently of its actual practice and in the hope that this nature will itself determine the practice. We can tell that a particular text is a work only when we can actually criticize it: which texts are works will depend on what counts as criticism, and what counts as criticism will depend on which texts have been considered as works" (p. 283).

If Dutton and Nehamas thus apply philosophy to literary theory, the remaining essays in the volume plumb the philosophical dimensions of literary works. Cascardi, in "From the Sublime to the Natural: Romantic Responses to Kant," looks at the romantics' uneasiness with Kant's guaranteeing knowledge but only on the condition that we surrender

claims to know things-in-themselves. (Stanley Cavell has recently put the romantics' reaction to Kant's settlement with skepticism this way: "Thanks for nothing.")² The fact that the romantics responded to Kant is hardly news, as Cascardi himself suggests when he cites Northrop Frye's comment in *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968) that "the shadow of Kant's riddle falls across the whole Romantic movement" (quoted, p. 114).³ Cascardi goes beyond a comment like Frye's by showing how several romantic texts wrestle with Kant's limitation on knowledge, especially with its moral implications, instead of simply registering its effect. Cascardi groups writers like Shakespeare (in *The Winter's Tale*), Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Coleridge with philosophers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, documenting the interest of each in exploring things-in-themselves. (In a related essay in the volume, David Halliburton makes a similar move when he uses a Robert Frost poem as well as texts by Hobbes, Peirce, and Heidegger to work out a "theory of constitution.") I like Cascardi's unstated claim that literary texts think through epistemological and moral questions but I occasionally miss in his essay Frye's sensitivity to the symbolism, imagery and plots—the "literary" dimension—of romanticism. He can say that "the romantic strategy might be thought of as an application of aesthetic experience to the problems generated (and implicitly, left unsolved) by the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (p. 106). Such a statement, whatever its other merits, exaggerates Kant's importance and makes romanticism a more bookish affair than it actually was. Blake, for example, entitled one of his most famous poems *Milton* (not Kant) and I cannot imagine him "applying" aesthetic experience to anything, not even to the failure of the French Revolution, surely as significant an event in romanticism as the *Critique*. I would agree that Kant and the French Revolution, even Kant and Blake, have something to do with one another. The romantics reacted to Kant, as Cascardi thoroughly shows, but both Kant and the romantics responded to historical, personal, and literary pressures that are sometimes slighted in Cascardi's essay.

Kant also plays a key role in Charles Altieri's "From Expressivist Aesthetics to Expressivist Ethics," which applies contemporary literary theory to a philosophical problem, thus reversing the path taken by Dutton and Nehamas in the essays discussed above. That problem, a legacy of antifoundational thinking, involves authorizing ethical judgments in the apparent absence of rational, "third-person" standards. Building on his book *Act and Quality*, Altieri fashions an expressive theory of literature indebted to Nelson Goodman, Wittgenstein, and Charles Taylor as well as to Kant's aesthetics. Literary experience, as characterized by this ex-

pressive theory, fills the void left by the collapse of moral universals: in Altieri's words, the arts offer "the most fully articulated models of expression that can connect first-person states to second-order concerns for self-reflexive public identity, concerns that tie self-interest to obligations involving a range of ideals and cultural exemplars" (p. 136). Even in a volume of adventuresome essays, Altieri's stands out as unusually ambitious. He is not only responding to a central issue in contemporary ethics; he is also criticizing New Historicist literary critics for discussing values and literary works solely in ideological terms. Altieri wants to show that "the fullest social uses of art have less to do with exposing the historical conditions of their genesis than with clarifying the ways in which they help us understand ourselves as value-creating agents and make possible communities who can assess those creations without relying on the categorical terms traditional to moral philosophy" (p. 135). I share Altieri's objectives here, although I think he caricatures the New Historicists who disagree with him, especially Jerome McGann, whom he hastily accuses of "identifying with a Byronic nihilism as the only authentic way to survive the very history" he embraces (p. 160).

Martha Nussbaum, in "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Literature and the Moral Imagination," also affirms the importance of literary texts to moral experience. Nussbaum goes so far as to argue that "the novel itself is a moral achievement, and the well-lived life is a work of literary art" (p. 169). Her example of the novel is Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, in particular the crucial scene in which Maggie and her father must give one another up. Nussbaum brilliantly shows that this moment demands something from everyone: the correct tone, gestures, and words from the two characters, as well as the right mix of perception, improvisation, and obligation; extraordinary psychological insight and literary skill from James; and unflagging attentiveness from the reader. These are moral demands; they test everyone's ability "not to miss anything, to be keen rather than obtuse," "to be responsible to more" (pp. 188-89). Nussbaum's intricate, finely worded commentary more than meets these demands: her essay is a major contribution to ethical and literary theory as well as a dazzling reading of a complex novel.⁴

Even a volume as rich as this one has its gaps. No one, for example, mentions Stanley Cavell's important work on skepticism and Shakespeare, let alone his provocative claim that Thoreau and Emerson inaugurate American philosophy. But no book can do everything and *Literature and the Question of Philosophy* does enough to show what can happen when literature and philosophy are freed from their departmental cells

and allowed to interact. In these impressive essays, philosophy rediscovers that it is written; literature recaptures its moral seriousness.

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1. R. S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), p. 179.
2. Stanley Cavell, "In Quest of the Ordinary: Texts of Recovery," in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 191.
3. I wish someone in this volume had addressed Frye's view of the relationship between literature and philosophy. As early as the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye was arguing that "all structures in words are partly rhetorical, and hence literary, and that the notion of a scientific or philosophical verbal structure free of rhetorical elements is an illusion." Anticipating an argument like Danto's, he goes on to add that "such an approach need not be distorted into a poetic determinism, for . . . it would be silly to use a reductive rhetoric to try to prove that theology, metaphysics, law, the social sciences, or whichever one or group of these we happen to dislike, are based on 'nothing but' metaphors or myths. . . . Rousseau says that the original society of nature and reason has been overlaid by the corruptions of civilization, and that a sufficiently courageous revolutionary act could reestablish it. It is nothing either for or against this argument to say that it is informed by the myth of the sleeping beauty." *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 350, 353.
4. In a lengthy footnote on a related essay by Nussbaum on James, Altieri objects that her essentially mimetic view of literature and ethics leads her to confine the ethical force of literature to the novel, thus slighting the lyric and experimental forms. I think that Nussbaum's approach can handle non-novelistic writing but Altieri is right to challenge her on this point.