

Breaking the Barriers between Aesthetics and Theory in Literature

Josette Attard

josette.attard@um.edu.mt

Abstract

Up to few decades ago, aesthetics and theory were considered two separate disciplines in the realm of literature. More recent studies have indicated that the experience and also the study of literature are breaking these existing boundaries by revealing common factors present in both aesthetics and theory. Several literary theorists and aestheticians have emphasized this close relation which is woven within literature itself. John Gibson, Derek Attridge and Peter Lamarque are few of the theorists who argue in favour of such a relation. They contend that the perspectives of both aesthetics, as a branch of philosophy, and theory, do not exclude each other. Furthermore, they suggest that both aesthetics and theory can be complementary to each other and combine the philosophical concern with clarity, and the creativity which pertains to theory.

The aim of this paper is to show how the study of literature can break the barriers between aesthetics and theory by combining them together in several ways, suggesting possible ties within the creation and the act of reading literature, with particular reference to fictitious narratives. In this paper I shall discuss firstly how ambiguity and imagination can have the potential to effect both literary aesthetics and literary theory offering different results. Secondly I shall focus on fictitious narratives from both the aesthetical and the theoretical points of view. I intend to emphasize the manner we view and discuss literature in the process of reading it. My literary discussion will include theories proposed by the literary philosophers Attridge, Lamarque and McGregor and how these theories can be combined through particular readings, thus breaking the barriers between aesthetics and theory in literature.

Keywords: ambiguity, imagination, narrative thickness, staging, opacity

Introduction

During the last few decades of the twentieth century, several conflicting arguments have taken place in the discussion of the relation between analytic philosophy and post-structural theory. By time the barriers which kept apart these two disciplines

got weaker when a connecting link was revealed in the study of literature. The importance of both theory and aesthetics in literature is undeniable and their perspectives should not exclude one another. In fact referring to Derrida's *Acts of Literature* (1992) which was edited by Derek Attridge, the emphasis was on literature which has the potential to combine theory to aesthetics. Such aspects include literature as free from limitation, the necessary relation between literary experience and pleasure, literature as an institution and the uniqueness of each new literary work. As Attridge claims in his introduction to Derrida's volume "Literary theory... has always consciously worked under the sign of philosophy" (1992, p.4). The very fact that Derrida, one of the twentieth century leading philosophers, chose to discuss literature, indicates that literature itself is an excellent example to illustrate the closeness between aesthetics and theory.

Gerard Genette commented on the theory of authorial intention while discussing the aesthetic object. "Whether an object attains the status of a work basically depends, then, on whether its receiver considers the possibility that an aesthetic intention is present within it..." (1999, p.39). Although later he appears to change his position, he stresses that the aesthetic aspect depends on the author's intention which is a theoretical aspect of literature. The discussion which follows on ambiguity, imagination and narrative thickness, can be considered to be both theoretical and aesthetic. The emphasis is on literary works especially narratives and a balance is kept between the two perspectives so that the aesthetic/theory division will not be evident. Therefore this study will reinforce the tentative ties between literary aesthetics and literary theory.

The Concept of Ambiguity

The concept of ambiguity may be looked at as a bridge between aesthetics and literary theory. This may be understood more clearly when one keeps in mind that this concept in relation to literature has formed the vocabulary, foundations and assumptions of empirical aesthetics and cognitive literary theory. As Otty and Roberts claim, ambiguity suggests a shift from **aesthesis** to **poesis** (2013, p.38). The term "aesthesis" here is the process of a relatively passive reception when reading a literary work whereas "poesis" is the process of interpretation which is both creative and generative. These terms seem to be antithetical as the former suggests a passive experience of reception taken from a sensory aspect, while the latter suggests the creation of an interpretation.

Objectivity and subjectivity play an important role within the concept of ambiguity as the definition of one includes the definition of the other. While objectivity entails the restriction of different aspects of the self, subjectivity encourages personal points of view. As a result artists, including writers, were urged to voice their subjectivity whereas scientists were restricted to express theirs. According to Andrew Bowie

aesthetic autonomy consists in a transformation of the arrangement of parts in a literary work. "The literary text can in this respect also become the focus... of the manifestation of language's capacity to resist conversion into 'meanings'" (1997, p.25). This implies that looking at literature as autonomous means that it resists all types of rationalization which are dominating our society now more than ever. Literature is powerful when it rejects one clear meaning which is also rational. At this point the concept of ambiguity is present. Interpretation through ambiguity has become a central feature of a literary text.

However, this does not mean that literature is irrational. As Otty and Roberts assert, literature is "the *product* of rationalization" (2013, p.40). In contrast to the techno-scientific world in which we live, literature has a more limited aesthetic field because it expresses what is left of the natural relation of the world. This is the reason why literature is ambiguous because it has kept all that was lost in the process of rationalization. Language is a basic feature of literature which distinguishes literary texts from other types of writing. Rational language seeks clarity while literary language may contain ambiguity which can help and at the same time hinder literary criticism. This is because through ambiguity, the critic is freer to interpret the subtleties a literary text can offer. On the other hand, this freedom may encourage interpretation without limits while sacrificing rational analysis. Subjective, ambiguous, literary language marks the aesthetic approach to literature. In contrast, objective, clear and rational language marks a theoretical and critical approach to literature. This may be one of the divergences in distinguishing between these two literary approaches.

One of the aims of modern literature is to engage the reader in the subjective activity of interpretation. This involves the creation of meaning in a completely free environment, presenting the reader with various choices. The emphasis here is on subjectivity which exists both in aesthetics and theory and which results in diverging attitudes towards ambiguity. Such acceptance of subjectivity in literature emanates from the concept of impersonality or invisibility of the author, a concept which can be traced back to T. S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919). According to Otty and Roberts, this concept embodies "the forms of 'contained' ambiguity associated with the New Criticism... via Eco's notion of the 'open work', and Barthes structuralist... celebration of the 'plural text'... to deconstruction" (2013, p.42). Therefore, ambiguity encourages polyvocality by means of creativity and imagination but it also can result in problematic interpretation.

Imagination in fiction

The close relationship between fiction and the mental activity of imagining was never denied. Kathleen Stock refers to the theory of "extreme intentionalism" in which the interpretation of the fictitious work depends on what the author intended the reader

to imagine (2017, p.1). Although many literary theorists and also aestheticians do not agree with this theory, Stock shows how, by means of the imagination, such a theory can be of extreme help when the reader interprets fiction. This implies that the reader is looking for the fictional truth and intentionalism helps him to reach a literary meaning. This does not mean that intentionalism is the only method to provide meaning to a fictitious narrative. There are other aesthetic properties such as the beautiful, the emotional aspects and the unconscious thoughts which are not directly determined by the author's intention. It is a popular belief among aestheticians such as Walton, Currie, Davies, Lamarque and Olsen, that fiction is directly related to imagining or pretence. As Stock claims "A fiction is best understood as a set of instructions to imagine things... in constructing a fiction, an author makes certain utterances, intending that the reader imaginatively engages with them" (2017, p.7). This statement implies that what the author intends the readers to imagine, becomes the content of the literary work itself.

In this sense, the concept of imagination becomes indispensable as it is the creative faculty of the mind. Peter Lamarque distinguishes between two aspects of the imagination. He claims that imagination can be either an 'activity' or an 'attitude' (1994, p.243). By means of the imagination, the mind is capable to combine different activities such as assembling and reconstructing ideas. These activities make it creative. However, when imagination is regarded as an attitude, it is more reflective than creative. It takes the form of a long-term emphasis which keeps something in the mind to form an attitude. The following example illustrates the difference between the author and the reader. The author's imagination, that is his/her mental activity, creates several images which make the reader reflect on this content forming in the reader a mental attitude. Of course, there might be some exceptions to this example. But it is the imagination in the sense of activity which is mostly related to fiction as the latter can be based on the imagination of objects which are both real and unreal.

The reading experience

In discussing the value of literature, many philosophers emphasize the extra-literary aspects of it, such as truth and morality. Though literary works may represent the truth and offer lessons about various aspects in life which may be important, they do not do so *as* literature. Literature is more concerned with the experience of events and as Derek Attridge claimed, such an experience brings about "a modification of the reader's outlook" (2015, p.2). The reader may not be aware of such a metamorphosis as it may be very slight. In spite of this and also because this experience is an act, the reader has to be involved in the act of reading in such a way as to read the work in a very particular way and not to seek extra-literary characteristics in this experience. During this process the reader has to adopt a

“willed passivity” as Attridge calls it (2015, p.2). This means that the reader has to be disposed to open-up and forget any constraints in order to be transformed. It is this commitment of the reader to the text that renders the work literary and thus aesthetically valuable to him/her.

This brings us to question about the role of the aesthetic in this process. I would undoubtedly discard the idea that beauty has an instrumental value of producing better people. The concept of beauty goes far beyond this because it is ideological. According to Attridge an instrumental attitude to literature means treating the text “as a means to a predetermined end” (2004, p.9). This principle opposes the aesthetical approach to literature because it must be understood that creation includes the idea of working actively towards an aim and also passively allowing oneself to discover what one could not have predicted. At this point the roles of the author and the reader are intertwined in a way that, the reader’s passivity is not passive at all. It becomes also active in the sense that s/he opens himself/herself to the work and is thus participating in the author’s openness. Such a literary experience is not only the reaction to a beautiful form but it also recreates a beautiful work which is witness to that original openness. Such openness was described by Attridge “as a hospitality to the other, on the part of both the artist and the one who responds fully to, who welcomes and does justice to, the work of art” (2015, p.5). This process was also discussed by Maurice Blanchot who stated that each time a literary work is read, it is as if it is read for the first time because each reading is unique. The active openness referred to by Attridge, here is emphasized by Blanchot who defines reading as a process of taking part in the development of the work itself. Blanchot calls this process “the unfolding of something in the making, the intimacy of the void which comes to be” (1989, p.202).

This approach to reading is a critical one because the reader becomes curious to know how the work was designed. Therefore, at this point, the reader becomes just like the author because both go through the experience of its creation. This change of attitude in the reader keeps the work alive or as Blanchot puts it “to make it [reading] communicate with the work’s intimacy, to keep this intimacy from congealing and protecting itself in the vain solitude of the ideal” (1989, p.203). In this sense, reading becomes a medium for breaking the barriers of time by communicating several aspects. Communication depends on the way a work is read and therefore on the experience it generates. Reading gives life to the work and must be present during all the work’s stages because according to Blanchot “it retains in itself everything that is really at stake in the work. That is why in the end it alone bears all the weight of communication” (1989, p.204).

All this is evidence enough that literature can be the cause of several aesthetic effects since both literary creativity and literary reception are capable to bring about changes. However, the reader has no possibility to know beforehand what s/he is opening himself/herself to. S/he should be ready for surprises. Moreover, this suggests that the value of literature cannot be instrumentalised. It follows that the

value of literature depends on its effects. While a literary work suggests movement because there is action all the time, the notion of beauty suggests a stationary state. Therefore, while keeping in mind that a literary work is a verbal text, when read in the appropriate manner, it can offer enjoyment through its manipulation of its formal properties such as sounds, syntax, metaphors, imitation and so on. As Attridge states, “the literary is to be found wherever these properties are exploited in a verbal event” (2015, p.7). Therefore, the reader has to be able to follow the movements of thought especially if s/he is reading fictitious narrative. Such an experience is salient because since a literary work is read as literature, its effect combines both body and mind as these two dimensions cannot be separated from each other. This experience is not only intellectual but it is also emotional as several emotions on the part of the reader result in the pleasure of reading. The feelings involved are not simple to describe. However, this experience transforms a literary work into an event rather than an object. Aesthetically speaking, this perspective changes the reader both intellectually and affectively. The reader is guided how to feel and therefore his/her sensibility is enlarged and refined through an experience. If s/he limits himself/herself only to the intellectual aspect as opposed to the affective aspect, s/he will be only looking for meanings, and as a result a literary work will not be read as literature and therefore will not be an event.

The inseparability of form and content

I agree very much with Rafe McGregor’s way of phrasing his ideas in *The Value of Literature*: “the value of a work of literature qua literature is the value of experience afforded by the work. And the experience afforded by the work is valuable to the degree that this experience is finally valuable – that is, produces literary satisfaction” (2016, p.ix). This statement suggests that literary form and literary content are inseparable. McGregor seems to agree with Attridge’s claim that the mode of reading a literary work is that of going through an experience. McGregor calls this experience “narrative thickness” (2016, p.69).

Derek Attridge comments on the intimate relationship between literary form and literary content in which form prevails over content because the latter depends on form to produce meaning. Therefore, literary forms are also loaded with meaning. Attridge states that “forms are made out of meanings quite as much as they are made out of sounds and shapes” (2004, p.114). He calls this inseparability of form and content in literary works as ‘staging’. This process of staging is the outcome of regarding the literary work as a “performance” or “an act-event” (2004, p.108). By performance Attridge means the particular reading of a work, for example a novel or short story, by a particular individual. At this point, literature becomes singular according to the response of the reader. This singularity does not only give way to potential interpretation and re-interpretation, but it also allows different readings,

even by the same person, leading to different experiences. In literature, this aspect is important because it highlights not only the literary form but also the value of what is literary in a work especially if it is fictitious. Every time a reading occurs, the act of performance is renewed. At this point there is a clear distinction between the value of literature as literature, and the instrumental value literature might possess. For Attridge, words are composed of sounds and shapes which communicate meaning and feeling, which in turn are the roots of human experience. Therefore, staging takes place in performative reading. Literature can be appreciated more by means of the process of staging and it leads to pleasure when literature is regarded as literature. By means of such a process, literary form exhibits literary content. Staging is mentioned also by John Gibson who calls it “dramatic” but attributes it with the same functions. “A literary narrative is in effect a sustained dramatic gesture, a way not only of presenting some content or material but of responding to it” (2007, p.117). Both Attridge and Gibson are using the same theatrical metaphor when they are referring to the combination of form and content which emerges from a particular mode of reading. In fact, the terms used to illustrate this staging process are connected with the theatre such as ‘dramatic’, ‘performance’ and ‘staging’ itself.

Since the reading of literature is regarded as an experience or an event, staging can create new content because it has the potential to mobilize meanings. It can leave an effect on the events of meanings in various ways, for example in their interrelationship or in their sequentiality and also in their intensity or satisfaction. As a result, staging is capable of organizing certain linguistic characteristics such as intentionality, creating metaphoric language, and creating references. Thus, in the reading experience of a literary work, sound and meaning come closer to each other in order to produce one of the aesthetic values which emphasizes the bond between form and content.

In *The Opacity of Narrative*, Peter Lamarque also refers indirectly to the process of staging with particular reference to literary narratives. He claims that certain narratives are opaque when the mode of narration is prominent. This suggests that the form in which a story is narrated is important for the value of the narrative itself (2014, p.146). He clearly states that narratives which are transparent generally are not literary and therefore carry instrumental values. Lamarque’s discussion sets aside such narratives because narrative opacity is not concerned only with facts. However, it *is* concerned with the reader’s imaginative involvement in the narrative work and thus preserving the identity of the fictional work. The relation between form and content in the light of narrative opacity focuses on the importance of form which influences the content. In literary narrative, as opposed to historical, biographical or philosophical works, the content always relies on its form. This renders the narrative opaque. Therefore the way people, places and events are described, are put into a perspective. This is the reason why Lamarque states that narrative content is “not merely loosely or contingently connected to its mode of presentation, but is partially constituted by it” (2014, p.12). This opacity may also be evident in literary narratives

where they employ real people, places or events. Also here, the mode of narration may be prominent.

In literary fictional narrative, description is important since its content is mixed with opacity. Fictional characters and events which are found in the narrative “acquire their nature and very existence from the modes of their presentation” (2014, p.166). However, this statement can be also true in real world settings as these are presented from a particular point of view. Lamarque fully agrees with Attridge because both refer to the inseparability of the perspective which is the form and the character, place or event which are the content. He calls this notion the “form-content indivisibility” (2014, p.154).

I would say that Attridge’s conception of staging and Lamarque’s theory of narrative opacity are complementary because the literary singularity claimed by Attridge is similar to Lamarque’s emphasis on narrative form, which when absent or limited, renders a narrative transparent and not opaque. As a result of this situation, the reader does not focus on the form and gives prominence to the content. Newspaper reports are one example of transparent narratives which cannot be ‘singular’ in Attridge’s terms, because each reading will be the same and therefore will not lead to different interpretations. Opacity is “a standing assumption” in literary narratives (2014, p.155).

If I come back to the conception of narrative thickness as proposed by McGregor, the combination of the two concepts of staging and opacity is easily applicable to narrative thickness. While staging is a necessary condition of literature, opacity is a necessary condition of literary narratives. According to McGregor “narrative thickness is a demand which is satisfied by a work rather than a property of a text” (2016, p.78). This concept is characteristic of literary narratives in a way that rewards the need for narrative thickness. The conclusion of this discussion is that literary form and literary content are inseparable in the experience of literary narratives in a way that neither of them can be isolated. Narrative thickness can be defined as such.

Concluding reflections

The concepts of ambiguity and imagination, the process of reading literature, and the content/form relation are but a few aspects which can be discussed by both literary philosophers and theorists. According to Didier Coste, the difficulty lies not in uniting theory and aesthetics in literature in as much as in separating them especially in the post-modern literary world. He states that, the way narrative aesthetics operate depends on narrative theory as the latter accounts for the various operations of the former (2016, p.31). Referring to Currie’s comments, he emphasizes that it is misleading to claim that “new directions in literary theory are the cause of fictional change” (1998, p.54). Philosophical thought discovered that this happens because of the power of language and its autonomy. However, Coste seems to be against too

much theory when it comes to literature. “Theoretical fictions... deconstruct and kill narrative seduction, which may be a good thing for the critical mind and a bad one for the senses” (2016, p.32). This statement suggests that the best thing is to keep a balance between theory and aesthetics.

I believe that such a balance can be reached by the basic attitude we assume when we appreciate literary works especially when they are fictitious. Breaking the barriers between theory and aesthetics depends on what Lamarque and Olsen called “the fictive stance” (1994, p.43). This attitude is found in the reader’s disposition to treat literary narratives as fictional and be appreciated as such. The idea that the same stance cannot have both the fictional and the real as its object is quite mistaken, as the difference between them is not so clear. John Gibson strengthens this idea with the presentation of a humanistic approach in which literature is importantly connected with reality and therefore can be appreciated both theoretically and aesthetically (2007, p.12).

References

- Attridge, D. (2004). *The Singularity of Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Attridge, D. (2015). *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blanchot, M. (1989). *The Space of Literature*. United States of America: University of Nebraska Press.
- Bowie, A. (1997). *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Literary Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Coste, D. Narrative Theory and Aesthetics in Literature. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. June 2017. Available at literature.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.116 [Accessed 10 April 2018].
- Currie, M. (1998). *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. New York: St. Michael’s Press.
- Derrida, J. (1992). *Acts of Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Genette, G. (1999). *The Aesthetic Relation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gibson, J. (2007). *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lamarque, P. & Olsen S. H. (1994). *Truth, Fiction and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lamarque, P. (2014). *The Opacity of Narrative*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- McGregor, R. (2016). *The Value of Literature*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Otty, L. & Roberts, A. M. (2013). ‘Dim-conceived glories of the brain’: On Ambiguity in Literature and Science. *Culture Theory and Critique*, . 54(1), 37-55.
- Stock, K. (2017). *Only Imagine. Fiction, Interpretation and Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bio-note

Dr Josette Attard is a senior lecturer at the Junior College and the University of Malta. She studied literature and literary theory at the University of Malta where she specialized in Maltese literary aesthetics in which she was awarded a Doctor

of Philosophy. Her research interests are the philosophy of literature and literary aesthetics besides Maltese literature. Her publications in this field include *L-Estetika Maltija – Antoloġija Kritika* (1997), and *Storja tal-Estetika Letterarja Maltija* (2011). She is a member of The British Society of Aesthetics, the Società Italiana di Estetica, the European Society of Aesthetics and the American Society of Aesthetics. She participated in various literary programmes on local radio and TV stations and presented papers in conferences held locally and abroad. She was twice awarded the National Book Prize in 1998 and 1999.