

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

4-1-1990

Review Of "Fictions, Philosophies, And The Problems Of Poetics" By P. J. McCormick

Richard Thomas Eldridge
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (1990). "Review Of "Fictions, Philosophies, And The Problems Of Poetics" By P. J. McCormick". *Philosophy And Literature*. Volume 14, Issue 1. 207-208. DOI: 10.1353/phl.1990.0079
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/289>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



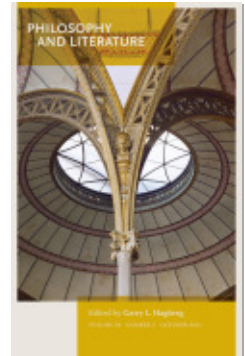
PROJECT MUSE®

Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics (review)

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 14, Number 1, April 1990, pp. 207-208
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *10.1353/phl.1990.0079*



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/phl/summary/v014/14.1.eldridge01.html>

to its original intent. When de Grazia ascribes to Machiavelli a coherent synthesis of classical and Christian elements, he fails to preserve the tensions within a figure who pursues but never quite achieves the unproblematic identity he once sustained as a citizen of Florence. By the same token, when de Grazia reconciles the murderous imperatives of secular politics with the injunctions of Christian ethics, he loses sight of the tragic fate of a man whose very real fear of hell cannot quench his love for the appearances of this world.

WHITMAN COLLEGE

TIMOTHY V. KAUFMAN-OSBORN

Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics, by Peter J. McCormick; xiii & 351 pp. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, \$42.50 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

The general argument strategy in *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics* is to set up opposing views, to elaborate and refine them carefully, and finally to transcend the opposition that had been established. The opposing views concern the topics of what fiction is, whether it presents truth, whether it is morally significant, how it moves us, and how it enacts conceptions of actions and persons. The general opposition that runs across all these topics is between theories of fiction that seek to analyze the mechanisms through which it achieves its effects and theories of fiction that attribute to it some deep metaphysical significance.

An account of the mechanism of fiction is needed in virtue of the fact that tantalizing metaphysical views about fiction—notably Ingarden's, but behind his Heidegger's and Gadamer's—are ultimately obscure. Here Goodman helpfully insists that fictions are some of the many incommensurable world-versions that all rightly render many actual worlds. Talk about hidden essences and obscure realms of possibilities is unnecessary. Yet Goodman's ideas turn out to be trivializing, in leaving the nature of the real unexplicated and conceptually incoherent. Ricoeur casts the world presented in a fictional work as a refiguration of our own present possibilities of life. But given that mechanisms for the workings of fiction are not satisfactorily specified, we must finally question the intelligibility of Ricoeur's doctrine.

The general result of working through these oppositions is that we need a more "satisfactory account" (p. 282) of fiction and its relation to reality, an account that better meets the demands against which the positions of Goodman and Ricoeur, Searle and Heidegger, Hospers and Gadamer, and others have been assessed. The "summary perspective" (p. 290) that attempts to meet these

demands lists six interrelated essential features of fiction that account for its workings and its significance. (1) The context of the production and reception of fiction is undecomposably natural, historical, and cultural. (2) The apparently monologic production of the individual author is always nested in dialogue. (3) Nominalism is false; the world has more in it than individuals—it has also beauty, and order, and cultures, and good and evil, among many other things. (4) Fictional worlds are conceptual frameworks that symbolize and metaphorically refer as wholes—not name by name or sentence by sentence only—to the human historical world. (5) The work and the audience both project horizons: the work is projected toward an audience; the audience is projected toward a possible future. (6) Fictions can refigure our classifications and perceptions of experience.

Once we see that fiction is not opposed to or other than reality, then we are forced to rethink how, through taking its projections and refigurings seriously, we are to find our ways about in life without relying on the appeals to individual, quasi-calculative, ethical good reasons that schematize the leading of a serious life in modernity.

A number of questions might be raised about this project. How does it align itself against other efforts, notably those of Cavell and Derrida, to reconceive seriousness by rethinking the relations of literature and philosophy? Are the claims put forward in the summary perspective very different from and very much clearer than the claims of Ricoeur and Gadamer? Perhaps most importantly, do we really need a metaphysics of fiction, and, if so, *when*? Instead of mechanical-metaphysical *explanations*, perhaps we need *elucidations* or *philosophical criticism*—letting the metaphysics take care of itself as we go along. Is the general effort to establish the importance of literary fictions, for both metaphysical thinking and moral self-understanding, consistent with the view that there are no legitimate categorical demands on persons?

But these questions are to a large extent already in play in *Fictions, Philosophies, and the Problems of Poetics*. There *are* sustained readings or critical elucidations of Eliot, Stevens, and Rilke that support a good bit of metaphysical thinking about human life. The treatment of the Korean and Japanese lyrics succeeds in establishing them as significant for both metaphysics and moral theory. The governing theme of the present possibilities of seriousness may well be the master philosophical problem of our time.