

Essays in Philosophy

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Environmental Aesthetics*

Article 3

1-2002

Review of “Philosophy of Literature”

Steven Schroeder
Roosevelt University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schroeder, Steven (2002) "Review of “Philosophy of Literature”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Essays in Philosophy is a biannual journal published by Pacific University Library | ISSN 1526-0569 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip/>

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 3 No. 1

Book Review

Philosophy of Literature: An Introduction. Christopher New. New York and London: Routledge, 1999. 159pp.

Reviewing Christopher New's analytic philosophy of literature is akin to reviewing an autopsy: one is aware of a meticulous examination, the object of which was (but is not now) alive, the successful outcome of which will be a determination of the cause of death. Autopsies serve a useful purpose, and the same may be said of analytic philosophy applied to literature; but neither is intended to put an observer in close contact with a living organism. Since this book is packaged as an introduction "as much for those with literary as for those with philosophical interests" (vii), it is important to be aware of this from the outset. While there is little doubt that New, like an experienced medical examiner, learns much from the analytic process, students (and writers) of literature may be put off by this encounter with a familiar acquaintance transformed into lifeless fragments on an operating table. Students who observe the examiner at work are likely to learn more about the examination process than the object examined, so this book may prove most useful for philosophy students as an introduction to the analytic style, an opportunity to watch an analytic philosopher at work.

More than a quarter of the book is devoted to ground clearing and definition, beginning with a distinction between literature and drama that tilts the analysis away from performance, surprising at a time when performative dimensions have come to be recognized across disciplines as critical to literary interpretation. New notices (1), and encourages his readers to notice, three things in ordinary language about literature: first, that we may doubt whether drama is literature; second, that a literary work need not be exclusively (or primarily) literary; and, third, that "literature" may be used in either a neutral or an honorific way. New proposes to avoid the honorific usage in favor of the neutral one, attending to what makes a work "literary" rather than what makes it "good" (4). There is, however, a vestige of honorific or evaluative usage in distinctions that lead him to exclude film (2) and lean toward "serious" as opposed to "popular" or "light" literature.

He arrives early at the commonplace that literature is distinguished by being necessarily linguistic (2) and proposes the rough analogy that language is to the author as paint is to the painter. Even as a rough analogy, this is an important cue: language and paint are introduced as objects to be manipulated by practitioners of separate arts rather than being joined (as many artists have joined them) by analogy with air or food. In New's understanding, one uses them rather than living in them, breathing them, or being nourished by them. The identifying characteristics of language are lexicon, syntax, and semantics (3), and it is assumed that these characteristics are absent in visual media and music. This tilts literary analysis toward communication as transport: language is a means, a vehicle by which something is conveyed, and, presumably, conveyance is either less significant in or entirely absent from graphic arts and music.

Emphasis on language leads New to an issue he calls preliminary (though it has a critical bearing on the relationship between "neutral" and honorific usage), the distinction between oral and written literature (4, 5). We could, he rightly points out, have literature without writing or without speech, but not without language. "Literature," then, is a category that includes both oral and written productions but is sharply differentiated from graphic arts, film, and music. Readers will want to attend carefully to differences this difference makes.

By including both oral and written productions in the category of "literary" works, New (almost) makes a postmodern turn to language that privileges writing. Though both oral and written productions are included, once written language is introduced, anything spoken may be translated into writing. This could suggest that writing is the more inclusive category and that oral literature may be understood as a subcategory. But, by directing our attention to what is lost in translation between oral and written forms, New directs our attention to the critical problem of translation itself (14). In the process, he reintroduces performative dimensions by analogy with games. Just as a move in chess is "not something over and above the motions involved in lifting the piece and putting it down" but rather "performing that sequence of movements in a way that conforms to the rules of chess," so making a statement is "not something over and above uttering a sequence of sounds or inscriptions" but rather "uttering that sequence of sounds or inscriptions in a way that conforms to the rules of the language" (11). Now language has become not only a means but also a space within which a performance takes place, and rules have a critical role to play in constituting both linguistic space and linguistic acts. For New (as for Walter Benjamin), this is closely connected with the question of copying or reproduction: neither a chess move nor a linguistic act is unique, and, in the case of language, "copies of statements are the same statements as the statements they are copies of" (13). But copying and reproduction are linked to translation: under what conditions is the copy no longer the same as the statement of which it is a copy? One answer (though not the only one) is when the copy moves across the boundary between oral and written language: now it is the same, but not exactly. (Anticipating, one might identify this as a transition from metaphor to simile: it no longer is, but is like.) Which boundaries count is a crucial philosophical issue, for literature as for other subject matters. For New, this is critical to determining what counts as "literary." Grammar and semantics, he says, are relatively more rigid in literary than in non-literary discourses (16). So one way, presumably, to gauge whether a particular linguistic production is "literary" is by ascertaining how difficult it is to reproduce a measure that is immensely complicated (as Benjamin noted far more clearly than New) in an age of mechanical (or, we might add, digital) reproduction. For New, "linguistic composition," not "writing," is the inclusive category for literary production: literature is linguistic composition "that has a certain property, or certain properties, of literariness" (18). And those properties, it seems, are connected with the questions of reproduction and translation, both performative.

To his credit, New invokes Wittgenstein at this point: don't think, look. This shifts attention away from definitions that depend on identification of an "essence" toward those that depend on family resemblance and paves the way for one of the most useful sections of the book, a survey of failed attempts to formulate a definition of literary discourse "which specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the term" (22-34). This survey includes brief descriptions of formalist (22), structuralist (23), *Rezeptionistaesthetik* (24), speech act (25), institutional (31), and social practice (33) approaches and is followed by a succinct statement of the family resemblance approach (34) that New favors. "There are," he asserts, "several distinct sources of literariness, although most literary works contain features from more than one source, and that is why attempts to define literariness in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the term all fail. But 'literature' is not an ambiguous word like

'pen'; for the different things we call literature, unlike the different things we call pens, are all related to each other in the ways in which members of a family resemble each other that is, variously" (37). Among the features that New highlights are rhyme, metre, onomatopoeia, alliteration, anaphora, epistrophe, metaphor, simile, meiosis, irony, hyperbole, and fiction, some auditory, some visual, some figurative without specific dependence on sound or look (36). As he notes at the end of this section, family resemblance analysis results in categories with blurred boundaries that invariably raise questions about marginal cases. New does not see this as a disadvantage, and here he shows signs of breathing life into the corpse on his operating table. "Some cities," he writes, "have streets laid out on a preconceived plan, others have streets that grow higgledy-piggledy over the years as a need is felt to add one or connect another, yet we can live and find our way in both. Language is like that, too. That is how we deal with marginal cases" (37). What follows may be understood as exploration of critical margins. New asserts that "the literariness-conferring features of discourses are fairly straightforward" (38) except in the case of metaphor, irony, and fiction, each of which is explored in some detail in the remainder of the book.

Not surprisingly, attention to fiction leads New to explore "story," a category which, like "narrative," has blurred edges that "frustrate misguided attempts to draw sharp boundaries" though they do not limit the usefulness of either category (47). The blurred edges make it difficult to determine "just how extensive a sequence must be in order to qualify as a story" (47); but sequence and connectedness are indispensable, as is invention, and the more extensive the sequence, the more certain we can be of its place in the category. In the case of fiction and irony, invention means make-believe or "nondeceptive pretence" (47) and this leads New to consider relationships between fiction and truth. He observes that the author of a literary fiction invites an audience to make-believe that the narrative s/he has invented is true and insists that the quality of invention requires that the author *not* believe the fiction is true. This understanding of the relationship between narrative and truth is likely to be among the most troubling aspects of the book for students of literature, and it leads the philosopher to extensive consideration of both epistemological and metaphysical dimensions. New is as concerned with the "what" and "how" of our knowing as with the nature of the world in which we live, and his philosophy of literature joins a broad linguistic turn that sees language as indispensable on each of these counts. It is intriguing that he chooses in the middle of this discussion to assert that "when we look at the news pictures on our television screens, we may see the dots and lines as a field with a house and tree in it, but that does not make the news pictures fictions" (52). Perhaps. But this does highlight just how important fiction and fictional techniques are to beings for whom knowledge is necessarily mediated. If news pictures are not "made-up," it is difficult to imagine what is. The question (in this as in other fictions) is how that relates both to truth and to *their* truth.

The question, as New understands, is also one of interpretation and reception; so he turns next to audiences and their psychological reactions. New is critical of approaches to literature (beginning with Aristotle) that limit their study of psychological reactions almost entirely to fear and pity. He does not discount either, but he takes questions of belief and reason to be more fundamental and, as a result, turns attention again to make-believe and (less explicitly) to play. Audiences are not afraid of what happens in fiction in the sense that we would think of calling the police to stop a murder we are witnessing there, nor do we pity fictional characters in the sense that might make us, e.g., think of laying flowers on Anna Karenina's grave (55). But he dismisses theoretical approaches that explain this by reducing literary fictions to props for audience make-believe. Though we (only) pretend that the events and scenes and characters in fiction are real, he says, we do not similarly pretend that our psychological reactions are real. He illustrates this with reference to amusement. When we see Charlie Chaplin caught in the cogs of the factory wheel in *Modern Times*, we pretend that the character and the situation are real, but we have

no need to *pretend* to be amused. This, he says, is evidence that we do not have to believe that the character and situation are real in order to experience real psychological reactions to that character and situation (60). The importance of this evidence in New's argument is that it paves the way for a broader understanding of rationality, one that has room for emotion if for no other reason than the utility of emotion, which, New maintains, serves a purpose (66).

Analysis of fiction forms the basis on which New explores imagination, which he says operates at three levels when we apprehend literature (78): first, "in our continuous and collusive engagement in the make-believe activity to which the author invites and seduces us"; second, in our picturing of what the author's words describe; and, third, in what the actors, props, camera crew, designers, etc. cause us to do that is to seem to be watching real people, places, etc. The first level, New says, is voluntary; but the other two are not (78). This leads him to insist on the importance of illusion (as well as imagination) in our encounter with works of fiction, specifically the importance of illusions that we know we have (79). The interaction of the second and third levels with the first means that our successful collaboration with the author of a work of fiction results in its seeming to be even where we do not believe that it is. Failure to recognize this, he suggests, diminishes the author's role "from that of cook to that of recipe-writer" (80), a particularly interesting metaphor when combined with the earlier reference to seduction. Both embody the experience of fiction (and, more generally, literature) as a process that, if we are really cooking, is a collaborative one that not only takes place in but also constitutes and nourishes relationships. This looks more like a romantic dinner than an autopsy.

While New rejects the idea that all language is metaphorical, he accords metaphor a central place in philosophy of literature and suggests that, at the very least, an adequate theory of metaphor must properly distinguish it from simile. That distinction was invoked earlier in discussion of oral and written literature, in the movement from *is* to *is like*. This movement is critical for New because of the importance he attaches to seeming as it relates to believing, and it means that he must insist that the movement is a real one. Though metaphor is so closely related to simile as to sometimes be understood as an elliptical simile in which "is" implies "is like," New maintains that they are not the same. This leads him through discussion of the truth of metaphor as it relates to its fittingness to a brief exploration of play (92, 93). Partly because of the brevity of those comments, partly because of the initial move that tilted his analysis away from performance, New largely overlooks performative aspects of metaphor. Readers would do well to remember Wittgenstein's advice here and *look*. For the player, the question is not so much what it means as what it does; and metaphor, like play, is not instrumental. This has important implications for authorial intention (101, 102) and the power of language. Simile places author and reader outside a relationship, while metaphor positions both inside. In simile, language surrenders significant power by authorizing readers to create the category implied by "like" or "as." In metaphor, language retains the power of "is" and draws the reader into a world that may in fact transform the one s/he has heretofore inhabited. Here I think New's argument is upside down: being mistaken about a poem, he says, is not as serious as being mistaken about gravity (136). But the question here is what we mean by being mistaken. Being mistaken about gravity is a serious matter for one who simply goes over a cliff believing herself or himself exempt from gravity, but New's own argument may help us see that the power of poetry lies in seeming's complication rather than believing's simplicity. It seems that human beings, unlike birds, do not have wings; but poetry makes it possible to invent worlds in which we do.

Copyright © 2002, Humboldt State University
