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Aesthetics and Literature: a Problematic Relation?

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I

Among philosophers of art it is simply taken for granted that literature falls within the purview of aesthetics. My aim is not in the end to challenge this assumption but to show, first, that it is not as obvious as might be supposed, second, that it does not presuppose, and should not rely on, reductive accounts of either literature or aesthetics, third, that it entails a conception of literature not always fully acknowledged and, fourth, that, when properly characterised, it converges with familiar principles of literary criticism.

It is worth noting at the outset that literary critics on the whole show a marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature. This in itself ought to be more surprising than it is to philosophers of art for whom, as noted, the matter is barely controversial. Of course there could be many reasons for this reluctance, not least a narrow view of what counts as aesthetics. An insight into the worries that literary critics have with the aesthetic comes from a recent exchange between three prominent critics, Frank Kermode, emeritus professor of English at Cambridge, Geoffrey Hartman, emeritus professor of English at Yale, and John Guillory, current chair and professor of English at New York University. This occurs in a volume entitled *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon*, published in 2004, which gives the text of Kermode's Tanner Lectures at Berkeley with comments by the other two critics.¹ Kermode's aim is precisely to relocate at least some notion of the

aesthetic – specifically the idea of “aesthetic pleasure” – in the vacuum left by the demise of “Theory” evident since the turn of the 21st century. The ostensible focus is on canon formation and the extent to which judgments of aesthetic quality, apart from what Kermode calls “collusion with the discourses of power”, could validly be thought to underlie the shaping of the canon.²

Although the critics Hartman and Guillory are happy to move with Kermode beyond the simplistic ideological analyses of 1990’s cultural critics, they both express scepticism about aesthetic pleasure. Guillory notes “the pervasive embarrassment with the subject of pleasure [in the critical community], and the ease with which pleasure has been neutralized as the merely contingent effect of reception”.³ His own unease with aesthetic pleasure stems from suspicion about “higher pleasures” and the traditional elevation of poetry among the literary arts. Although he accepts—more readily than Kermode himself—the specificity of aesthetic pleasure among other kinds of pleasures he is inclined, against Kermode, to reject the link between pleasure and canonicity. Hartman finds the very concept of pleasure, in the literary context, “problematic” and “descriptively poor” and speaks of its “onomatopoeic pallor”. To the extent that pleasure is indeed at the heart of the aesthetic—a point to which we shall return—then the scepticism voiced by Guillory and Hartman about the bearing of aesthetics on criticism is probably widely shared. However, Kermode is not entirely isolated. The critic Harold Bloom, for example, famously led an attack on fashionable literary theory at its very height in the 1990s in the name of the “autonomy of the aesthetic”.⁴ Like Kermode, Bloom defends the canon on the grounds of aesthetic value while recognizing that “the flight from or repression of the aesthetic is endemic in our institutions”.⁵

To compress the debate drastically and crudely, the “flight from the aesthetic” among critics seems to stem from several sources: the politicisation of criticism in the heyday of Theory and the thought that appeal to aesthetic quality is reactionary and tainted with unwelcome ideological accretions;⁶ a shying away from value judgments of any kind; a belief that any reference to pleasure or emotion or experience or indeed to a phenomenology of reading is marginal to the critical enterprise; and, by implication, the thought that the very vocabulary of aesthetics, as exemplified in Frank Sibley’s famous list of aesthetic concepts—*unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving*, etc—is itself peripheral to substantial critical discourse.

What is curious, however, is that philosophical aestheticians, who readily accept a place for literature within aesthetics, often share many of the reservations found among literary critics. Aesthetic pleasure is not a prominent topic for aestheticians who write about literature,⁷ nor is much serious effort made to promote an aesthetic vocabulary in describing literary works. What place, then, does literature hold within contemporary aesthetics?

First of all, it finds a natural place in philosophy of art, which is often treated, mistakenly, as identical with aesthetics. Few aestheticians doubt that literature should count as one of the arts. After all, when the fine arts were initially characterised in the early 18th century poetry was included along with painting, music, sculpture and dance and indeed the idea of an “ars poetica” goes back beyond Horace to the ancient Greeks. There is little dispute that poetry is one of the high art forms and the artistry

of poetry is not hard to discern. Yet it is a curiosity of current discussions of literature within aesthetics that almost nothing is written about poetry per se. Most attention is given to narrative fiction in the novel or drama but it is at least not obvious that there is a unified conception that conjoins poetry and prose fiction under the label “fine art”.

Among the cluster of issues that do occupy philosophers writing about literature, questions about cognitive and ethical values still rank high (as they did for the ancient Greek philosophers) as do debates about authorial intention in criticism, and about fiction and emotion. Yet it is a characteristic of these debates that they seldom focus on specifically *literary*, far less *aesthetic*, features. The question about emotional responses to fiction has been dominated by examples from film, mostly genre varieties like horror. Other issues about fiction—reference, truth-value, and ontology—apply indifferently to non-literary as well as literary narratives and usually are focused in theories of meaning or metaphysics. It is perhaps for this reason that they have never caught the attention of literary critics. The key debates about intention, cognition and ethics also arise, indiscriminately, for other art forms and the core arguments do not rest crucially on the nature and status of literature. All in all, it is far from obvious that when philosophers turn their attention to literature they are really engaged in *aesthetics* at all, as opposed to philosophy of language, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, moral philosophy, and at best a broadly conceived philosophy of art.

So if literary critics are sceptical and philosophers only marginally interested what future is there for an aesthetics of literature? More precisely what might be involved in supposing literary works to be proper objects of aesthetic attention and aesthetic appraisal? Kermode and Bloom are no doubt right that some conception of *aesthetic pleasure* is integral to such an approach but their literary critical opponents are also right to be suspicious of this. Kermode gets off on the wrong foot by seeking to naturalize the pleasures of literature, via Freud and Roland Barthes, identifying them with a heady mix of sexuality (Barthes' *jouissance*), transgression, and what he calls "dismay". Apart from the fact that this simplistic psychologizing is hopelessly vague and open to counter-example, the highly implausible idea that there is a distinct phenomenology associated with reading literature can only discredit the enterprise that Kermode is engaged in. A characterisation of the aesthetic pleasure that literature can afford is not some empirical datum with which the enquiry starts but at best a destination reached from quite other premises.

If aesthetics is to be at all relevant to literature it must deploy recognizable features of aesthetic appraisal as applied more widely but it must also capture something distinctive about literature as an art form. This is by no means an easy task or even one that the subject matter obviously demands. After all, aesthetic appraisal in most other contexts is connected in some way with perception or sensory experience or the "appearance" of objects and it is often supposed that this already distances literature from other art forms and indeed from aesthetics. Is there anything sufficiently analogous to the experiential side of aesthetic response to make the literary case worth considering in this context? The answer, I believe, is Yes but it will not be found in reductive accounts of *jouissance* or transgressive pleasures. The key is in a suitably

qualified conception of *appreciation*.⁸ If it can be shown that there is a distinct mode of appreciating literature *as literature* or *as art* then the first crucial step will have been taken to establish that an aesthetics of literature is possible and worthwhile.

We should look, I suggest, to Frank Sibley, rather than Immanuel Kant and the idea of disinterested attention, for inspiration on how to proceed. The Sibleyan tradition of aesthetics suggests important constraints on how an aesthetic approach might be developed, although we need not be committed to all Sibley's specific claims. Sibley identified a range of concepts (noted above) which serve to characterize aesthetic aspects of art or other objects. Setting aside the question of how useful such concepts are to the literary critic, it is important to acknowledge some benefits of the lists he assembled.

One benefit is to show that aesthetics is not exclusively confined to beauty, as it seemed to be in the 18th century. To speak merely of the "beauty" of literary works is as anodyne as speaking merely of the "pleasure" they afford. Sibley showed that aesthetic appraisals, thus aesthetic interests, are considerably wider than that. Another benefit is his recognition of the subtly different ways in which descriptive and evaluative elements can interact in aesthetic concepts.⁹ Aesthetic characterisations are not always or only ways of evaluating works; they also have implications for how the work *appears*, what *impact* it has, what is *salient* in it, what merits aesthetic *attention*. Aesthetic descriptions bring such matters to light.

There are also three more substantive theses in Sibley that seem especially pertinent. The first is the view that aesthetic properties are emergent or *gestalt* properties that

require something more than merely sensory perception for their discernment. Sibley maintains that only people possessing a certain kind of “sensitivity” or “taste”, itself subject to training and improvement, will be able to apply aesthetic terms correctly and engage in aesthetic appreciation. Something parallel is true in the literary case, namely that mere grasp of the language is not sufficient to appreciate a work aesthetically. Whether or not a particular sensibility is called for might be open to question¹⁰ but that some skill is involved beyond linguistic competence seems certain. Literary appreciation is not a natural but a trained mode of discernment.

The second Sibleyan thesis relates to this, namely that there is no logical or even inductive relation between an object’s non-aesthetic properties and its aesthetic ones. No list of non-aesthetic—physical, structural, perceptual—properties entails (or makes probable) the presence of an aesthetic property. The idea that aesthetic concepts are not condition-governed has, of course, been challenged,¹¹ although we need not rule on that now. But there is at least a case for saying in the literary application that a work’s emergent aesthetic features, of a kind that will be exemplified later, are not deducible from textual features alone.

Thirdly, Sibley’s aesthetic particularism has an application in the literary context. This is the view that aesthetic judgments are not generalisable. From the fact that in this work this combination of non-aesthetic features contributes to this aesthetic effect it does not follow that there is a generalisable principle that states that whenever that or a similar combination occurs the same effect will follow.¹² For example, the use of the “same” poetic imagery—love as a rose, time as a tyrant—in different works never ensures sameness of aesthetic effect.¹³

One of the principal lessons from the Sibleyan tradition is that aesthetic qualities, while related to non-aesthetic qualities, are not reducible to them. The temptation to reduce literary works to instances of more familiar or more tractable kinds is the biggest obstacle to a successful characterisation of literary aesthetic appreciation. Only if literary works can be shown to be objects of a distinctive kind of aesthetic appraisal, and to promote and reward such appraisal, will it be possible to set apart the literary sphere as a subject worthy of its own treatment within aesthetics. But the tendency to “naturalise” literature is strong, for example, to see works of literature as no more than pleasing pieces of language. If the aesthetics of literature has any hope of finding a coherent, central and defensible place for *aesthetic pleasure*, for *aesthetic features* distinct from merely textual features, for a sui generis mode of *aesthetic appreciation*, and for some conception of *aesthetic value* then it needs to avoid the temptation of reduction on several fronts:

- to any one literary form (such as poetry),
- to purely linguistic properties (semantic, syntactic, or rhetorical),
- to formal properties (such as style or structure),
- to purely hedonistic conceptions of pleasure,
- to intuitive, “natural” or untutored “responses”, and
- to any form of “art for art’s sake” aestheticism.

I am going to focus on three kinds of reduction, which I see as obstacles to an aesthetics of literature, each of which has its adherents. One is to *form*, one is to *meaning*, one to a certain kind of *narrative realism*.

A prominent temptation in trying to characterise literature in aesthetic terms is to reduce literature to “fine writing” or “belles lettres”. In itself the idea is not implausible for there is indeed a generic sense of “literature” where it means just that. Fine writing is exemplified across nearly all modes of discourse: history, philosophy, biography, letter writing, political speeches, as well as throughout the more narrowly defined literary arts, drama, poetry and the novel. And it is not uncommon to describe such discourses, when well written, as “literary”.

Fine writing is easier to recognize than to define. David Hume’s philosophical writing frequently exhibits literary or aesthetic qualities, as when he describes his philosophical journey in the *Treatise*:

Methinks that I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap’d ship-wreck in passing a small firth, has yet the temerity to put to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under this disadvantageous circumstances.¹⁴

It is not only the metaphorical figure that contributes to the literary effect but also the phrasing, structure, cadences and choice of words. I suggest, though, that we should look to rhetoric rather than aesthetics to characterise the effectiveness of writing of this kind. Perhaps surprisingly, I am not inclined to build the aesthetics of literature on the base of “fine writing” or on a belleslettrist conception of literature.

For one thing, giving focus to fine writing affords no principled way to distinguish between “literature” in the generic sense and “literature” in the narrow sense of literary art.¹⁵ The label “imaginative literature” for the latter is not entirely satisfactory for it is not as if the imagination has no role in other discourses. If imaginative means fictional then that seems to favour certain kinds of literary works, such as novels, over others, such as lyric poetry. It is better, as we shall see, to draw the distinction between literary artworks and works of history, philosophy, or biography, independently of “fine writing”, in terms of conventional modes of apprehension. Fine writing might be a sufficient condition for literature in the generic sense but it is not sufficient for literature as art and arguably not even necessary. Those novels, for example, that are written in the first person through the narrative voice of a child (such as *Catcher in the Rye*) or someone uneducated (such as *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Peter Carey’s novel) might not exemplify fine writing as that is normally understood, even if the writing is described as clever, effective, moving, or realistic. Other reasons altogether qualify the writing as literature or as art.

It might seem perverse to set aside fine writing when addressing the aesthetic qualities of literature so a further word needs to be said on this. Of course aesthetic pleasure is to be had in good writing wherever it appears. Nor is it uncommon for critics to use aesthetic concepts—expressive, moving, powerful, resonant, striking—to characterise poetic usage. But good writing in literary art is seldom an end in itself, rather a means to some further end or effect. Mellifluous prose or delicately nuanced imagery will not always be appropriate in every literary context, say, in a dialogue (in a novel) between drunken members of street gangs. Rhetorical or formal devices, like

figurative language, imagery, alliteration, rhyme schemes, repetition, metre, do not have intrinsic aesthetic value but gain their effectiveness by the contribution they make to a desired end, be it emotional impact, realistic depiction, humour, or poetic insight. The use of alliteration, rhyming couplets, or enriched figuration affords no aesthetic pleasure, for example, if used to convey bad news.¹⁶

The important theoretical point, though, is that formal or rhetorical devices are in themselves *textual* features, identifiable independently of discursive aims and often subject to learnable rules. They acquire aesthetic significance only when assigned a function within an artistic structure. Here is an example. Consider a critic's observations on certain rhetorical features in these well-known lines from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey":

... a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Some of the sweep of this passage is also to be explained by the repetition of 'and': '*And* the round ocean, *and* the living air, / *And* the blue sky, *and* in the mind of man'. In conventional prose 'and' would normally signal the end of a list, but here, no sooner has Wordsworth thought to end it than some other facet of nature's multitudinousness occurs to him. The list is apparently endless, and Wordsworth's profligate way with connectives all adds to the sense of amplitude and prodigality. This impression is strengthened by a similarly extravagant use of 'all': '*All* thinking things, *all* objects of *all*

thought, / And rolls through *all* things.’ The omnipresence of the ‘a’-sound is also worth noting: seven consecutive lines in this section begin with it, and all the singular elemental words—‘man’, ‘and’, ‘am’, ‘all’, ‘a’—contain it. When this ubiquitous sound is coupled with the way every aspect of the universe is merged together with connectives and embraced by repeated ‘all’s, we have the impression that man, language and the universe are merging together in a paean of ecstatic oneness.¹⁷

What is striking about this passage is that it highlights a textual feature—the repetition of ‘and’ and ‘all’—which might in other contexts be thought a defect, far less a mark of fine writing. But the critic identifies an aesthetic function for this rhetorical feature and assigns both significance and value to it. The aesthetic significance of the repetition *emerges* from the particularities of the poetic context and the construction put upon it. The example demonstrates a fundamental aspect of literary aesthetic effect: the consonance of means to end. The critic’s aesthetic appreciation of the passage lies in perceiving a consonance between the formal means and the further poetic purpose of expressing “nature’s multitudinousness” and the “ecstatic oneness” of man and universe. The appreciation does not rest on the rhetorical feature (the *textual* feature) alone.

IV

Just as it is wrong to reduce literature—and the aesthetic qualities of literature—to fine writing so it is wrong to reduce literature to language or meaning *per se*. Literary works are not simply strings of sentences to be assigned meaning—in a word they are

not simply *texts*. Extreme textualists in effect dismiss the idea that there is anything distinctive about literary works among other kinds of texts. They hold, with Roland Barthes, that texts are undifferentiated “writing”, or *écriture*, waiting for readers to fashion into their own meanings,¹⁸ or with Richard Rorty that “the coherence of the text ... is no more than the fact that someone has found something interesting to say about a group of marks and noises”.¹⁹ It is not just the aesthetic interest in literature that gets lost under such reduction but literature itself as a meaningful category.

A more subtle form of linguistic reductionism, short of textualism, takes literary works to be contextualised utterances akin to utterances in any form of communicative exchange. Noël Carroll is well known for promoting the analogy between literary writing and conversation²⁰ and Robert Stecker identifies what he calls “work meaning” with “utterance meaning”.²¹ On this view there is no difference *in principle* between writing a novel, writing a letter, or making a political speech. All manifest the same desire to convey meaning. All invite the same goal of understanding and success is judged on whether the meaning is conveyed. It is no wonder that the debate about intentions is so prominent among philosophers who start with this premise about literature. The primary questions become what kind of meaning is conveyed and what are the constraints in grasping that meaning: is it the explicitly intended meaning of the author, is it the contextualised meaning of the words used, is it the meaning of an utterance combining intention and convention, and so forth?

I suggest that this framework is utterly misconceived; the emphasis on conveying and grasping meanings distracts attention from more fundamental issues about what

literary works are and what they are valued for. Significantly there is no intention debate about aesthetic description. If we are to pursue the possibility of an aesthetics of literature it will be necessary to move beyond a focus on utterances and their meanings. A radical shift is needed from the picture of an author producing a *text*, communicating a *meaning*, and inviting *understanding*, to that of an author creating a *work*, engaging a *practice*, and inviting *appreciation*.²² It is the latter that must underpin any coherent, non-reductive aesthetics of literature.

There is no denying, of course, that literary works are associated with texts and meanings nor that the question of what a particular phrase or sentence means will inevitably arise. This is sometimes called “explication”. The mistake is to suppose that explication is a model for literary interpretation or literary appreciation. Consider this example. Edmund Spenser’s poem *Epithalamion* written in 1594 demands a great deal of explication, at least for modern readers. Here is part of stanza 9:

Loe where she comes along with portly pace,
 Lyke Phoebe from her chamber in the East,
 Aysing forth to run her mighty race,
 Clad all in white, that seemes a virgin best.
 So well it her beseemes that ye would weene
 Some angell she had beene.
 Her long loose yellow locks lyke golden wyre,
 Sprinckled with perle, and perling flowers a tweene,
 Does lyke a golden mantle her attyre,
 And being crownéd with a girland greene,
 Seeme lyke some mayden Queene.

The meanings of Elizabethan words—“portly” (stately), “seemes” (suits), “weene” (expect), or “perling” (winding)—need to be recovered, as do the classical or mythological references to the likes of Phoebe (goddess of the moon). The expression “mayden Queene” must be recognized as an allusion to Queen Elizabeth I. A scholarly edition will make such matters clear with the aim of aiding understanding.

There is little need to refer to Spenser's intentions as the recovered facts rest on shared contemporary knowledge.

However, the pursuit of textual or utterance meaning in this vein is a bare preliminary to an appreciation of Spenser's poem as a literary work. Such appreciation only begins with the recognition that the poem belongs in the conventionalized "epithalamic" tradition popular in the Renaissance but dating back to the Roman poet Catullus. Epithalamia are celebrations of weddings, following strict conventions of versification, imagery, epithets, and temporal structure, with a conventional progression through the religious rites, the processions, the banqueting, the singing and revelry, the retreat of bride and groom to the bedchamber, to the final consummation.

What becomes salient in appreciation of Spenser's poem is not the way he follows convention or uses conventional imagery, but rather how he departs from convention to produce something unusual and unique. Unusually, for example, the poem is about the poet's own wedding, fusing the role of bridegroom and poet-speaker. References to the bride's beauty take on a personal not merely conventional colour. Another unconventional motif is, in the words of a critic, the recurring

ominous associations of darkness ...[for example] where the stars are
described as torches in the temple of heaven

that to us wretched earthly clods
In dreadful darkness lend desired light ...

Here it is not only the marriage but the whole of human experience which is menaced by the night's sad dread. Thus the threat of disaster, the irrational

fear of vaguely specified suffering, hovers faintly over the poem, lending particular urgency to the concluding prayers.²³

Literary critical observations of this kind move some distance from a search for utterance or conversational meaning. The exploitation of and departure from specific poetic conventions already provides a richer context for appreciation than afforded by any effort merely to understand the poem's meaning. That the "threat of disaster ... hovers faintly over the poem" is a fact, if a fact at all, not about meaning but about tone and mood.

The appreciation of Spenser's poem arises not only from recognition of its embeddedness in a poetic tradition but also from wider expectations of literary art per se. Appreciating the poem involves locating it both in the specific context of the epithalamic tradition and in the context of poetic art more widely conceived. It is integral to the practice of reading a poem *as a poem* that interest is given to structural and thematic unity. Again the focus is not on what the poem *means*—beyond textual explication—but on how the poem *works*, how its effects are achieved. Here is a critic noticing such aspects in *Epithalamion*:

The world of the poem may be seen as a series of concentric areas. In the center is the couple, always at the dramatic focus; about them lies the town, the "social context"—the merchants' daughters, the young men who ring the bells, the boys who cry "Hymen" with "strong confused noyse"; beyond lies the natural setting, the woods that echo the jubilation with an answering joy ...; vaguely outside of this is the world of classical figures, the Muses and the

Graces, Maia and Alsmena, Hera, Cynthia, and Hymen, ...; finally above all these realms stretches the thinly disguised Christian Heaven, the “temple of the gods,” lending light to wretched earthly clods. The poem begins and ends with the widest perspective; at the center of the poem, during the ceremony, the focus has narrowed to the couple itself. Immediately before and after the ceremony the focus includes the “social context.” The opening, with its perspective into the past, is balanced by the concluding perspective into the future. Thus, structurally as well as thematically, the amplitude is complemented with an elegant symmetry and an intricate harmony.²⁴

It is not fortuitous that the critic ends this analysis by using aesthetic terms like “elegant symmetry” and “intricate harmony”. For what the analysis has identified is an aesthetic feature, not merely a textual feature, of the poem. The idea of there being concentric circles unifying the work structurally and thematically, with the couple at the centre and the Christian heaven round the perimeter, is not “given” in the text, implied by semantic content, but is an “emergent” feature imaginatively reconstructed by a reader seeking a distinctive kind of appreciation from the work. That readers of literary art should seek symmetries and unity and connectedness of this kind (both formally and through any generalised vision that a work embodies) is not just a contingent aspect of particular interests but is essential to the mode of response demanded by the very practice of literature. Literary works are defined as works that invite and reward such a response. This is at the heart of what makes literature a suitable object for aesthetic appraisal and is not reducible to facts about linguistic meaning.

V

The examples I have offered so far are from poems and it might be thought that in focusing on poetry I have made the case for an aesthetics of literature too easy. Few would disagree that poetic art exhibits aesthetic features, even if, as I have tried to show, there is not clear agreement on what such features are. But what about literary works in prose: the novel or narrative fiction?

In fact I don't believe that from an aesthetic point of view there is a difference in kind or that prose fiction is any less susceptible to aesthetic appraisal or appraisal as art. One problem is that narrative fiction, more so than poetry, encourages a bifurcation of interest that in one form or another runs through all literary criticism: interest, on the one hand, in structures, devices, narrative styles and modes, narrators and implied authors, and, on the other, interest in the human dramas depicted, the people, the conflicts, the politics, the emotions, the sociological and psychological implications. The latter interest, especially when turned into ideology, can seem remote from aesthetics, but the former can seem remote from what matters about the novel.

The aesthetic interest in the novel as an art form should not, again, be reduced to formalistic considerations. Surprisingly, though, when philosophers turn to the novel it is not that kind of reduction that tempts them but another kind that sees narrative art primarily in terms of plot and character and "world". A great deal has been written about fictional worlds, truth in fiction, and the status of fictional characters but little of that, however intrinsically interesting, has much to do with aesthetics. It is reductive to the extent that it takes fictional description to be transparent, to depict

people in fictional worlds exactly as a historian or biographer might depict real people. To read and understand a fictional narrative, on reductive views, is to grasp the “facts” about a fictional world either through “make believe” or by projecting, in some other way, worlds, in David Lewis’s terms, where the fiction is “told as known fact”. What such attention to narrative misses is precisely what makes narratives a focus for aesthetics, namely, the modes by which the “world” is presented and the lack of transparency in fictional description.

The “world”, for example, of Dickens’ *Bleak House* is not merely Victorian London or even Dickensian London drawn as a more or less realistic backdrop for the action of the novel, it is itself an elaborate imaginative construct built on a wealth of fine-grained description and infused throughout with symbolic significance. One critic characterises this world as follows:

The mud and fog of the opening paragraph of the novel ...are the symptoms of a general return to the primal slime, a return to chaos which is going on everywhere in the novel and is already nearing its final end when the novel begins.

The human condition of the characters of *Bleak House* is, then, to be thrown into a world ... which has already gone bad.²⁵

In describing the “decay and disintegration” that is a defining feature of this world, the critic notes “the great number of disorderly, dirty, broken-down interiors”:

The Jellyby household is “nothing but bills, dirt, waste, noise, tumbles down-stairs, confusion, and wretchedness”. At the time of the preparations for Caddy Jellyby’s marriage “nothing belonging to the family, which it had been possible to break, was unbroken ...; nothing which it had been possible to spoil in any way, was unspoilt ...”. ... Skimpole’s house too is “in a state of dilapidation”, Symond’s Inn, where Richard Carstone’s lawyer, Vholes, lives, has been made “of old building materials, which took kindly to the dry rot and to dirt and to all things decaying and dismal”, and Richard himself lives in a room which is full of “a great confusion of clothes, tin cases, books, boots, brushes, and portmanteaus, strewn all about the floor”. The “dusty bundles of papers” in his room seem to Esther “like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind”.²⁶

After citing evidence of this kind from across the novel the critic draws a thematic conclusion: “one of the basic symbolic equations ... is the suggested parallel between ... two forms of disintegration”, “physical or spiritual”: “either the destruction of the individual through his absorption in the impersonal institution of ‘law and equity’, or the dissolution of all solid material form in ‘that kindred mystery, the street mud ...’”.²⁷

Here we see the typical practice of the critic, making connections and finding generalised descriptions to characterise a recurrent theme. The very identity of the “world” rests on the mode of its presentation in the novel. There is no independent perspective on this world—the decay and disintegration are not contingent features but help determine what the world is—and the symbolic significance borne by its

characterisation is essential to its identity. The same is true of the modes of presentation of the fictional characters for how they are presented is likewise indivisible from what they are. Characters are perspectival entities in the sense that they have their identity “under a description”.²⁸ When the character Krook dies of spontaneous combustion his horrific demise symbolises another return to the basic elements of disintegration, the fog and the mud, manifested in the “thick yellow liquor” on the window sill. His death, “inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself”,²⁹ is not just an event in the world but an image through which to imagine that world.

These quasi-ontological points about fictional worlds and characters are crucial to aesthetics. They show that appreciation of narrative content is not (merely) a factual investigation into what is true in a possible world but an imaginative reconstruction of an artefact of language.³⁰ Grasp of the propositional content of the narrative sentences is not enough to apprehend the “world” and characters presented. Something more like a Sibleyan gestalt is needed to appreciate the significance of the descriptive content and the interconnectedness of its elements. A principle of functionality operates that is not applicable to fact-based narratives, namely that for any element of the narrative (a phrase, a sentence, a passage, as well as an incident, a character, or a description of place) it is always legitimate to ask what function that element is performing. An answer to the question—an interpretative judgment locating the element within a broader perspective—will help to indicate not the *meaning* of the work but how it *works* and where its interest lies.

The appreciation of fictive narrative in prose is not fundamentally different from that of poetry. In both a special kind of discernment is called for which goes beyond mere comprehension of the text and presupposes initiation into a distinctive practice of reading. A reader approaching a text from a *literary* point of view has expectations about what rewards will flow from giving it that kind of attention. The expectation is of a value-experience. A work that affords little by way of internal connectedness, thematic unity, complexity of structure, and a generalised vision arising out of the particularities of the subject, will not reward literary attention and will be open to at best limited aesthetic appreciation.

VI

I do not know if any of this would persuade Geoffrey Hartman or John Guillory that applying aesthetics to literature is a worthwhile activity. The aesthetic pleasure that I have called “appreciation” is very unlike the reductive sensual pleasures that Frank Kermode promoted and they rejected. In fact we seem to have come full circle for the response to literature *as literature* or *as art* that I have outlined is in essence familiar to literary critics. It has not elevated one mode of literature over another, poetry or narrative, and it has discarded formalism and the belleslettrist conception of literature. It has also repudiated a tendency among philosophers, alienating to critics, to see narrative fiction as a mere window onto alternative worlds, peopled by facsimiles of ourselves. Not only do critics reject the assumption of realism but, rightly, they are suspicious of the implied conception of realism as transparency.

My argument has been that a substantial aesthetics of literature must avoid misplaced emphasis in three areas: on intrinsic textual properties, on the priority of meaning, and on reductive views of plot and character. That need not be uncongenial to literary critics. The argument has promoted various distinctions not universally acknowledged by critics but not at odds with basic critical principles: between texts and works, specifically textual features and aesthetic ones, between appreciation and understanding, and between what something means and how something works. The aesthetic elements identified in literature are not simply well-crafted turns of phrase or expressive images—although everyone agrees such things exist—but rather emergent qualities that become salient when appropriate attention is directed to works. There is a kind of perception involved in discerning such qualities and ultimately it is a source of pleasure. In that sense there need be no watering down of aesthetics when applied to literature.

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¹ Kermode (2004).

² For further arguments in favour of “aesthetic quality” over “ideology” in canon formation, see van Peer (1996).

³ Kermode (2004, p. 66).

⁴ Bloom (1994, p. 9).

⁵ Bloom (1994, p. 22).

⁶ A view found, for example, in Bourdieu (1984) and Eagleton (1990).

⁷ For an overview of some of the issues, see Lamarque and Olsen (2003).

⁸ It should be noted that the conception of appreciation developed in this paper is distinct from an alternative conception, which I do not have space to consider but should not be left unmentioned, advanced by Feagin (1996). Feagin’s conception principally concerns affect or feeling, although it includes elements of interpretation and meta-reflection. She offers a sophisticated account of the psychology of our responses to literary fiction—notably our emotions of empathy and sympathy—and explores the multiple ways that literary works stimulate and manipulate feelings, which in turn ultimately ground value judgments. Much of this is highly illuminating but there are doubts about its centrality to *aesthetics* and indeed to *literary criticism*. One might suppose that critics like John Guillory would take affective response, like pleasure, to be “neutralized as the merely contingent effect of reception” (see above). There are worries too that emphasis on localised affects cannot account for a work’s overall aesthetic unity. For a discussion see Lamarque (2000b).

⁹ Sibley (1974).

¹⁰ It is explicitly rejected in Olsen (1987, p. 7).

¹¹ E.g. Kivy (1973).

¹² Sibley (2003, p. 133).

¹³ The singularity of the work is often remarked. Hence Malcolm Budd:

The value of poetry is singular or non-substitutable; poetry has an importance it could never lose by being replaced by something else that achieves the same end; for what we value is the experience of the poem itself, a specifically linguistic expression of a complex of thought, desire and sentiment. (Budd (1995, p.85))

It is notable that Budd makes the point by reference to the “experience” of poetry.

¹⁴ Hume (1739-40).

¹⁵ See Lamarque (2001).

¹⁶ Hume has noted the inappropriateness of powerful rhetoric on such occasions:

Who could ever think of it as a good expedient for comforting an afflicted parent, to exaggerate, with all the force of elocution, the irreparable loss, which he has met with by the death of a favourite child? The more power of imagination and expression you here employ, the more you encrease his despair and affliction.

(David Hume, “Of Tragedy”)

¹⁷ Rowe (2004, pp.174-5).

¹⁸ Barthes (1977).

¹⁹ Rorty (1992, p.97).

²⁰ See, e.g. Carroll (1991).

²¹ Stecker (2003, p.59).

²² The distinctions between text / work and understanding / appreciation are developed in more detail, for example, in Lamarque (2000a) and Lamarque (2002). I

acknowledge a considerable debt to Stein Haugom Olsen who pioneered similar ideas in Olsen (1987). They also appear in Lamarque & Olsen (1994).

²³ Greene (1968, pp.648-9).

²⁴ Greene (1968, pp. 649-50).

²⁵ Miller (1977, p.951-2).

²⁶ Miller (1977, pp. 948-9).

²⁷ Miller (1977, p. 952).

²⁸ For further discussion, see Lamarque (2003) and Lamarque & Olsen (1994, Ch.6).

²⁹ Dickens (1977, p. 403).

³⁰ For more details of this argument, see Lamarque (1996).