AESTHETICS AND LITERATURE

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PREFACE

In this book, I examine a range of philosophical questions that are posed by the literary arts. The philosopher's interest in literature is similar to her interest in other human practices like visual art, science, and law. In each case, she seeks to help us better understand the nature of those practices – their goals, the entities with which they deal, the standards that govern our participation in them, and the broadly ethical questions to which they give rise. In some cases, the puzzles and problems with which the philosopher wrestles are ones of which reflective participants in a practice are already aware. In other cases, she tries to bring out hitherto unremarked features of a practice which may help us better to understand its significance and the conditions for its flourishing.

This book examines four kinds of questions that philosophers have pursued with respect to literary art.

First there are 'ontological' or classificatory questions about the entities that enter into our literary practices. What kind of thing is a literary artwork? To what extent does the context in which the text of a literary artwork was composed enter into the very identity of the work? If, as is clearly the case, the majority of literary artworks are classified as works of fiction, in what does their fictionality consist? And is there a sense in which fictional characters must exist in order for us to be able to understand, and discuss, stories 'about' them?

Second, there are broadly epistemological questions that examine the sorts of rational grounds that can be provided for those claims to understand literary works that seem so central to our critical and interpretive practice. One such question concerns our understanding of fictional narratives – the grounds for claims about what is 'true in a story' – while another concerns the significance to be accorded to an author's intentions in the understanding and appreciation of her works. Should we assume that there is, at least in principle, a single 'right' interpretation of a given literary work – perhaps the interpretation intended by the author – or should we expect such works to admit of a plurality of equally 'right' but otherwise very different interpretations?

Third, a number of puzzling questions relate to our capacity, and desire, to be moved in certain ways by literary fictions. Can we feel genuine emotions for characters in a story, and, if so, does that mean that, in our imaginative engagement with a fiction, we believe it to be real? And why do we seek out fictions that seem to produce in us painful feelings of a kind that we seek to avoid in real life, such as pity and fear?

Finally, we can ask about the values offered to readers through their engagement with literary works, and the sorts of moral and legal constraints that should apply to the creation and distribution of such works. Can works of fiction give us knowledge that bears upon the extra-fictional world, and if so, how? Does literature have moral value, and if so, does the moral worth of a literary work make it better as literature? And are we justified in censoring literary works that may disturb or upset certain members of the public, either directly or indirectly?

In writing this book, I have drawn upon or extended ideas developed in other publications. The general framework for thinking about artworks introduced in Chapter 1 is more fully elaborated in chapter 3 of *Art as Performance*. Chapter 2 draws upon some themes in 'Works, Texts, and Contexts'. In both Chapters 3 and 4, I develop some points in 'Fictional Truth and Fictional Authors'. Chapter 5 contains arguments presented in 'Semantic Intentions, Utterance Meaning, and Work Meaning', forthcoming in David Davies and Carl Matheson (eds), *Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Literature* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview), and in 'Interpretive Pluralism and the Ontology of Art', *Revue internationale de philosophie* 198 (1996), 577–92. In Chapter 8, I draw upon my 'Learning through Fictional Narratives in Art and Science', under review.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF LITERATURE

What is literature? As with many philosophical questions, it may seem at first glance easy to provide an answer. Literature, after all, is something a lot of us claim to enjoy and to spend our time reading, and upon whose virtues we are prepared to expound at length at parties if given half the chance. Literature is the plays of Shakespeare and Molière, the novels and short stories of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Jane Austen, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Coleridge, and Rilke . . . We could go on, but someone interrupts us by adding some of their own favourite examples: '– the Bible, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, Hume's *History of England*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* –' And another voice pipes in: '– and the James Bond novels, and Harlequin Romances, and Superman comics –' And then one more voice seeking to put an end to all of this nonsense: '– and the manual for my computer, and gardening books, and the Highway Code – they're all literature!'

We want to object that these things are *not* all literature in the sense we had in mind when we introduced the topic. Our conversational partners, we protest, are wrong to classify all of the things they mention as literature. But we are soon forced to withdraw the accusation of misuse of the term 'literature', for all of the things they have cited *are* correctly described as literature in certain linguistic contexts. So now we must try to distinguish different senses in which something can rightly be said to be literature, corresponding to the different kinds of discursive contexts to which our partners have appealed. Were we able to prevail upon them to remain as Socratic interlocutors in a further examination of these issues, how should we proceed?

We should begin by granting that the term 'literature' has at least three different senses. In what we might term the *broad* sense, 'literature' refers to any body of writing that has a shared topic. It is in this sense that we talk of the literature on shampooing carpets, or indeed, of the literature on the nature of literature! Perhaps (though this is less clear) we can in this sense refer to Superman comics as

'the Superman literature', although this is more naturally read as referring to (scholarly?) books *about* the comic-book hero, rather than to the comics themselves. A related use of the term refers to any piece of writing that has a generally informative role – for example, the 'promotional literature' for a new software program, or the 'instructional literature' for installing the new program on your computer. Since, in the right context, almost any piece of writing can count as literature in the broad sense, it is unlikely that anything more illuminating than the preceding remarks will be forthcoming if we ask how literature differs from non-literature understood in this way. Nor should we expect there to be interesting philosophical questions about literature so construed.

Literature, in the sense that interests us, picks out a narrower class of writings that possess, or are presented as possessing, some qualities that we value over and above their being useful to us in a particular practical context. In this sense, writings on shampooing carpets are most unlikely to qualify as *literature*, while *Hamlet*, *War and Peace*, and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* might be offered as paradigm cases that do so qualify. But here again we need to distinguish different senses in which certain writings can count as literature in this narrower sense. Often, when questions are raised about the nature of literature, our interest is in delimiting those writings that might be studied in courses on literature taught in Arts faculties at colleges and universities, analogous to the task of delimiting those daubed canvasses that might be studied in college courses on visual art. To be literature, in this sense, is to be a literary artwork. We may term this the *artistic* sense of the term. To ask about the nature of literature in the artistic sense is to ask what makes a piece of writing a literary artwork. What we are now seeking is a principled distinction between novels, poems, and plays, for example, and scientific articles, biographies, essays, comics, and advertising material. This is indeed a distinction that has interested many writers, and it is literature in the artistic sense that we tried to define 'extensionally' by offering examples.

But the term 'literature' is also often used evaluatively in what we may term the *extended* sense, to include not only literary artworks but also writings in non-artistic genres – travel writing, essays, some works of philosophy and history – that are taken to share with literary artworks some of the qualities for which the latter are valued. It is in this sense that Terry Eagleton cites, as examples of seventeenth-century English literature, not just the works of Shake-

speare, Webster, Marvel, and Milton, but also 'the essays of Francis Bacon, the sermons of John Donne, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography', and even philosophical and historical works such as Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*.[1] Eagleton's own conclusion is that literature in the extended sense is just 'a highly valued kind of writing',[2] where this, in turn, will reflect the things that are valued in a given culture. All other proposed criteria of literariness, he maintains, fail to capture what falls in the extension of the term.

It is important, however, not to conflate the question Eagleton answers negatively – is there an objective criterion of literariness in the extended sense? – with the question, are there any distinguishing characteristics of the literary artwork? This is particularly important if, as suggested above, we see the extended sense of the term 'literature' as an extension of its artistic sense, so that certain pieces of writing that are not literary art qualify as literature in the extended sense in virtue of possessing qualities valued in literary artworks. It is also important because it is with literature in the artistic sense that this study will be principally concerned.

Some would argue that the notion of literary art is as culturally inflected as the notion of literature in the extended sense, and that the distinction between literary artworks and other works of literature in the extended sense is a matter of convenience and convention rather than principle. Consider, for example, the difficulty we experience in classifying much recent writing that employs many of the distinctive characteristics of literary art for more standardly non-artistic purposes. A couple of examples may help here. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is often heralded as initiating a new kind of writing, journalistic in purpose yet employing the distinctive linguistic figures and structures of literary art. The opening lines of *In Cold Blood* could easily be drawn from a twentieth century American novel:

> Until one morning in mid-November, few Americans – in fact few Kansans – had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there.[3]

Similarly, in his book *The New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe discusses the use of an autobiographical approach in Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, whereby Mailer turns himself into a character in the story.

The same device is found in the writings of one of the most notorious 'new journalists', Hunter S. Thompson, whose *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* begins with the sentence: 'We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.'[4]

With these examples in mind, we can consider possible answers to the question, what makes a piece of writing a literary artwork – what makes something literature in the artistic sense? As we noted earlier, this seems analogous to questions we can ask of works in the other arts – what makes some paint-daubed canvasses, photographs, and assemblages of objects works of painting, photography, and sculpture, while other superficially similar entities are not? We might think that, in each case, we can explain what makes certain things works of art by, first, identifying a particular *medium* – pigment on a surface, language, bronze, sound structures, for example – and then saying what makes a particular entity that results from the manipulation of that medium *art*. Of course, we may have to explain how certain works of contemporary visual art fail to count as literary works even though they utilize language. For example, a famous painting by Magritte depicts a pipe beneath which are inscribed the words 'Ceci n'est pas un pipe'. Is it only the sheer volume of words in a novel by Dickens, with illustrations by Boz, that makes this a work of literature rather than a work of visual art? More troubling still are some late-modern and 'conceptual' works. Fiona Banner's *Break Point*, for example, short-listed for the Turner Prize in 2002, is a large canvas, 2.7 × 4.25 metres, upon which a lengthy text, expressive of an erotic stream of consciousness, is inscribed, line by line, in red marker pen and acrylic.

We might say that language can be *used* by a visual artist in her paintings without being, in the relevant sense, the medium of her works. This, however, requires that we explain what it is for something to be the medium of an artwork. An answer might be that the medium of a work is the means whereby the salient, contentful artistic properties are realized in the work – the means whereby certain things are represented or expressed, for example. As may be clear, however, a lot more will need to be said if this kind of explanation is to be persuasive. Fortunately, we can postpone further investigation of these questions until later in this chapter. As we shall see, answers to these questions require the same sorts of resources as are needed to answer our original question: what is it that makes the product of certain kinds of manipulations of the linguistic medium a literary artwork?

One suggestion is that literary works differ in their *content*, being pieces of fictional writing. (We shall look at what makes something *fictional* in Chapter 3.) But this clearly isn't sufficient. Jokes ('A panda goes into a restaurant and orders a meal . . .'), philosophical thought experiments ('Suppose that a demented scientist removed your brain while you slept and placed it in a vat . . .'), scientific thought experiments (see Chapter 8) and comic strips are usually viewed as fictions, but not as literary artworks. Also, some literary works, such as works of lyric poetry, seem to be non-fictional in their subject-matter. So being fictional doesn't seem to be necessary either.

This suggests an alternative criterion of literary art, namely, the *style* of a piece of writing. This answer was favoured by the Russian Formalists, one of whom, Roman Jakobson, defined literature as 'organised violence committed on ordinary speech'.[5] Literary writing in the artistic sense, they claimed, deliberately departs from ordinary speech, and relies for its effects on this disruption, which forces us to read it differently and to reflect on our ordinary comprehension of language and of the world. While this seems to be an implausible characterization of most literary prose, it is not difficult to find examples of poetic art that lend themselves to such a description. The first stanza of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The Sea and the Skylark', for example, runs as follows:

> On ear and ear two noises too old to end
> Trench—right, the tide that ramps against the shore;
> With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,
> Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend.[6]

And the opening stanza of Dylan Thomas' 'Fern Hill' is similarly impenetrable to normal reading:

> Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
> About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
> The night above the dingle starry,
> Time let me hail and climb
> Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
> And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
> And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
> Trail with daisies and barley
> Down the rivers of the windfall light.[7]

A related view was defended by the American 'New Critics', who took as their focus the 'literary use' of language – the use of distinctive rhythms, syntax, sound patterns, imagery, metaphor, tropes, ambiguity, and irony. Literary artworks are to be distinguished in terms of their possession of these features, in virtue of which they lend themselves to a particular kind of close reading that focuses on relationships within the text.[8]

A first difficulty with such a view is that, even if we restrict ourselves to the field of poetry, we can find parts of poems, and even entire poems, that do not seem to commit any violence on ordinary speech, but merely to reflect it, and that are not distinctive in their use of 'literary language'. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example, contains over thirty lines of uninterrupted 'ordinary conversation' set, it seems, in a pub. The opening lines will convey the overall flavour of the passage:

> When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said –
> I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,
> HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME
> Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart,
> He'll want to know what you've done with the money he gave you
> To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.
> You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,
> He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you,
> And no more can't I, I said . . .[9]

Of course, this passage occurs in the context of a poem with many other lines that do display semantic and syntactic features we wouldn't encounter in ordinary uses of language, but this doesn't explain what the lines in question are doing in Eliot's poem. Furthermore, there are contemporary 'prose poems' that not only are composed entirely of what might pass as ordinary prose, but also eschew standard poetic conventions. Consider, for example, Michael Palmer's 'A Mistake':

> I mistakenly killed a man some years ago. I do not mean that I killed him by mistake, since I killed him intentionally. I mean that it was a mistake to kill him. I slit his throat with a serrated hunting knife I then always carried. It was in front of a Chinese laundry on Manhattan's Lower East Side. I thought he had called me 'little dago boy,' though in fact, as others later attested, he had called out,

'Hey, little day-glo boy,' in playful reference to the bright colour of my shirt.[10]

This testifies to a more fundamental problem with any attempt to characterize literary art – even for an art form like poetry – in terms of stylistic features of the writing. In literature, as in the other arts, accepted features of artistic style are always open to challenge by artists who produce artworks that deliberately depart from the received style. We see this, for example, in the intentionally flat and 'objective' writing of French 'new novelists' such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute. We also see it in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges which deliberately adopt for fictional purposes the academic style found in professional journals, complete with scholarly footnotes and erudite references. Furthermore, it seems that writers in fields that we would not naturally classify as artistic can employ stylistic devices of the sort celebrated by the formalists. This applies to 'new journalists' like Capote, Mailer, Wolfe, and Thompson, as noted above. Perhaps some works of 'new journalism' are properly viewed as works of literary art, but it is questionable whether this conclusion should be forced upon us by the kinds of linguistic resources upon which they draw. Nor would we say that I can turn this sentence into poetry by breaking it up into four separate lines placed one after another, nor indeed, that, in virtue of being presented in such a fashion, my shopping list is a poem.

Some have concluded that there is no distinctive class of 'literary artworks', but only distinctive 'literary' ways of *reading* texts – for example, attending to the very features of 'writing' to which the formalists and the New Critics drew our attention. The suggestion, then, is that a text is a literary artwork just in case we choose to read it in a certain way. For some theorists, this way of reading is institutionalized and historically contingent, a set of operations and procedures to which texts are subjected by those who belong to a particular tradition of literary criticism. Michel Foucault associates the kinds of critical practices celebrated by the New Critics with the contemporary conception of an author. Certain classes of texts, Foucault maintains, become associated with what he terms the 'author function',[11] something he feels we should overcome in order to allow greater freedom to readers and a corresponding proliferation of interpretations of works. We shall return to some of these issues in Chapter 5. But, in the present context, we may note that, if something is a literary work purely because of cultural conventions

as to how texts are to be read, this seems to elide an important distinction between something's *being* a literary artwork, and its *being treated as* a literary artwork. And, it might also be noted, the decision to adopt a particular strategy in reading a particular text seems to reflect a prior expectation that the text in question is profitably approached through such a strategy, an expectation which seems to reflect, in turn, a prior classification of certain texts as literary artworks.

This suggests that we might try to distinguish literary artworks from other texts not in terms of how they are or might be read, but in terms of how their authors *intended* them to be read. Suppose that, as was just suggested, there exist, in given cultural contexts, established ways of treating certain classes of texts, corresponding to the sorts of reading strategies described by the New Critics. We could further elaborate this story by talking about the sorts of values made possible by engaging in such readings, perhaps also explaining, in this way, why such practices have evolved. We might point, for example, to certain 'aesthetic' values whose realization is furthered by the reader's attention to formal properties of texts and the use of various figures of speech; to moral values to be pursued through a broadly 'humanistic' approach to texts; to certain kinds of pleasure that attend the sort of imaginative engagement with a text promoted by the reading strategies informally 'institutionalized' in a culture; or to certain cognitive values furthered by such strategies. It could then be argued that works of literary art are texts that are intended by their authors to furnish such values to readers who adopt the relevant kinds of reading strategies. This allows both for something's being treated as a literary artwork when it is not (because the required general intentions were not instrumental in its history of making), and also for flawed or downright bad works of literary art (where an author fails to produce something that readers find valuable in the relevant ways when they adopt the intended reading strategies).

But, even if we bring authorial intentions into the picture in this way, the challenge is to say what is distinctive about the ways in which literary artworks are intended to be read, especially given the broad disagreement in the scholarly community as to how such works *should* be read. Is there any common core to the reading strategies that have been proposed by literary theorists, and is this core sufficiently distinctive to allow us to distinguish an intention that a work be read in line with one such strategy from the intention

that a text be read as a work of literature in the extended sense – as a work of history or of philosophy, for example? What is it, if anything, about the way in which a text is intended to function that could make that text a literary artwork?

In trying to get to grips with this question, it will be helpful to begin by looking at how we might answer analogous questions which present themselves in relation to other art forms. If asked to say what makes a sequence of bodily movements a performance of a work of dance, for example, the natural response is to maintain that the sequence is composed of more specific movements or routines for which we can, if we are aficionados of the art of dance, provide labels such as – in the case of the ballet – 'plié', 'glissade', 'battement', 'pas de chat', etc. This suggests that the arthood of a dance consists in the distinctive nature of the elementary movements of which it is composed and the manner in which those elementary movements are organized. This is the analogue of the claim, criticized above, that the arthood of a piece of writing consists in its distinctive semantic and/or syntactic properties. But, analogous to our examples of literary artworks indistinguishable in such terms from non-works, we find in the modern dance repertoire works consisting of sequences of movements indistinguishable, *as such sequences*, from sequences of movements that are not enactments of a work of dance. Consider Yvonne Rainer's *Room Service*, where the dancers work in three teams performing a series of ordinary movements that involve, among other things, the moving, arranging, and rearranging of objects such as mattresses and ladders. In a paper that cites Rainer's work, Noel Carroll and Sally Banes, who attended a performance of the piece, remark that one of the central elements in the performance is 'the activity of two dancers carrying a mattress up an aisle in the theatre, out one exit, and back in through another'.[12] Crucially, the movements of the dancers were in no visible way intensified so as to differentiate them from ordinary activities such as moving a mattress around in a sequence of rooms.

What, then, makes the sequence of movements prescribed by Rainer a work of dance, such that the execution of that sequence of movements by the members of her troupe is properly viewed as a performance of the work? To say that the sequence is a dance because it is prescribed by a choreographer, or that the performance is a performance of a work of dance because of its institutional setting, is to beg all of the interesting questions. What is it, for example, to prescribe a sequence of movements as a dance, if the

movements prescribed can be the kinds of movements that we execute in our ordinary daily lives? And what is the significance, for the audience, of watching the given sequence of movements being presented in a theatre rather than in, say, a furniture showroom or a gymnasium? And if Rainer were to have given an aerobics class in which she prescribed the same sequence of movements, would this have been a work of dance just in virtue of her other work as a choreographer? Carroll and Banes comment on the piece as follows:

> The point of the dance is to make ordinary movement qua ordinary movement perceptible. The audience observes the performers navigating a cumbersome object, noting how the working bodies adjust their muscles, weights, and angles . . . The *raison d'être* of the piece is to display the practical intelligence of the body in pursuit of a mundane goal-oriented type of action – moving a mattress.[13]

They also note that one can find many other examples of dances of this sort – they term them 'task-dances' – produced by choreographers in the late 1960s and the following decades.

This suggests that, put in simple terms, the sequence of movements prescribed by Rainer is a work of dance because of how she wanted her intended audience – people familiar with the more general traditions of the dance – to respond to an execution of that sequence. She wanted the audience to attend to the movements with the same sort of care and intensity, and the same kind of 'artistic' interest in grasping the *point* of the movements, as they would do if they were watching a performance of a more traditional work of dance composed of the kinds of distinctive elements described above. Of course, for viewers familiar with other 'avant-garde' works of modern dance, there will be aspects of the movements prescribed by Rainer that will have a resonance, with reference to those works, that would not be there in a performance of a more traditional work of ballet or modern dance. But the general structure of the attention desired and anticipated by Rainer will be the same.

We can note a couple of features of this attention. First, there are many details of the movements to which we would pay no attention if observing two people moving a mattress in a furniture showroom, but which are significant if we attend to those movements as a work of dance. In fact, every visible inflection of the body through which the act of moving the mattress is executed is significant in this way.