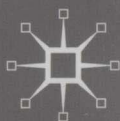


# LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

*A Guide to Contemporary Debates*



*Edited by David Rudrum*



# Literature and Philosophy

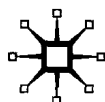
## A Guide to Contemporary Debates

Edited by

David Rudrum



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*For Tracey,  
at last*

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# Introduction – Literature and Philosophy: The Contemporary Interface

David Rudrum

'The separation of philosophy from literary studies has not worked to the benefit of either.' An uncontentious statement, surely, and perhaps even a disarming or conciliatory one. Who, after all, would think that segregating literature from philosophy could do anything but delimit and restrict both? And yet, within its original context, this statement formed part of a controversy that would rage for many years. It is taken from the introduction to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (Hartman, p. ix), a manifesto heralding the arrival and ascendancy of deconstructive thought in America, which featured contributions from all the leading 'Yale School' critics (Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom), and from Jacques Derrida himself. Its publication marked the opening salvo in some of the most notorious debates in the so-called 'theory wars' of the 1980s.

Looking back, from the distance of a quarter of a century, what is striking about Hartman's preface is the attempt he makes to tag deconstruction, and literary theory in general, onto a venerable tradition stemming from German Romanticism that thrives on the intersection between philosophy and literature.<sup>1</sup> 'Without the pressure of philosophy on literary texts, or the reciprocal pressure of literary analysis on philosophical writing, each discipline becomes impoverished. If there is the danger of a confusion of realms, it is a danger worth experiencing', he argues (Hartman, p. ix). It seems curious today that this move should have been so controversial, even allowing for the vociferous, bitter, and often eccentric climate of polemic surrounding the theory wars. Some critics feared that this harnessing of philosophy would bring a sterile abstraction and theoretism to the study of literature, destroying literature's vitality. Others felt that the kind of philosophy that underpinned deconstruction was too destabilizing: it was both anti-foundational and antihumanist. Still others objected to what amounted to interdisciplinary posturing on the part of the deconstructionists: 'Hartman

acts as if no one before him had ever connected the two disciplines', wrote one commentator (Dasenbrock, p. 4), whereas in fact, philosophy and literature have almost always been in close proximity to one another, from Plato and Aristotle through Voltaire and Rousseau to the Romantics and Existentialists.

At the time, however, Hartman's proposed deconstructive alliance between literary and philosophical studies initially failed to materialize. As literary theory emerged, evolved, and rose to dominance, many of its philosophical aspirations gave way to debating various different techniques, methods, and thematics of reading. Before long, the fascinating thought of philosophers as diverse as, say, Mikhail Bakhtin, J.L. Austin, and Jacques Derrida was being packaged as 'Bakhtinian theory', 'Speech Act theory', and 'deconstructive theory', each offering a particular angle on a particular set of literary themes, genres, or devices – interesting stuff, certainly, and richly productive in terms of literary analysis, but arguably tending to narrow down rather than draw out the philosophical significance of the ideas behind them. Further specializations, giving rise to feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and queer theory, transformed our sense of the classical canon, and politicized the nature of critical debate in many refreshing ways. Yet, with some exceptions – the importance of de Beauvoir, Cixous, Irigaray, and Butler in feminism, for instance, or the ongoing debates between African philosophy and post-colonialism – these theorists have tended to concentrate on 're-evaluating' or 'reclaiming' areas of traditional literary scholarship. They have done so with great success, yet this does not amount to the *rapprochement* between literature and philosophy that theory was supposed to inaugurate. All too often, the broader conceptual questions that literary theory had promised to tackle – philosophical issues about the nature of language, of reading, of ethics, or of the aesthetic – tended to fall through the cracks between the various competing schools of theory.

It could even be argued that at times, theory was actually something that came between literature and philosophy, rather than bringing them together. Those that claim this will typically point to the 1977 confrontation between Jacques Derrida and John Searle over the legacy of J.L. Austin.<sup>2</sup> Derrida used deconstructive theory to question some of the assumptions underpinning Austin's philosophy of communication; Searle, its leading advocate at the time, wrote a reply that dismissed many of Derrida's points out of hand; Derrida replied to Searle by playfully deconstructing Searle's every move. It seems, in retrospect, that neither Derrida nor Searle had an adequate grasp of the tradition they were attacking, and that both were basically talking at cross purposes.<sup>3</sup> But in practical terms, the damage had been done: the debate polarized many Anglo-American philosophers, with their predominantly analytic outlook, against new trends in Continental thought, on the assumption that Continental philosophy entailed an ultimately illogical, nonsensical view of language.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of this exchange,

most philosophy departments barred their doors to deconstructionists, and a symptomatic division in the Anglo-American academy became evident: (analytic) Philosophy and (empirical) Literary Criticism remained distinct, unrelated disciplines.

However, the philosophy department's loss was to be the literature department's gain. New directions in literary theory and in Continental philosophy had a great deal more in common with each other – not least their struggle to secure academic acceptance – as became evident during the advent of deconstructive literary criticism and the ensuing theory wars. In other words, the gulf that opened up between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy during the Searle/Derrida affair forced the latter into an alliance with literary theory. Only two years after the controversy of 1977, the Yale School manifesto of 1979 was proclaiming Derrida's work to be a 'new dawn' in literary criticism (Hartman, p. ix), and the theory wars were about to begin in earnest.

By the 1980s, then, the deconstructionists had largely been aligned with the project of literary theory rather than philosophy. This pattern would repeat itself throughout the reception of many more 'Continental' thinkers, including Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Levinas. That this constituted an enrichment of literary studies rather than an impoverishment (let alone a threat) is something I take here as self-evident. However, the full richness of any potential interaction between literature and philosophy was all too often compromised by the tendency to dilute challenging, radical philosophical ideas and concepts into 'theories', which could then be applied to texts to produce 'readings' of them, most of which readings illuminated the theory behind them as much as they did the text itself. In other words, the parameters of traditional literary theory might not have been the best place to develop a fully-fledged relationship between literary and philosophical studies, for these parameters can confine both disciplines by reducing them to neat theories, or to sets of theoretical terms. This is not in any way to downplay the achievements of literary theory in bringing together two highly complex bodies of scholarship, nor to disparage its impressive interdisciplinary achievements. Many literary theories have built sophisticated networks of bridges that span the divide between literature and philosophy, but the traffic that flows across these bridges tends to be regulated. To speak metaphorically, these border crossings work as patrolled checkpoints where texts and ideas can receive an entry clearance, but first they must be stamped as 'theory', and thereby subjected to certain import and export restrictions.

The project of literary theory, however, has not gone unchallenged. Throughout the 1980s, on both sides of the Atlantic, a steady stream of books and collections appeared which challenged and polemicized with the problematic status of the theoretical project. Titles like *Against Theory*, *The Resistance to Theory*, *The Limits of Theory*, and *The Failure of Theory*<sup>5</sup> paradoxically became focal points for theoretical discussion and formulation. In the

1990s, though, a rather different accentuation emerged with books entitled *After Theory* (two of these), *Reading After Theory*, *Life After Theory*, *Post Theory*, and so on<sup>6</sup> – the implication being that theory itself was no longer something problematic, controversial, or threatening, nor something that needed challenging, but something that had actually come to an end.

Of course, this much-vaunted 'end of theory' has been the source of a further torrent of theorizing about the end of theory. What might such an end of theory mean? Clearly the end of theory does not mean the end of theoretical thought – more people are writing about figures from Adorno to Žižek than ever before, and certainly more theories that theorize the end of theory are being mooted than ever before. Indeed, it has even been argued that the end of literary theory is coterminous with the triumph of literary theory, insofar as theory is no longer separable nor distinguishable from the mainstream of literary studies. Yet whatever, if anything, the end of theory means – and there is not room to explore that fully here – there are good indications that it marks the beginnings of a promising new period in the often stormy relations between literature and philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Over the past decade or so, literary theory, traditionally the ally of Continental philosophy, has come in for far more sophisticated scrutiny and scepticism than greeted its arrival during the theory wars. But the response to this has been an encouraging turn to the philosophical thought that underpinned so much of recent literary theory in the first place: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Adorno, for example, are now widely debated by literary critics. Simultaneously, many philosophers have begun to pay attention to the intricacy of philosophical discourse, and to approach philosophical texts with a sophisticated awareness of their textuality – they have, in short, recognized the importance of ideas and methods associated with literary criticism.

Much recent work has addressed itself towards the growing relationship between the areas of literature and philosophy, constituting one of the most innovative of contemporary cross-disciplinary interactions for both fields.<sup>8</sup> Interest comes from both directions, making this a well-rounded interdisciplinary encounter. There is even some evidence that this developing *rapprochement* is being reflected in the structure of the university. At the pedagogical level, the current tendency in higher education to merge academic departments now means that literature and philosophy are sometimes being taught and studied in the same department. Doubtless this owes as much to economic necessity as to the intellectual *rapprochement* between the two, but it is nevertheless instructive that within the university, philosophy is now often located alongside literature as opposed to, say, science, mathematics, theology, social science, or politics. The basis for this realignment is borne out by some of the most productive contemporary scholarship and research in both disciplines.

A growing sense has emerged within contemporary literary studies that traditional critical theories should begin to engage more fully with issues

such as ethics, identity, pragmatism, or aesthetic truth. These issues are traditionally located within the provenance of philosophy. Accordingly, a 'post-theoretical' generation of critics is turning increasingly to the philosophical and aesthetic thought that engendered literary theory in the first place. For example, it is now at least as common to find younger academics (and their students) working on Heidegger or Nietzsche than on Paul de Man, and probably more common to find them working on Adorno or Benjamin than working on Terry Eagleton. A case in point here would be the debates around the 'New Aestheticism', in which Continental thought on the nature of the aesthetic has been taken up and reused by Simon Malpas and others to re-evaluate the significance of this traditional philosophical category.<sup>9</sup>

Simultaneously, Anglo-American philosophy departments – dominated for so long by the analytic tradition – have gradually begun to open their doors to the Continental thought that informed literary theory. Thinkers such as Derrida, Adorno, and Levinas are now being read and accepted far more widely by the anglophone philosophical community. This development has compelled many philosophers to reconsider the stance that philosophy has taken towards literature, and to re-examine the ground it shares with contemporary literary theory. Some have followed the example of Stanley Cavell in using readings of literature to exemplify and refine points about language, aesthetics, and so on. Others, following Jonathan Rée's lead, have taken up the challenge of reading philosophy itself as literature.<sup>10</sup>

If literary theory once acted as a bridge to facilitate traffic between philosophical and literary studies, then its task has been successfully achieved, perhaps to the point of rendering such a bridge redundant. In the intervening period between the arrival of theory and the so-called 'end' of it, traditional boundaries have gradually been broken down, and interdisciplinary thought has grown instead. It is therefore, at last, a timely moment to stage a full-scale face-to-face encounter between literary and philosophical studies, one that is not obliged to make the traditional detour through critical theory. To literary critics who have raised questions about the end of theory and what should succeed it, the reciprocally informative relationships between literature and philosophy offer a plausible answer.

Such is the background and genesis of the lively set of debates encapsulated in this book. What follows is divided into six parts. The first half of the book explores encounters between literature and the three principal schools of Western philosophy, with each of the first three parts dedicated to the relationship between literature and, respectively, French, Anglo-American, and German philosophy. In the second half of the book, Part IV ('Literature and Philosophy: The Question of Ethics'), Part V ('Reading Philosophy as Literature'), and Part VI ('Approaching the End') explore more specific issues. Each of these parts contains essays from a variety of philosophical backgrounds, with a view to showing how different philosophies interact with literature over similar issues, thereby charting a breadth of approaches



to the subject, and encapsulating the diversity of the literature/philosophy interface. Part IV examines how the question of ethics is explored at the intersection of philosophy and literature; Part V engages in various aspects of reading philosophy as literature; and, by way of a conclusion, Part VI debates the notion of the end of art and its implications for literature.

Each of these six parts is introduced with a brief expository essay, which maps out the field under discussion, describing the major aspects of the literature/philosophy dialogue in the area in question. These introductory essays chart the origins and consequences of this dialogue, as well as pointing towards important new developments in both literary and philosophical scholarship. They are intended not only to introduce the key philosophical movements and thinkers to literature students, but also to provide something of a bibliographical essay for those who wish to read further in any of these areas. It should be emphasized that this aspect of the introductory essays is just that – introductory. They are aimed at undergraduate students rather than advanced students or researchers, and are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive.

Finally, the book as a whole is an attempt to represent the burgeoning field of ‘literature and philosophy’ at its most diverse. It does not attempt to offer nor to advance any particular philosophy of literature, nor to philosophize any particular aspect or body of literature, nor to drag philosophy into the service of literary criticism or *vice versa*. Its aim is to appeal to philosophers and literary critics or theorists of every stamp and shade of opinion, without privileging either discipline (or any of their countless sub-disciplines) over the other, and to provide a guide to the vast spectrum of thought involved in the contemporary debates between literature and philosophy.

## Notes

1. The best recent discussion of this tradition is Bowie (1997).
2. For the essence of this debate, see Derrida (1988). The consequences of what eventually became a heated controversy are explored by Dasenbrock (1989).
3. See Dasenbrock, and also Stanley Cavell’s ‘What Did Derrida Want of Austin?’ and ‘Seminar on “What Did Derrida Want of Austin?”’, in his *Philosophical Passages*.
4. For an interesting re-evaluation of this position, see Wheeler.
5. As can be seen from these titles, challenges to theory came from a variety of different perspectives. Respectively, W.J.T. Mitchell (1985) debates a pragmatist approach; Paul de Man (1986) is the classic deconstructive engagement with it; Thomas M. Kavanagh’s collection (1989) contains a broad spectrum of opinion on the subject, while Patrick Parrinder’s position (1987) is basically a Marxist polemic. For an interesting discussion of the various rejections of theory, see Robert Eaglestone’s engagement with the issue (1997).
6. Once again, the sheer breadth of opinion on this subject can be gauged from the distance between the authors of the two books entitled *After Theory* – Thomas Docherty (1996), an avowed post-Marxist, and Terry Eagleton (2003), the Marxist