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EILEEN JOHN AND DOMINIC McIVER LOPES

Philosophy of Literature

Contemporary and Classic Readings

An Anthology

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Edited by

Eileen John

and

Dominic McIver Lopes

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Philosophy of Literature

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Preface

If you are a student of the philosophy of literature then you are likely to care about philosophy or about literature or, ideally, about both. In any case, this anthology has something to offer you.

Literary historians and critics study works of literature as cultural artifacts, investigating the conditions in which particular works are written and received, and formulating generalizations about the corpus of literary works. This investigation can take place at several scales. One might explain the small-scale features of a particular work as symptoms of its author's life, or attribute changing features of a genre to the evolution of a tradition of writing, or link the development of a medium (e.g. the novel) to large-scale formations (e.g. the rise of the middle class). This cluster of enterprises relies on conceptual tools that it is the business of philosophy to analyze: an implicit definition of literature, a sense of the boundaries of individual works, conceptions of fiction and metaphor, and standards of interpretation and evaluation. To be sure, literary scholars do not employ these tools uncritically; contemporary literary scholarship is attentive to theory. But philosophy of literature, in so far as it stresses rigorous and methodical theory-building, has something to offer students of literature who wish to think about their subject from a strictly theoretical perspective.

Students of philosophy need not care deeply about literature in order to find something of interest in the philosophy of literature, for doing

philosophy of literature is one way of doing philosophy. This book collects topics in value theory, metaphysics (the definition of literature, theories of fiction, the ontology of literature), and the philosophies of language and mind (theories of fiction, emotional engagement, interpretation, and metaphor). Some of these topics generate problems ranking among the hardest in philosophy, and their solution advances our understanding of many areas of the discipline.

Any selection is also an exclusion. This volume features the best recent efforts of the most influential so-called analytic or Anglo-American philosophers. Largely excluded are examples of the growing body of work by philosophers locating philosophical themes in narrative artworks, though some of the authors included here write insightfully about specific literary works. Also excluded, with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, are works in the Franco-Germanic philosophical tradition. These are readily available elsewhere, as are works of literary criticism that advance and defend philosophical claims – a good collection is *Literary Aesthetics*, edited for Blackwell by Alan Singer and Allen Dunn.

While this volume focuses on recent work, it begins with some of the most influential texts on literature from historical sources. This section is followed by seven thematically organized sections. Each of these opens with a short work of literature or literary criticism that serves to introduce, illustrate, and indeed to test the theoretical discussions that follow it. In some cases, the theoretical selec-

tions directly refer to the literary or critical selection. In all cases, the testing function of the opening selection is particularly important: an

effective heuristic in aesthetics is to seek a reflective equilibrium between theoretical considerations and our experience of literature.

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PART I

Classic Sources

Introduction

This volume reflects the fairly recent development of a sustained, focused philosophical conversation about literature in the analytic tradition. But this conversation did not come out of nowhere. The historical sources collected in this section give a sample of influential works, but it is a rich sample and can be read in a number of ways. The readings are interesting in relation to each other: consider how Plato, Aristotle, and Sigmund Freud conceive of the social and psychological dimensions of popular fiction, or how David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche account for the pleasures of tragedy. And how does each of them engage with questions of reality and illusion, knowledge and deception? Some of these texts are candidates for literary status themselves, and some of them comment explicitly on the relations between philosophy and literature, so they can also be read with those concerns in mind: how can literature be philosophical or philosophy literary?

Collectively these readings display qualities that distinguish them in temperament, as it were, from much recent work: the historical sources are ex-

pansive, ambitious, speculative, and evaluatively confident in ways that do not really seem available to us now. Even Hume, writing a nicely focused essay on tragedy, moves freely from the logical consequences of a view to psychological speculation to aesthetic evaluation. These qualities are also part of what makes these sources very interesting in relation to the thematic sections that follow, as the older works tend to address clumps of thematic issues at once. The connections are too numerous to document here. For instance, along with making the explicit link between Hume's essay and the essays on tragedy in the emotion section, one could read Aristotle at least in relation to the sections on definition, emotion, fiction, and values, and Freud in relation to emotion, fiction, interpretation, and values, and so on and on. Since the historical thinkers are uniformly concerned with the pleasures and values found in experience with literature, these readings make especially deep contributions on the concluding theme of literary values.