

REVIEW

Re-establishing Literary Studies

Why Literary Studies? Raisons D'être of a Discipline, edited by Stein Haugom Olsen and Anders Pettersson. Oslo: Novus Press, 2011. 219 pp.

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Of late, there has been dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in literary studies both within the discipline and outside of it. The state of criticism worries especially those philosophers and literary scholars who are associated with Anglophone philosophy. This is easy to understand, as contemporary literary theory, or Theory, draws from the Continental tradition. For Anglophone philosophers, it often seems strange that literary critics apply the methods of other humanistic disciplines – in which the critics have not been educated – and, further, write of “extra-literary” phenomena, such as political and social issues, instead of the works *per se*.

Dissatisfaction in the field has produced a great number of publications. As an example, one can mention *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (2005), edited by literary critics Daphne Patai and Wilfrido Corral, which already contains 47 essays from scholars of different fields who all share the idea that literary theory is in some sort of a crisis. The aim of *Why Literary Studies? Raisons D'être of a Discipline*, edited by Stein Haugom Olsen and Anders Pettersson, is however different from that of *Theory's Empire* and publications alike. The six contributors of *Why Literary Studies?*, who all have worked or work as literary scholars, represent “varieties of the same general paradigm” (11) and have similar interests in literary aesthetics and philosophy. Most importantly, they aim for sketching a ground and future for literary studies.

In the introduction, the editors maintain that they are unsatisfied with the methodological diversity in literary studies and even more with Theory which embodies scepticism in defining literature and literary value and which, in focusing on broad cultural phenomena, dismisses theoretical problems – such as the concept of literature and the nature of literary experience, appreciation and literary values – which the editors take to be the core issues of literary studies. The six articles in the collection examine literary studies as an academic discipline: the inner logic

of the discipline, its purpose and “present possibilities or impasses” (11). The first three articles study the human significance of literary studies, whereas the rest probe ways forward.

In the first article, Anders Pettersson maintains that in addition to deepening our understanding of literature, literary studies also “contributes to a deeper understanding of reality” and hence indirectly “enhances our ability to lead a good life” (29). As Pettersson sees it, literary interpretation is not about discursive understanding but experience, and experiences “cannot be translated into words”. Rather, he claims, “[o]nly certain elements or aspects, among others the perception of the literal meaning, can be successfully abstracted from the experiential whole and formulated in words” (35). Although I am sympathetic to Pettersson’s claim that literary experience cannot be *reduced* into words or propositions, I think that his claim of *untranslatability* is problematic. After all, literary works themselves are full of lifelike or intense descriptions of (fictional) experiences that are produced by words and sentences.

In describing the cognitive value of literature and literary studies, Pettersson compares literary representations to maps. He says that although no representation of reality is “*the* true description” of reality, there are correct and incorrect representations. Pettersson does not argue for a representationalist view of literature but suggests that literary works may affect a reader’s way of relating to reality; a work may have consequences for the reader’s attitudes and strategies in life. For Pettersson, Tomas Tranströmer’s “Summer Plain” (“Sommarslätt”, 1966) offers “a transient glimpse of earth in the guise of a paradise”, “a perception of life and reality that [he] may not have been able to shape unaided and which [...] enriches [his] way of understanding the world to some extent” (35). The poem may “affect [his] way of relating to reality to some extent – particularly [his] ability to view and feel the world around [him] as being supportive – and so have consequences for [his] attitudes and strategies in real life” (38).

According to Pettersson, literary studies may also further readers’ wider comprehension of reality. As his example, Pettersson uses Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), whose authors explored “how women in the past had negotiated the subjection of women, and [...] found inspiration in this for their own lives, a kind of glimpse of the possibilities of liberation” (56). Pettersson says that the representations of reality which literary studies provide may “stimulate us to thinking and feeling about other aspects of the world than those represented, much as literary representations may do” (56). I am happy to

accept Pettersson's view of the cognitive benefits of literary studies. But I also hear the sceptic saying that, first, Pettersson's careful proposals do not account a constitutive function of criticism but rather point to subjective use or application of critical studies and, further, that perhaps there are similar eye-openers nearly everywhere.

In his article, Stein Haugom Olsen explores the birth and development of literary studies as an academic discipline of knowledge in Anglophone universities and discusses epistemological and methodological questions related to the discipline. According to Olsen, there are roughly two ways to approach literature. First, literature can be studied from the outside: one may "adopt specific methodologies and epistemologies from already established disciplines and apply them to such works as are or have been deemed to be literary works" (68). Nevertheless, Olsen thinks that the problem of these "external approaches" is that "they have no intrinsic connection with the concept of literature as *belles-lettres*" (71). In Olsen's view, the most problematic form of the external approach is critical theory which "developed into a general theory of 'texts' or study of social practices that could be 'read' as 'texts'" (71–72) and in which the notion of taste is considered a product of bourgeois ideology with no theoretical substance. As an alternative to external approaches, Olsen presents the "focus on the problem of methodizing taste and the aesthetic judgements" (72). Olsen thinks that if the epistemological credentials of literary studies are questioned, then it is also questionable whether the discipline can be placed among other academic disciplines. As he sees it, literary studies is concerned with the advancement of knowledge of literature and may be understood in terms of "disciplined intellectual work" (93).

In turn, Paisley Livingston develops a value-oriented argument for the function of literary studies as an academic discipline. Livingston thinks that "occasioning of positive, intrinsically valenced experiences under the right conditions is one of the central functions of great works of literature" (101). Drawing upon C. I. Lewis's work *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946), Livingston proposes a definition of aesthetic, intrinsically valued experience. Livingston thinks that to appreciate a literary work as an artwork "must derive at least in part from a contemplation of the work's artistically relevant features, including the contextually situated accomplishment or achievement of the writer" (102). He supports the Wollheimian idea of criticism as "retrieval" and maintains that "one of the tasks of literary studies [...] is the documentation of the activities and results of many of the world's greatest literary creators" (107). Although

there surely is need for the kind of criticism Livingston describes, it is hardly sufficient to form the core of literary studies. I also find it problematic that Livingston dismisses another highly relevant context in literary interpretation, namely, that of the interpreter.

Eric Bjerck Hagen begins his article by claiming that the “main point of literary studies is the enhancement of literary experience in the culture” (110), which is a welcome opening in this anthology in which many of the contributors are hesitant to show their cards. As Hagen sees it, good literary criticism makes the reading experience more precise and intense and enriches it by providing knowledge about the literary tradition, the author’s life and features that make the text a literary work. Hagen emphasizes a mimetic conception of literature; for him, literary value is constituted of originality, reality (lifelikeness) and sincerity, factors which he derives from the critical pieces of Harold Bloom, James Wood, F. R. Leavis and the like.

In his article, Bo Pettersson discusses the role of imagination in literature and literary studies. According to Pettersson, there is a need for studying “popular” or “cultural imagination” associated with literary works. Pettersson introduces different conceptions of imagination used in describing literary experience, but he does not pursue the issue in detail. Instead, he proposes that two dominant approaches to imagination in cognitive literary studies, the study of figures and the study of narrative, should be fused in order to account the functional and aesthetic properties of literary works.

Unlike other contributors, Torsten Pettersson’s aims are not modest. Pettersson argues for “synergetic criticism” which maintains that “we could and should attempt to emulate the ability of the literary work to embody seemingly distinct, yet interpenetrating patterns of meaning” (163). Pettersson suggests that synergetic critics should deliberately attempt to combine disparate and even logically contradictory interpretations (for instance, apply contradictory perspectives simultaneously); they should revise their criterion of relevance and welcome alien approaches as potentially valuable elements; finally, they should pay attention to the (indisputable) specifics of the work, such as situations and their consequences, characters’ actions, and the like. Pettersson admits that synergetic interpretation is difficult to imagine, but he simulates it by reflecting *Othello* from a variety of angles. Although his readings give a glimpse of his critical ideal, it remains unclear who could produce “linguistic-[l]iterary-psychosocial-philosophical etc. studies of literature” and conjunct “all different perspectives in a structure in which

they are coordinated but not watered down" (167). Despite that synergetic criticism easily sounds like a Borgesian fantasy, Pettersson's suggestions about going beyond critical positions surely are endorsable in a field that lives of fresh approaches.

In Anglophone philosophy, critique of contemporary literary theory is prone to attack caricatures and does not thereby much help it advance or promote dialogue between different philosophical traditions. The articles in this collection are, in turn, open-minded, although many of them put forward or imply a narrow view of literature itself. On the whole, *Why Literary Studies?* is a very welcome apology for criticism in these times when humanistic departments around the world are being run down.

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