

REVIEWS

Rafe McGregor. *The Value of Literature*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 161 + xi pp. ISBN 978-1-7834-8923-7

McGregor's book has a number of virtues: it is short, well informed, stylishly written, vigorously argued, and helpfully laid out (important theses are highlighted, for example, and previous positions carefully summarized). It also makes good use of many felicitously chosen literary examples, and is commendably thorough and fair-minded: the views of philosophers who oppose McGregor's position – such as Noël Carroll and Martha Nussbaum – are expounded at length and subjected to careful and detailed examination. Occasionally, there are judgements which suggest a certain literary naivety (p. 138: 'Dickens is a paradigmatic realist novelist [...]'), and not much effort has been expended turning a PhD thesis into a book – 'I began my thesis [...]' (p. 129), 'I have been explicit throughout my thesis [...]' (p. 140) – but these blemishes do nothing to reduce the work's overall quality.

McGregor defends an autonomist conception of literary value, and I criticize this view in the four sections which follow. I should make clear at the outset, however, that he defends his position very ably, and anyone writing about literary value will have to engage with his arguments.

I

What is the value of literature? 'I shall maintain,' writes McGregor, 'that the pleasure which characterizes the literary experience is the source of literature's *sui generis* value and that literature therefore does not serve much of a purpose at all' (p. viii). Literary pleasure, we are told, 'arises from the simultaneity and interplay of the sensory, imaginative, affective, and intellectual aspects of [a] work' (p. 111), and is 'a peculiarly and particularly intellectual type of delight' (p. viii). '[This] is indeed all,' McGregor concludes, 'that I shall have to offer for literary value' (p. viii).

It may be true, McGregor acknowledges, that some literature also informs you about historical periods, shows you various kinds of moral or immoral behaviour, and clarifies a number of different concepts, but to read or value a work because of the knowledge or insight it conveys is to not to read it *as literature* (that is, as an end in itself), but as history, moral philosophy, or psychology (that is, as an instrumental means to acquiring knowledge of some kind).

There are three basic difficulties with this position. First, it trivializes literature's value. The value of literature may be different from the value of teaching literature, but when the dean, or some other powerful person in an educational institution,

wants to know why so much time and money should be spent on teaching literature when the same resources could be diverted into teaching obviously useful subjects like medicine and engineering, then it would be nice to be able to offer a more cogent response than merely saying that literature gives its readers a certain kind of pleasure.

If offered this answer, the dean is likely to reply that if pleasure is the ultimate reason for reading and teaching literature, then educational resources could equally well be devoted to teaching board games, tea ceremonies, wine tasting, and other activities which give rise to their own distinctive, complex, culturally resonant, and intellectual pleasures. But, the dean will probably continue, as nobody thinks these should be major components of the school and university curriculum, why not simply drop literature?

Of course, McGregor could respond that some literature improves the vocabulary, conveys interesting facts about history and geography, and so forth, but if the dean has read McGregor's book, she will quickly point out that to value works of literature because of the knowledge they convey is not to value them *as works of literature*, and follow up by asking whether students' vocabularies and knowledge of history and geography would not be more effectively improved by teaching those topics directly. I'm afraid that if the dean is keen on closing down the literature department, and diverting the money into medicine and engineering, then nothing in McGregor's book is likely to dissuade her; indeed, I think the dean will take considerable succour from this book's arguments, and find her worst prejudices confirmed.

Second, on McGregor's conception of literature, it's very hard to motivate and legitimize negative criticism – a kind of criticism which plays a central role in literary practice. Suppose I am enjoying a poem by Robert Southey which I take to be a parody of a Romantic sonnet, but a friend shows me – using the poet's letters, reports of his conversations, and so forth – that Southey intended the work in all seriousness, and that the sonnet is just a truly terrible, attitudinizing, and clichéd piece of work. My pleasure in reading the poem at this point might be completely destroyed.

On a more cognitive understanding of literary value, my friend's intervention can be justified on the grounds that I took the poem to be conveying a view of the world which it does not in fact convey, and imbibing false beliefs is *prima facie* harmful. But how, on McGregor's understanding of literary value, can such negative criticism be justified? It has prevented me from taking pleasure in something which once gave me pleasure, reduced the overall pleasure available in the world, and can thus only seem motivated by insensitivity or malice. Of course, McGregor could reply that one should only take pleasure in *well-grounded*

interpretations of works of art, based on a correct understanding of the artist's intentions and so forth, but how, on his conception of literary value, can this position be upheld? If pleasure is the ultimate end of art, why not simply adopt interpretations of literature that maximize pleasure and ignore any comments that might risk diminishing it?

Third, even if we accept that the pleasure literature gives is an end in itself, and that this is the only kind of value literature can have, then this does not close down the debate about whether literature has an instrumental value – it simply moves the question to a deeper level.

We take immediate pleasure in some areas of human activity because these areas are too important to be left to mere instrumental reasoning. Consider sex and eating. Perhaps there were once people who took no immediate interest in these activities, and would only consider having sex or eating if they began to worry about the continuation of their family line or noticed that they were becoming unusually weak or thin. If so, they died out long ago and have been replaced by people who feel the most urgent desires for sex and food, experience considerable misery when deprived of them, and great elation when they achieve their goals. It is thus characteristic of our most fundamental drives that we are motivated by a desire for immediate pleasure, but this indicates that, from the evolutionary point of view, the goals of our drives are of absolutely fundamental instrumental importance.

The evolutionary advantages of sex and eating are completely obvious, but there are some activities in which we take immediate pleasure whose evolutionary rationales are much less clear. Play is a good example. Clearly, children like playing simply because it gives them pleasure, but this has not prevented psychologists and anthropologists wondering why children in all cultures have, over the course of many hundreds of thousands of years, come to take immediate pleasure in the activity. Perhaps those who did not enjoy play, or only engaged in it reluctantly, suffered some kind of evolutionary disadvantage. At least a dozen reasons have been suggested that might be evolutionary advantages of play – it helps coordinate the limbs, it helps develop the imagination, it allows children to practice social roles, it allows them to develop more advanced language skills and so forth – some of which will apply to some kinds of play but not others, some of which will apply simultaneously, and so on. Now none of these reasons could be described as the 'child's reason for playing' – he simply does it for the sake of immediate pleasure – but they do help explain why the child has developed in such a way as to take immediate pleasure in play. The phenomenon of humour can be analysed in a similar manner.

Of course, the fact that most humans take immediate pleasure in some activity does not mean that it *must* have some evolutionary advantage: it may once have had a function but has it no longer; it may simply be a natural upshot of something which is useful but has no evolutionary advantage in itself. But, nonetheless, the fact that nearly all humans across most times and most cultures take immediate pleasure in some activity gives at least a *prima facie* reason for supposing it is importantly advantageous in some way.

It seems to me that one can do a good deal to explain the value of the arts (and hence literature) by showing their connections with the role imagination plays in our normal thought processes. But some twentieth-century aestheticians think our normal theory of mind is too jejune to explain the value we place on the arts, and that a more powerful theory will need to be developed to account for it adequately. This is why I. A. Richards spends so much time in *Principles of Literary Criticism* developing a theory of impulses and their proper functioning, and R. G. Collingwood spends the long central section of the *Principles of Art* developing a complex theory of the imagination. Both aestheticians consider literature an end in itself, but this does not prevent either developing a theory of mind designed to show its long term, instrumental advantages.

So, even if we agree with McGregor that immediate pleasure is the only end of literature, this does not end the discussion of literature's instrumental value; indeed, it is the point where the discussion should start.

II

For McGregor, content is *what* the poet says and form is *how* he says it, and one of the themes of his book is that, when a work of literature is assessed as literature, form and content are inseparable (p. 47). Understood in one way, I don't think many people would wish to dispute this view. When we respond to a poem aesthetically, for example, we respond to and assess both what it says and how it says it, and any interference with either (replacing a number of words by different-sounding synonyms, for instance, or substituting similar-sounding words with different meanings) could, in a good poem, severely reduce its quality. Form plus content, we might say, equals aesthetic effectiveness.

It is important to emphasize, however, that nothing on this conception prevents one writing an accurate paraphrase of an excellent and wholly comprehensible poem, and then evaluating the intellectual coherence and ethical maturity of the views the paraphrase expresses. Similar considerations apply to form. The view only requires one to say that neither an accurate prose paraphrase of the original nor a poem (possibly a nonsense poem) whose sound

is as close to the original as possible will – probably – have the aesthetic quality of the original poem.

McGregor insists many times (for example, pp. 47, 75, 78, 95) that form-content inseparability is something we demand of a literary text, not something we discover in it. This characterization is less than happy. Any piece of writing or speech will have both a form and a content, and it may also be strikingly evocative, witty, culturally resonant, full of allusions, connotations, and so forth. For normal instrumental purposes, however, we usually ignore or overlook all these qualities, and simply fillet chunks of language for their paraphrasable propositional content. But when we respond to a segment of language aesthetically, we not only allow ourselves to respond to its propositional content, we also allow ourselves to respond to all the other elements which are always present but which we usually edit out – the diction, rhythm, imagery, allusions, connotations, humour, resonance, and so forth. In such circumstances, propositional content does not become irrelevant, but becomes one element amongst a number of others, and therefore slightly less important than in normal non-aesthetic contexts. Reading a text aesthetically is not imposing a demand on it; it is allowing ourselves to respond more openly and completely to what is always there but usually overlooked.

But McGregor's notion of form-content inseparability, which he calls 'literary thickness', is much stronger than the one outlined in the first paragraph of this section. He thinks that if you discuss a poem's content in isolation from its form, or its form in isolation from its content, then you automatically change the form and change the content, because 'formed content' (p. 107) in works of literature is an indissoluble amalgam. Furthermore, full-blown literary thickness is not found when correctly appreciating ordinary works of literature (either fictional or non-fictional), but only when correctly appreciating *excellent* works of literature: 'Form-content inseparability is actually a benchmark or criterion for great poetry as opposed to the merely good, mediocre, or bad[,] because form and content can be separated in even "good poetry" and Shakespeare's work shows evidence of this flaw. If *P* is a poem, and form-content inseparability holds for *P*, then *P* is a great poem' (pp. 56–57).

This understanding of the form-content relation is claimed to have a number of dramatic consequences for our understanding of how to interpret references to people, places, and events in works of excellent literature (p. 78). Here is one alleged consequence for our understanding of real places in literature:

Numerous parts of London are described in great detail in *Oliver Twist*, but because *the form in which the story is told matters in the appraisal of the narrative* the geographical content is not presented transparently. The lack of transparency means one cannot

invoke just any information about London in one's imaginative engagement with the novel if the identity of the work is to be preserved. Like [T. S. Eliot's] 'Gerontion', *Oliver Twist* does not authorize one to imagine 'the city that hosted the 2012 Summer Olympics' when one reads 'London'. [...] 'London' in *Oliver Twist* is not therefore London *per se* (i.e., 'London' in its fully extensional use), but *London-in-Oliver-Twist* (i.e., London under the aspect *Oliver Twist* licenses one to imagine). (p. 77)

Following Peter Lamarque, McGregor refers to this alleged phenomenon as 'narrative opacity' (p. 75).

It would certainly be odd to have images of the 2012 Olympics floating through one's head while reading 'Gerontion' or *Oliver Twist*, but does this oddness have anything to do with literary thickness, literary excellence, semantics, form-content inseparability, narrative opacity, or the identity of the work being read?

I think the answer must be 'No'. The inappropriateness of such thoughts has to do with the fact that our interpretation and response to any kind of text must be governed by the knowledge that it is the product of human intention, and that our interpretation and response to a particular text must be constrained by what the author *could have intended*. If the author could not possibly have meant the interpretation we offer, or could not possibly have recognized the thoughts we entertain when prompted by his work, then our response cannot be justifiable, even though we may choose to retain our interpretation and accompanying thoughts for purely private amusement.

Thus, imagine a modern economic historian reading a mid-Victorian document from a London warehouse, because he wants to write an article on international trade. And imagine, furthermore, that there is a list in the document which contains the words 'virgin', 'mouse', and 'window'. I think it's fairly clear that the historian would be in error if he took 'virgin' to be referring to Richard Branson and his businesses, and interpreted 'mouse' and 'window' in their modern computer senses. Similarly, he might correctly interpret the semantics and syntax of what he reads, but say that, while reading the list, he cannot help his head filling with images of Branson, desktop computers, and the 2012 Olympics. As empathy and feeling-for-period are qualities we expect in a historian (because they are likely to make him a better historian), we will probably not feel reassured by this confession. We may, however, acknowledge that it may just be possible to be a decent historian while being distracted by such inappropriate thoughts.

But the way our imagination fills-out, realizes, concretizes a literary text is part of our aesthetic response to that text. If, therefore, a literary critic tells us that every time he encounters the words 'virgin' and 'London' in Dickens he is possessed by images of Branson and Usain Bolt, and has similarly wild reactions to every other section of the text, then I think we could only regard his response

as irrelevant and idiotic, and take no further notice of his interpretations, assessments, and comments on Dickens.

What this discussion makes clear is that the problem of inappropriate thoughts is not just a problem for literature, great or minor (since it can arise for an ordinary document); it is not just a problem in narrative (since it can arise for a list); and it is not a result of form-content unity (since it can arise in non-aesthetic contexts). Furthermore, it is not a problem in semantics (because the images in one's head are not part of word meaning, even if they accompany or are prompted by word meaning); it is not just a problem with the semantics of proper names (because inappropriate thoughts can arise from whole passages which may contain no proper names at all); and, finally, it has nothing to do with work identity (because work identity has to do with the way authorial intention – transmitted by appropriate causal chains – is realized in a public medium).

I conclude that McGregor is correct to say that inappropriate thoughts can be a problem when reading literature, but his characterization of the problem is faulty, and does nothing to support his views concerning the irrelevance of truth to literary merit, the autonomy of literary value, the opacity of literary narrative, or the inseparability of form and content.

III

As we have seen, McGregor thinks that assessing a novel for its accuracy or truth is not part of assessing it as a work of literature. But consider the following dialogue:

A: What did you think of my novel?

B: To be frank, I found it artificial and implausible: the characters are pasteboard, the conversations stilted, the plot contrived, and the rows and reconcilings not indebted to reality. The emphasis on kinky sex and extreme emotions is adolescent and sentimental, and you've not even bothered to do a modicum of research – you have a character drive from Stomness to Lerwick, you have a cat which is pregnant for seven months, you seem to think the Dieppe Raid took place after D-Day. As for the novel's morality, it can only be described as simple-minded and offensive (the black characters are dim and loyal, the women cheerfully subservient, and the Orientals fiendish, venal, and cruel), while the book's overall theme – children flourish best when abused and neglected – is idiotic. In sum, an embarrassing failure.

A: Okay, but what did you think of it *as a novel*?

If you think A's second question is entirely reasonable, then you hold McGregor's position; if you think that A's second question is entirely unreasonable, and that B's reasons are obviously relevant to assessing the novel *as a novel*, then you hold mine.

What reasons (apart from those already discussed in my two previous sections) does McGregor have for holding a position so wildly at variance with literary-critical practice, experience, and common sense? Why does he think that words in literature refer in their (largely) normal way, and that literature deals with perennial and important themes, but that readers should be indifferent as to whether the literature they read is plausible, wise, insightful, accurate, or truthful?

McGregor's most powerful argument is found in his fifth chapter. Here, he asks us to imagine a novel called *The True Knights*, which has the same plot as D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, and seeks to show that 'the Ku Klux Klan were heroic defenders of liberty' (p. 103). He then argues that the novel could be serious, mature, and well written, and thus an excellent work of literature, even though its theme is vicious and silly. The conclusion he draws is that the accuracy or wisdom of a novel's theme is not, and cannot be, part of its literary quality.

McGregor acknowledges that there are no canonical works of literature with idiotic themes – which is why he has to invent a case – and this is clearly a striking admission from someone who claims that quality of theme has no bearing on literary value (p. 103). After all, if a really foolish theme automatically debars a work from the canon of literature, then a foolish theme would appear to be a considerable literary failing.

But the real difficulty with his argument is that it can have no force against his opponents' position. Sensible cognitivists think that truth is one of a plurality of virtues which a novel might have, and that imagining a case where a novel is admitted to be excellent but lacking in truth does not show that truth is not a literary virtue. You could try to show that wit is not a literary virtue by citing an excellent novel that is lacking in wit, or that ingenuity is not a literary virtue by adducing an excellent novel that is not ingenious, and so forth. The point the cognitivist wants to make is that there are *many* literary virtues, including truth, and if an excellent novel lacks one or two of them, that does not show that truth, wit, ingenuity, and so on are not literary virtues, because the novel can still achieve excellence by virtue of *its other qualities*. Indeed, the appropriate way to describe *The True Knights* is that it is a fine novel *in spite of* its silly and vicious theme.

Critics are often quick to disapprove of factual errors in novels, and this practice too represents a problem for McGregor's position. His response is to argue that mistakes are regrettable because they can be distracting, but that only *some*

errors will be distracting to *some* people; the problem is therefore minor (p. 101). But even if errors are only minor demerits in a work of literature, they are still demerits, and it is odd to take comfort in the thought that, all things being equal, the more ignorant you are, the more literature there is for you to enjoy.

McGregor's response, however, does not get to the heart of the problem, because (as in physics textbooks) it is precisely the errors that you do *not* spot – and that do not therefore distract you – which are most harmful. Let's consider some cases of prejudice and bias. The first time I read Camus's *The Outsider* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, I concentrated on the existential fates and plights of their heroes (Meursault and Kurtz) and paid little attention to the societies in which the works are set (Algeria and the Congo River and the Congo Free State). It was only on later readings that I noticed just how racist both works are, although it's hard to say whether this racism is the authors' or the narrators'. In *The Outsider*, the protagonist and his friends are named, and their lives are described in great and sympathetic detail; whereas the Arab shot by Meursault remains nameless, and virtually no description is devoted to the victim's family and friends or their reactions to his death. *Heart of Darkness* shows a similar bias. A great deal of attention is paid to Kurtz's psychology, and very little to the fact that King Leopold II of the Belgians had turned the entire Congo into a concentration camp, and instigated a genocide that caused the death of millions of people. Focusing on the corrupt psychology of one white European, while largely ignoring the genocide being simultaneously perpetrated on millions of black Africans, suggests that his fate is an important aspect of the whole Congo affair, while theirs is comparatively minor.

If you read both works without noticing or being distracted by their extraordinarily skewed focus – caused by some fundamental and implicit value-judgements – then you can become inured to their outlook, begin to find it comfortable and natural, and eventually become complicit in it. The effect might be temporary – perhaps it exists just while you read the books – or it might become more permanent and ramify into other areas of life.

McGregor's final argument for non-cognitivism is that reading a novel for literary pleasure requires one kind of reading, whereas investigating the truth of what it says requires another: '[One] cannot perform a formal analysis of *Oliver Twist* and engage with the novel *qua* guide to Victorian London in a single reading. The two types of interest one brings to the work – an interest in plot structure and an interest in historical geography – are entirely different' (p. 106). Some judgements about whether what a novel says is true and plausible may be made instantaneously during the reading process ('That character would never do that!') although they may later be revised. Other judgements – such as whether

Dickens's portrayal of Victorian London is accurate – may take more time, and involve different kinds of reading and different kinds of investigation altogether. But why should our overall artistic assessment of a work *have* to result from only one kind of reading? Why shouldn't other kinds of reading, and experience gained in many different spheres, be allowed to deepen our evaluations? I first read *The Outsider* and *Heart of Darkness* forty years ago, and my feelings about them have changed as a result of a number of processes – rereading the novels, reflecting on them, looking at histories of their periods, visiting their settings, meeting Africans, watching documentaries, reading critics, and so on. Isn't this how we come to decide that a novel we initially thought gripping is adolescent? Or that a novel we once thought boring is wise and compelling?

Fortunately, late in his book, one can feel McGregor beginning to doubt the wisdom of his own approach. The passage in question concerns André Marty, a particularly vicious and paranoid Communist commander in the Spanish Civil War, who executed at least 500 of his own men (p. 112). This squat, beetle-browed character is more or less accurately portrayed in Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and McGregor comments as follows:

[Historical] verisimilitude is not [...] irrelevant to the appreciation of the novel and the realistic presentation of Marty as powerful, bitter, and irrational is vital to the role he serves in the novel. An inaccurate description of Marty as tall and emaciated would not necessarily be a literary defect, although a description of him as amiable and eager to assist would, because the character would no longer serve the narrative, dramatic, and thematic functions identified. (p. 128)

It may so happen that an accurate portrayal of Marty also serves the 'narrative, dramatic, and thematic functions' of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but the two kinds of assessment – historical verisimilitude and narrative coherence – can easily come apart. Suppose I am writing a novel about the Spanish Civil War. I decide to have two Nationalist characters based on real commanders, one of whom is wicked, the other God-fearing and innocent. For dramatic balance, I then decide I need a similar pair on the other side. I quickly pick out a paranoid Republican commander, so I now need a more sympathetic Republican to balance him up. For this reason, I decide to use Marty's name, appearance, and history, but make him kind, amiable, and eager to redress injustices.

But wouldn't my whitewashing of Marty's character still be thought an outrage, even though I can give narrative, dramatic, and thematic reasons for my historical tinkering? Wouldn't the relatives of Marty's victims be appalled? Wouldn't they ask why I hadn't based my likeable Republican on another real Republican who was half decent, or simply invented an amiable character, if that was what the dramatic and narrative structure of my novel demanded? Wouldn't they be

right? I suspect McGregor knows at a fundamental level that we would object to such a novelistic sanitization of Marty on the grounds that it's morally suspect and thoroughly inaccurate, while attempting to persuade himself that this falsification is only objectionable on the grounds that it would interfere with the novel's internal coherence.

IV

Our ordinary concept of literature is historically conditioned, complicated, messy, and baffling. The connections between literature and knowledge are intricate and difficult to grasp (only in recent decades, for example, have philosophers begun to think hard about the various kinds of knowledge and the way literature might provide them¹); and the connections between literary knowledge and pleasure are equally puzzling and poorly understood (pleasure in literature, I want to say, is a necessary *medium* for knowledge²). The philosophy of literature throws up many further and equally perplexing questions, some of which have been touched on in this review.

At the moment, McGregor largely denies these complexities, and constructs a concept of literature which is simpler and more streamlined than the original. This new concept has the minor advantages of dividing the world into neat categories (the sciences aim at truth, the arts at pleasure), and of silencing critics who want to ban Lawrence and Larkin because their views are morally suspect. But it has the major disadvantage of removing all the fine-spun intricacies that make our ordinary concept interesting and significant; in particular, it severs literature's important links with truth, accuracy, and plausibility on the one hand, and with history, psychology, and so forth on the other.

My recommendation, of course, is that McGregor should acknowledge these complexities, and then try to make careful, piecemeal progress in understanding them. His section on Marty – where certain indocile realities become unignorable – encourages me to think that this process has already begun.

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¹ Recent discussions of these issues include M. W. Rowe, 'Literature, Knowledge, and the Aesthetic Attitude', *Ratio* 22 (2009): 375–97, and László Kajtár, 'What Mary Didn't Read: On Literary Narratives and Knowledge', *Ratio* 29 (2016): 327–43.

² For a little more detail, see M. W. Rowe, 'The Idea of Literature', in *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 67–82, especially 74–78. I should explain that, since writing the articles mentioned in these footnotes, my ideas have moved in a more cognitivist direction.