

**Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-873319-5**

Restating all of the central claims from his award-winning book *The Singularity of Literature*,<sup>1</sup> in his new publication, *The Work of Literature*, Derek Attridge once again formulates his theory of literature and literary practice centred on the trinity of concepts he deems crucial for the creation and reception of literature: otherness, or alterity, invention, and singularity (whose meanings will, I hope, be clear in the course of this review). He also stays committed to his main intellectual influences, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, as he returns to the question of what it means to do justice to a literary work and sets out to disentangle the ethical dimension of the creation and reception of literature. Restating his claim that a literary work is not an object created by the author but an act-event that comes to life in the process of reading, Attridge reuses the metaphor of a performance to illustrate his point: a work is a performance in which a novelist stages the individual's mental processes, allowing the reader to bring these to life as events.

Regardless of this deliberate parallelism – *The Work of Literature* is intended as a supplement to *The Singularity of Literature* – there is much to gain from taking up Attridge's latest masterpiece, not in the least because of its wider scope. In *Singularity*, Attridge developed his theory primarily with the aim of overcoming what he saw as inadequacies of the two then dominant approaches to literature to explain its value and the role it has within a culture. While instrumentalism, he claimed, errs in treating a literary work as means to a predetermined agenda it had to fulfil (such as delivering a cognitive insight or a moral lesson), various aesthetic theories fail to explain how and why creation of literature is an active process whereby something new is inserted into the culture. In *The Work of Literature*, he offers a more substantial defence of his ideas, and positions them within a network of wider theoretical concerns, again supporting his conclusion with exemplary interpretations of various literary works.

In the first part, composed as a self-directed interview, Attridge summarizes his theory and confronts the criticism of his previous book. In the second part, he further develops his views on the role and responsibility of critics, the context of creation and reception, the relation between literature and culture, the cognitive value of literature, and the affective responses it elicits in readers, tackling along the way creativity, originality, and metaphor, and wrapping it up by linking the

<sup>1</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004). Winner of the ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) Book Award for literature in 2006.

notion of otherness to literary criticism. Many famous phenomenologists, pragmatists, and thinkers pertaining to hermeneutics and various schools of criticism figure immensely in the book. Regardless of this embeddedness in predominantly continental tradition, Attridge shows admirable commitment to the precision of analytic philosophy. Balancing between literary aesthetics and literary theory, his is a unique, complex, and above all intriguing account of literature, which is relevant for the arts generally.

Referencing his *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (1988), Attridge starts off by claiming that literature, at least in the evaluative (as opposed to classificatory) sense, cannot be defined, since there are no intrinsic, stylistic, structural, or other kinds of feature which define literary works. Equally irrelevant are authorial intentions, since an author creates not a work, but a text, which can be read in different ways, as a historical, sociological, or philosophical document. The crucial question for Attridge thus becomes that of explaining what makes literature different from other kinds of writing, and that of establishing literature's value among other cultural practices. On his view, 'literature as art involves a particular kind of experience [...] characterized summarily as an opening to otherness' (p. 16), as an opening to new horizons by bringing the 'other into the reader's habitual frameworks of consciousness and affective life' (p. 17). Otherness is defined as something hitherto hidden, nonexistent, unfamiliar, that which is 'unencountered [...] given the present state of the encountering mind or culture' (p. 55). It grounds the aesthetic criterion for what makes something a literary work, since works which fail to reveal otherness, that is, those that confirm 'the existing attitudes and habitual values' (p. 18), are not literary works.

However, otherness is not an intrinsic property of a work, but stems from a relation between a reader and a text. To recognize it, that is, to see a text as literary, a reader has to assume an attitude of 'openness and attentiveness demanded by the literature' (p. 34). It is an ethical obligation to read with 'an alertness to the new, to the inventiveness of language and genre, to the possibility of surprise' (p. 22). No special training or expertise is needed, since 'anyone can have the openness to new thoughts and feelings, the readiness to be surprised, the capacity for careful attention' (p. 23). When read responsibly, a work comes across as different from other works, creating a unique, singular experience. It is in 'responding to the handling of the form that the reader of a literary work brings it into being as literature' (p. 267). A literary work is thus 'a realization of the text as it is experienced in [one's] reading' (p. 30). Consequently, the category of literature is relative and changeable from one period to the next, from one reader to another, even from one and the same reader's reading to the next. But a work's

identity is neither entirely subjective nor completely relative; it remains loosely fixed, since the reading process is determined by one's 'idioculture' – a 'personal cultural and ideological history, and a resultant set of techniques, preferences, habits and expectations, that overlap considerably with those of others in his "interpretive community"' (p. 33).

Although it takes a reader to recognize otherness in a work, it takes an author to insert it into a culture, as 'a way of thinking, seeing, feeling, or handling language that is new to that culture' (p. 38). In the process of literary invention, an author has to passively allow himself or herself to let the work take charge over the process of writing, and he or she has to be open to that which is excluded. The author's ethical responsibility is postulated as a task 'to explore the symptoms of the exclusions in order to make space for otherness to enter' (p. 39) and to find fresh ways to use the materials of a language to surprise and please the recipient. It is therefore important for an inventive and original author to have 'absorbed her culture's norms, varieties of knowledge [...] as well as the available techniques and methods of the literary field' (p. 56). Immersion in one's culture is crucial, since literary invention is 'a matter of exploring and shaping the impress of that multifaceted and far from seamless external context upon [the artist's] mind and body' (p. 184). By this act, the existing culture is changed, since it now becomes open to and inclusive of what was once excluded.

By Attridge's account, there are striking parallels in the activities of authors and readers. Both have to assume an attitude of willing passivity to open themselves up to the literariness, and both have to do justice to it by allowing it to bring otherness to the fore by linguistic means. Though it is, in a sense, impossible to do so, since a work is by definition 'other' and therefore unapproachable, Attridge claims that doing justice to a work implies finding oneself under the obligation to respond responsibly (that is, to feel accountable) to the work by allowing it to challenge the norms and habits by which one relates to the world. Those who respond to a work in such a way experience it as a pleasurable, singular event that opens them up to things previously unknown. Literature thus makes something happen; it changes those who engage with it. The change might not be for the better, but the fact that it occurs explains why literature has powerful social and political functions which cannot be determined and should not be prescribed in advance.

Given the strong bond between literature and culture, Attridge devotes a lot of polemical space to questions concerning the appreciation of works which originate in different cultures or are distant in time. Because of the way that material and ideological conditions influence the creation and reception of

a work, Attridge believes that a reader should have some knowledge of the original context of its creation in order to better appreciate the work – a point convincingly illustrated by his profound interpretation of *The Yacubian Building*. However, since there is always an element of creativity involved in reading, there is no such thing as pure reading, just as there is no single right interpretation. A good critic should convey the sense of how a particular work moves, but a critic's account cannot substitute for the original work.

Given Attridge's insistence on the responsibility and creativity of authors, readers, and critics, his book offers insights for the rapidly growing field of virtue aesthetics. By allowing each reader to value the singularity of his or her firsthand experience, but putting him or her under the obligation to treat literature responsibly, Attridge accommodates the autonomy of readers' subjective judgements and the intuition that literature is valuable objectively. Nevertheless, his account may not seem convincing to those who think of literary value as something objective and independent of individual readings, or to those less impressed by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas.

While on the whole I agree with much of what Attridge says about literature's capacity to influence culture, I have some worries regarding the way he explains this capacity. Two claims are dominant in his theory. First, literature as art brings about changes in one's cognitive map, emotional setting, and aesthetic sensibility, by opening one up to what was once excluded. Second, when a literary work imparts knowledge or ethical insights or initiates political or social change, it is not in virtue of its literariness that this is achieved. However, these two claims pose a striking problem if they are part of the same theory – namely, though it is not unusual to claim that literature should not be defined by or valued for its capacities to offer knowledge or moral lessons, this claim raises tension for Attridge, given a certain ambiguity in his account of otherness. Given how Attridge explains it, otherness can be understood in (what I will call) artistic/aesthetic terms and in political terms. In the former sense, it designates linguistic achievements, whereby an author manipulates the language in order to bring forward new ways in which language generates aesthetic experience.<sup>2</sup> In the latter sense, otherness refers to the capacity of a work to bring to the fore isolated individuals or minorities who are pushed

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Attridge differentiates between 'reading experience that affords pleasure through the confirmation of existing attitudes and habitual values – the enjoyment of familiarity, as when a novel follows a formulaic plot with stock characters – and one that affords pleasure by revealing unexpected possibilities of thought and feeling (including new formal possibilities for the genre in question)' (p. 18). He also defines literary experience as one of 'staging of reality, of emotions, of *language's capacities*' (p. 31, my italics).

into the domain of exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Both senses are problematic. First, it is not clear why the existing culture would exclude the otherness understood in the artistic sense. Joyce's style of writing introduced something hitherto unencountered into the culture, but it makes little sense to claim that the culture depended on this exclusion. Without denying that there can be social, political, or religious pressures to censure an artist if his or her style, choice of topics, or otherwise is deemed politically incorrect or immoral, the idea that the exclusion of artistic possibilities sustains 'the status quo' strikes me as untenable.<sup>4</sup>

Second, there are reasons to doubt otherness defined as that upon whose exclusion a culture depends, as a criterion for literature's status as art. We value and recognize many works as great works of literature although they do not bring the *excluded* other to the fore – realist literature is one such example. On the other hand, we value works that present otherness, but it makes no sense to claim that a culture depends on the exclusion of that particular otherness. Autobiographical literature or confessional poetry reveals something excluded from the reader's perspective, in the sense that he or she is unfamiliar with various episodes of the author's life, but there is no reason to suppose that these episodes are deliberately excluded from public knowledge in order to sustain the existing culture.

Perhaps a way to avoid these worries is to see the two senses of otherness as united – arguably, this is how Attridge sees them.<sup>5</sup> In that case, however, there is a tension in his overall theory, because it is unclear how to accommodate this understanding of otherness with his desire to avoid attributing to literature

<sup>3</sup> See p. 55, where Attridge claims, 'Otherness is not just out there, unapprehended because no one has thought of apprehending it, or because it bears no relation whatever to existing forms of knowledge, but because to apprehend it would threaten the status quo'. In a similar vein, we read that 'for a culture to exclude a possibility, and to have to change if that possibility is to be admitted, implies that it has depended on that exclusion in order to sustain its existence' (p. 39), as well as that otherness is 'unknown because the culture operates not only to exclude [...] but to exclude awareness of their exclusion' (p. 182).

<sup>4</sup> Attridge himself sees this as 'the most challengeable part' of his theory (p. 38). In his self-directed interview, he raises the question in this way: 'You argue not just that what you call the "act-event" of invention succeeds in introducing into the familiar landscape of a culture a way of thinking, seeing, feeling, or handling language that is new to that culture, but that its exclusion from the culture up to that point is more than a matter of chance. The culture, you claim, is sustained by its exclusions, and the artist finds a way of accessing a part of this excluded realm, through the inventive handling of the given materials of the art-form' (p. 38).

<sup>5</sup> For example, when he claims: 'to read a poem or a novel that merits the term "literature" [...] is to feel oneself taken into a new realm of thought and feeling [...]. A fresh metaphor will fuse together two domains of meaning and produce a tiny alteration in one's cognitive map; a powerfully drawn character will modify one's perception of other selves in the world; a finely articulated couplet will enhance one's sense of the expressive potential of the language' (pp. 145–46).

cognitive or emotional values. In other words, his claim that a work of literature reveals otherness, thus enabling readers to undergo a certain kind of cognitive and emotional experience that changes them, can hardly be reconciled with his continual refusal to accommodate the influence of this kind of work into its literariness. Here is why.

Attridge claims that the 'changes [literature] brings about in its reader's grasp of the world' (p. 96) are achieved by artistic means, more precisely, by the awareness of the manipulation of language as a medium (p. 31) and by the work's handling of a form (pp. 266–67, see also footnote 5 in this review). I find this claim convincing: it fits perfectly with the common sense intuition that it is the aesthetic use of language which makes literature touch us in a unique way. But, given the much contested problem in literary aesthetics concerning the relevance that artistic means have to a work's potential to influence readers, more needs to be said to explain the relationship between the artistic and the political sense of otherness before it is clear that artistic otherness can ground the opening up to otherness and the potential for a change. The link between powerful aesthetic experience (which is, I take it, what Attridge means by his description of the artistic use of language, which is central to literature) and the possibility of change described as the 'grasp of the world' which results from that experience, needs more elaboration than Attridge offers. As it stands now, the link between powerful aesthetic experience and the possibility of change triggered by literature cannot operate as he describes it, that is, if it is meant to explain *literary* experience. The following example will, I hope, clarify my point.

Consider a work such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Not only did Beecher Stowe work with the material provided by her culture, thus enabling her readers to participate in the same idioculture, but she also managed to bring out many of the aspects of the dominant culture which were responsible for excluding the Other. Her work enabled black voices to be heard, their perspective to be sympathized with and understood, and, most important, it helped introduce social and political changes needed for the abolitionist movement. In other words, by artistically manipulating language, she brought the excluded Other into the conceptual and emotional framework of her readers, and into the culture. It seems to me, however, that this was possible only if along the way readers, *in addition to* appreciating the expressive power of her prose, picked up the moral lesson that slavery was wrong. In Attridge's argument, however, outcomes like this are not a 'function of [a work's] literariness' (p. 101), but are instead the result of a *change of attitude*, whereby a reader comes to treat a given work as a statement on ethics. This implies that literariness is in fact limited to the experience of aesthetic otherness, which further implies that it should be divorced from its political counterpart.

Consequently, the change one undergoes in the experience of reading can only refer to an increase in one's awareness of the artistic/aesthetic possibilities of language, not in one's grasp of the world. But, as I hoped to show in the preceding discussion, it is unclear why the exclusion of the aesthetics sense of otherness is crucial for maintaining the status quo of a culture.

Ultimately, Attridge should explain the changes he sees as definitive of literature and as grounding its values by means of the resources of a well-established doctrine of literary cognitivism. Not only does he use the terminology that literary cognitivists are so fond of when describing the impact of literature on one's cognitive grasp of the world, but even his view of the artist, focused as it is on his or her abilities to explore, understand, and undermine conditions of the exclusion of otherness rather than on his or her aesthetic skills, well accommodates literary cognitivists' intuitions about the artist's epistemic reliability.<sup>6</sup> A similar worry translates into the domain of the ethical value of works. On several occasions, Attridge claims that a culture open to otherness is an 'ethical good' (p. 146). But given that this opening is brought about by literature, why not see its literary value at least as partly grounded in its capacity to tackle moral questions? The acknowledgement of a work's cognitive and ethical dimension neither implies instrumentalization, nor is it to be taken normatively, as a prescription that all literature should promote cognitive or moral values.

Finally, Attridge's claim that the reader's change of attitude, whereby he or she comes to treat a work as a social or political work rather than as a literary work, is in tension with his claim that literature falls within the purview of ethics. Tying the identity of a work so tightly to readers' attitudes makes the status of literature subject to the whims of individual readers, and leaves hardly any space for the ethical obligation that literature imposes objectively, if literature can so easily go in and out of existence by a simple change of attitude.

Though I am deeply intrigued and highly impressed by *The Work of Literature*, in the end it seems to me that Attridge's account is at best incomplete, illuminating some but not all of literature's capacities. It remains unclear whether he intends it primarily as a descriptive elaboration of his own reading experience or as a prescriptive view of what literature should be. For all the uniqueness and plausibility of Attridge's theory, we need a more clearly explained phenomenology of reading, one that sheds more light on what exactly happens to the status and value of literature when a reader recognizes otherness.

<sup>6</sup> See Noël Carroll, 'Literary Realism, Recognition, and the Communication of Knowledge', in *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative and Knowledge*, ed. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Poggi (London: Routledge, 2007), 24–41; Amy Mullin, 'Art, Understanding, and Political Change', *Hypatia* 15 (2000): 113–39.

The alleged ability to shift from recognizing the otherness in a work, and allowing oneself to be open to it and thus changed, to a decision to stop treating works as literary when they have this impact is deeply problematic due to the ontological consequences of such shifts, and due to the ambiguous notion of otherness. Even if Attridge is willing to accept that literariness is a disturbingly and counter-intuitively fragile notion all too easily dispelled by the reader's change of attitude, problems with his account of otherness remain – one of them being that the aesthetic sense of otherness cannot on its own sustain the status quo of a culture.

For his account to work, Attridge should divorce the aesthetic sense of otherness from the political one, since the political sense (i) grounds the impact of otherness that can only be explained in the cognitivist terminology that Attridge rejects, and (ii) determines the ethical dimension of literature, which he doesn't associate with literature. In that case, however, literature's cultural value would be limited to its capacity to provide aesthetic pleasure, which is precisely what Attridge opposes. Alternatively, he should retain the union of the aesthetic and the political sense of otherness but accept that the changes brought about by the recognition of otherness, including cognitive gain and affective reactions, are part of literary experience. Not only would this reinforce his claim that literature objectively makes ethical demands on its readers, but it would also allow the identity of literary works to be fixed more firmly, and would make room for the cognitive and the ethical dimension of literary works to be part of their literary value without succumbing to the instrumentalization of literature: a win-win solution!

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