

REVIEWS

David Davies. *Aesthetics and Literature*.

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David Davies, Professor of Philosophy at McGill University, Canada, is a prolific and well-known scholar in Anglo-American analytical philosophy of literature whose interests include the ontology of literary artworks and the nature of narrative fiction. Davies's recent monograph, *Aesthetics and Literature*, is an extended account of his earlier publications from the 1990s to the present day. The work, which is aimed at students of aesthetics and philosophy in general, treats multiple different issues in the philosophy of literature and also puts forward new ideas. Davies's book contains nine chapters that consider the nature of literature and fiction, fictional truth, literary interpretation, the ontology of fictional characters, the nature of emotions involved in reading fiction, and the cognitive and moral value and function of literature.

APPROACHING 'LITERATURE'

Davies begins his survey by examining the definition of (a work of) literature. First, he makes a common distinction between literature (an evaluative term) and fiction (a descriptive term). He then distinguishes two uses of the term literature: first, literature in the broad sense as 'any body of writing that has a shared topic' (p. 1); and second, literature in the artistic sense, as a class defined as works that possess, or are presented as possessing, 'some qualities that we value over and above their being useful to us in a particular practical context' (p. 2). After terminological clarifications, Davies continues to examine semantic and syntactic definitions of literature in Russian Formalism and American New Criticism. He rejects semantic and syntactic definitions, and suggests that literary works of art are products of a certain sort of intentional action governed by a specific institution. Here, one might easily expect Davies to refer, for instance, to Arthur C. Danto's or George Dickie's institutional theories of art and especially Stein Haugom Olsen's influential philosophical theory of the literary institution. Davies briefly talks about the literary institution as an historical practice, concerning, for instance, artistic values that change in time (and over cultures), and genres that evolve and cross. None the less, he thinks that 'crude institutional terms' should be rejected in defining art and in explaining, for example, how ready-made artworks have become art objects. As he sees it, in defining literature the point is 'how the intended audience is supposed to respond to the object on display' (p. 11). According to Davies,

a work's literary status is only about its design function: a work is literature if it is intended as a vehicle for the articulation of aesthetic content. Nevertheless, Davies speaks vaguely about an 'artistic community' in which the artworks are presented; he also dismisses the role of the institution in defining literature and speaks about 'reading strategies' and the author's intended effects.

In the second chapter, which considers the ontology of literary works, Davies introduces two types of theories concerning the nature of literary works of art: textualism, which identifies the work with a text-type (Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin), and contextualism, which holds that the contextual features of the work, such as its author, are part of its identity (Gregory Currie). Admittedly, Davies's distinction is quite simplified, but he represents well the main question in the contemporary ontologico-interpretative debate. Instead of argumentation, Davies simply assumes that one should adopt 'some form of contextualism' if one wishes to take account of 'the rich array of contextually based properties that seem to play a part in our critical and appreciative engagement with literary works' (p. 31).

When illustrating ontological problems related to the nature of literary works of art, Davies represents the story of Theseus' ship and other ontological thought experiments. Here, one may notice that Davies's interest in the scenario depicted in Borges's 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote' shows that he is paying more attention to literary *ontology* concerned with the logical nature of objects than literary *aesthetics* concerned with the actual art world. However, it would have been nice had the survey been a bit broader and – briefly considered –, say, phenomenological approaches such as Roman Ingarden's theory of literary works of art as intentional objects. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to read about the ontology of narratives based on legends and tales such as different versions of the Faust-story, like Marlowe's, Goethe's, and Mann's versions, or the relation between different performances of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's play, but Davies's prime interest is, after all, in the ontology of singular works. The ontological examinations continue in Chapter Six, in which Davies considers Meinongian, Russellian and Kripkean approaches to nature of fictional characters.

THE NOVELIST'S MODE OF SPEAKING

In the third chapter, Davies examines the nature of fiction-making. As in his definition of literature, here too Davies rejects stylistic and semantic definitions of fiction: for him, fiction is to be defined as a production of a certain type of intention. Davies investigates the nature of fiction-making in Austinian and Gricean traditions: as pretended illocutionary acts (John R. Searle) and as a genuine speech act of 'fiction-making' (Gregory Currie).

When examining Searle's theory of fiction, Davies advances the conventional argument (pp. 40–41) that the problem in a speech-act theory of fiction in which the novelist is taken to be pretending to make assertions is that there seems to be 'genuinely asserted sentences' in fiction, such as the paradigmatic example, the opening sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. And naturally, Davies claims, a sentence cannot both pretend to be asserted and be asserted. One way to solve the debate would be to suggest that works of fiction consist of both fictional utterances and the author's assertions, Davies says. However, as he sees it, it is not reasonable to make a distinction between sentences asserted by the author (for instance, general propositions about the actual world) and the fictional utterances that constitute the make-believe story, because sentences such as the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina* seem both to make an assertion and to take part in constituting the make-believe story.

While I agree with Davies that there are many difficulties in Searle's theory of fiction, it seems that Davies's Searle looks a bit like a straw-man – which is quite common in critique of the pretension theory. Now, one should recall that Searle admitted the existence of the actual author's both direct and indirect assertions. In 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,'¹ which Davies refers to, Searle suggests that authors may perform genuine actions both *in* fiction, as direct assertions, and *by* fiction, that is, the complete work. At the end of the article, however, Searle also mentions the possibility of conveying genuine assertions by fictional utterance; what Searle says is that he is not satisfied with the prevailing theories that examine such acts.

Second, Davies states that Searle's theory of fictionality seems too broad. Davies argues that there are cases in which someone pretends to assert something by a sentence but the sentence uttered is not fictional. As his example, Davies mentions a student who verbally imitates her professor. Now, the problem in Davies's argument is that it is directed against something broader than Searle's account of *literary* fiction-making, the production of novels, short stories and the like, and that it also fails to distinguish between two modes of mimesis: pretending *to do something* and pretending *to be someone* (see Lamarque & Olsen² for different types of pretension).

As an example of a theory that treats fiction-making as the production of an utterance of its own, Davies examines in insightful detail Currie's Grice-based theory in which the author intends her audience to make-believe the story she

¹ Searle, John R. (1975). 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse.' *New Literary History*, 6 (2), pp. 319–32.

² Lamarque, Peter, & Olsen, Stein Haugom (1996/1994). *Truth, Fiction, and Literature. A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 61.

utters as a result of recognizing the author's make-believe intention. Davies also considers Currie's subtle views concerning accidentally true and non-accidentally true stories and the relevance of the audience's response in defining the nature of a work uttered with a fictive intention but describing events that have actually been happened. Here, it would have been nice had Davies mentioned, like in his examination of Searle's theory of fiction, Currie's views concerning the author's assertion in fiction. Currie's view is interesting, for, as he suggests in his *Nature of Fiction*, works of fiction are seldom entirely 'completely fictional' but 'tend to be a mixture of fiction-making and assertion'.³

Although Currie's theory of fiction-making is a prime example of Grice-based theories of fiction, I think that Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's⁴ theory of 'the fictive mode of utterance' illuminates better the act of fiction-making in the light of literary practice. While Currie *mentions* in his theory 'conventions' that are generally used in fiction-making to signify the author's fictive intention to invite the readers to make-believe the propositions she exhibits, Currie does not really examine the social practice that, more or less, governs the author's communicative act.

THE NATURE AND MEANING OF FICTION

After introducing the basic questions related to fiction-making, Davies moves to the matter of truth in fiction, or 'the epistemology of literature' in a chapter entitled 'Reading fiction (1): Truth in a story'. He aims at answering the questions of what are the rules that govern what is true in fiction. Before beginning, Davies makes the conventional distinction between the 'story meaning' and the 'high-order' thematic meaning of a literary work (pp. 50–51). He bases his theory of fictional truth on Grice's philosophy of language and David Lewis's influential theory of truth in fiction, which holds that the fictional truth consists of the narrator's claims and the reader's background information of the actual world. Thus, Davies's account of fictional truth combines the fictional speaker's explicit propositions and the reader's background knowledge and Gricean conversational implicature. Drawing on Grice, Davies gives several reasons why the reader should not outright fictionally make-believe, that is, should not consider the narrator's reports fictionally true: the narrator often implies things by her utterances; she may also be ironic, speak figuratively, or be defective or self-deceptive.

³ Currie, Gregory (1990). *The Nature of Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 48.

⁴ Lamarque, Peter, & Olsen, Stein Haugom (1996/1994). *Truth, Fiction, and Literature. A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davies also examines Currie's theory of fictional truth and the fictional author (the implied author), a fictional character that is constructed in the act of make-believe as the character who is telling the story as known fact. Currie's distinction between reliable and unreliable narrators and narratives, however, receives little attention. There could have been more emphasis on unreliable narrators and narratives that are popular not only in literary fiction but also in films and television series. Moreover, as usual in analytic examinations, the story-meaning of fiction is (implicitly) considered more important than the thematic meaning, supported with the familiar argument that the story meaning creates the basis for the thematic or symbolic meaning. If the thematic meaning is as important as Davies remarks in the beginning of the chapter, and as it is for most philosophers of literature, it would have deserved consideration here.

Davies's study of the nature of fiction continues in Chapter Six, which concerns the nature of literary interpretation and its relevance in determining the world of the work. In this second part, Davies examines William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's influential notion of 'the intentional fallacy' which holds that the actual author's intentions, designs or plans are irrelevant to understanding and evaluating literary artworks. Davies argues for 'an "uptake" theory of interpretation' and attempts at the same time to preserve 'what is right' in Wimsatt and Beardsley's account (p. 70). He claims that literary works allow a multiplicity of different interpretations which correspond to the multiplicity of 'interpretative aims'.

Davies says that there are also 'defenders of "intentionalism"' who 'have sought to establish the relevance of authorial intentions to the appreciation and evaluation of literary artworks by defending an intentionalist view of interpretation' (p. 71). Not only is this definition empty in its informative purport in defining the aims of such interpretative practice, but Davies fails to tell us who these defenders are. Instead, he goes on to argue that intentionalist interpretation faces a serious dilemma. The dilemma is the one proposed by Saam Trivedi in his article 'An Epistemic Dilemma for Actual Intentionalism'⁵ although for some reason Trivedi is not mentioned in the work, which otherwise faithfully cites sources. As Trivedi sees it, the audience may either figure out independently what the artist intended her work to mean or figure out independently what the work itself means. The intentionalist dilemma is that if the work's meaning can be solved without appealing to the author's actual intentions, the author's intentions are unnecessary. On the other hand, if the work's meaning can be solved without knowing the artist's

⁵ Trivedi, Saam (2001). 'An Epistemic Dilemma for Actual Intentionalism.' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41 (2), pp. 192–206.

successfully realized semantic intentions, then it seems that one cannot tell whether the artist has been successful.

Davies continues, in the spirit of Wimsatt and Beardsley, to argue that the publication of a literary work breaks the bond with the author's semantic intention and the work's textual meaning. In this part, I disagree with Davies's interpretation of Wimsatt and Beardsley's theory of the intentional fallacy: Wimsatt and Beardsley did not deny the reference to the author's intention *as manifested in the work* but as *declared outside the work*, or in 'external evidence'. For instance, in his article 'Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited'⁶ Wimsatt admits that the author's intention might somehow manifest itself in her work. He says that by the intentional fallacy he and Beardsley meant to say that 'the closest one could ever get to the artist's intending or meaning mind, outside his work, would still be short of his *effective* intention or *operative* mind as it appears in the work itself and can be read from the work'.

After the anti-intentionalist critique, Davies finally deals with actual intentionalist theories of interpretation cursorily rejected in the beginning of the chapter. He introduces Hirsch's absolute intentionalism and Iseminger's moderate intentionalist account developed from Hirsch's theory. Iseminger's views are used as an example of a brand of intentionalism which suggests that interpreters should take the 'conventional meaning as imposing *limits* on utterance meaning, where the utterer's intentions determine utterance meaning within these limits' (pp. 77–78). Davies then presents some objections to intentionalism, such as Beardsley's claim that linguistic conventions are enough to determine the meaning, and inquires how Robert Stecker's theory of moderate actual intentionalism tries to answer them.

Unfortunately, in his critique of actual intentionalist theories of interpretation, including the Trivedian dilemma, Davies does not properly take into account prevailing intentionalist theories, their moderate and modest formulations. Contemporary moderate actual intentionalist views proposed, in addition to Stecker, by philosophers, such as Noël Carroll, Gary Iseminger, and Paisley Livingston, hold that intentions are not something outside the work. Rather, these views hold that intentions manifest themselves in the work and that the utterance meaning of a literary work guides the interpreter to the author's intended meaning.

Nevertheless, instead of treating actual intentionalist theories in detail, Davies moves to "'uptake" theories of intention' which emphasize the role of the 'appropriate' audience in determining the meaning of a work. The 'uptake

⁶ Wimsatt, William K. (1976/1968). 'Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited.' In D. Newton-de Molina (ed.), *On Literary Intention* (pp. 116–38). Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, p. 136.

theorists' mentioned are mostly hypothetical intentionalists who do not stress the actual semantic intentions the author intends for a piece but the semantic intentions that members of the appropriate audience would ascribe to the piece. The most difficult question for such theories is, Davies suggests, what sort of knowledge the appropriate audience should possess in order to be able to give the work a proper meaning. Davies admits that the author's intentions 'might play an indirect determinative role', for her actual intentions determine, at least partly, the appropriate audience (pp. 84–85).

Davies aims at showing that both actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism contain flaws. He suggests that because of the difference between conversational utterances and literary artworks, the standards of intentionalist conversational interpretation should not be applied to literary interpretation. Instead, Davies suggests, literary interpretation should aim at solving the 'contextualized conventional meaning' of an utterance (p. 81). Referring to the views of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and so-called 'constructivists', such as, Susan L. Feagin and Alan H. Goldman (but for some reason not Stanley Fish), Davies proposes that the meaning of literary artworks is not determinate and readers should rather celebrate the 'proliferation of meanings' (p. 93) in literary interpretation: as Davies sees it, literary interpretation is a creative activity.

The chapter could also have been clearer in its structure; brands of intentionalism should have been mentioned after introducing the dilemma for actual intentionalism. Moreover, another problem in the chapter is that the concept of 'intention' stays fairly obscure: it seems to refer both to the author's mental events and to her aims realized in use. Also, as the book is designed for students, the concept of 'interpretation' should have been defined in detail: after all, 'interpretation', with its enormous multiplicity of meaning, is perhaps the most problematic term in aesthetics.

THE ANCIENT QUARREL

In the eighth chapter, Davies discusses the cognitive value of literature, which is perhaps the most polemical topic in the philosophy of literature. In the beginning, he distinguishes four ways by which literary cognitivist theories have seen literature 'as a source of knowledge or understanding of the real world': first, that literature may function 'as a source of *factual information*', acquiring 'true beliefs' about, say, bullfighting through reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*; second, that literature may 'give understanding of general beliefs' concerning, for instance, moral and psychological principles (p. 145); third, that literature has been praised as a source of 'categorical understanding',

'new ways of *classifying and categorizing* things and situations'; or offering 'practical knowledge'; fourth, literature may offer '*affective knowledge*', 'what it would be like' to be in a certain, for example, morally complex situation (p. 146). While Davies's fourfold distinction classifies well diverse brands of literary cognitivism, his distinction between propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and skills (knowing-how) remains a bit obscure.

After introducing types of cognitivism, Davies discusses 'the epistemological challenge' to fiction and ponders whether literature can provide knowledge – which requires true belief or warranted belief. He first notes that it is problematic to identify assertions in fiction, if any. Second, he echoes 'the "Platonic" challenge' concerning the source of literary knowledge: where do poets get their profound literary truths from; how Arthur Conan Doyle, a fiction writer, possess information about the matters he is writing about? Here, Davies emphasizes Jeremy Stolnitz's well-known anti-cognitivist arguments: first, that truths conveyed by works of fiction are everyday or banal (the triviality argument); second, that there is no distinct 'artistic knowledge' comparable to, say, scientific or historical knowledge (the uniqueness objection); third, that fiction does not confirm its hypotheses (the no-argument objection). Davies then introduces David Novitz's and James Young's (forthcoming) defences of literary cognitivism, the former claiming that the 'banality' of literary truth stems from a naïve attempt to restate the meaning of a complete fiction in a single sentence, and the latter arguing that fiction represents or exemplifies types of characters and situations, and that also the perspectives or viewpoints or the truth-claims made in fiction are to be assessed as right or wrong. At the end of the chapter, Davies examines fictional narratives and their relation to (scientific) thought experiments, his focus being on the epistemological nature of scientific thought experiments. Although Davies briefly mentions similarities and differences between these two sorts of fictional narratives, he does not, unfortunately, consider theories of fiction as distinct thought experiments as recently put forward by philosophers such as Noël Carroll, Eileen John, and Peter Swirski.

The examination of the cognitive function of fiction continues in Chapter Nine which considers the relation between literature, morality, and society. In this chapter, Davies suggests that our understanding of the ethical nature of literature is said to be 'deepened through the details of the fictional narrative whose principal character embodies that very claim' (p. 166). Here, he introduces views that hold that works of fiction communicate general principles about ethical matters (Sir Philip Sidney) and change readers' ethical capacities (Iris Murdoch). He also treats aestheticism, or autonomism, which

holds that artworks should not be approached from a cognitive or ethical point of view, and (moderate) moralism (Carroll), or ethicism (Berys Gaut), which holds that artworks may have ethical value and that an appropriate *aesthetic* response may include ethical assessment. The book ends in a discussion of how authors and literary works may be 'morally and socially accountable'.

CONCLUSION

As literary works of art are both linguistic and aesthetic objects, they are in analytic aesthetics generally examined primarily either as subjects of the philosophy of language or artistic works that belong to the realm of aesthetics. Davies takes the first position: his survey is 'logico-analytical' in that he is mainly interested in the nature of literature, the ontology of literary works and fictional characters, and the correct interpretation. Although the title of the book is *Aesthetics and Literature*, questions such as appreciation, evaluation, and the aesthetic or literary value of fiction are not really dealt with.

Davies's philosophical interest can also be seen in his literary examples. In general, an analytic philosophy of literature is a philosophy of realistic fiction, and in theories of fiction-making, truth in fiction, cognitive value of fiction, and the like, the concept of literature is often purely mimetic. Also, in Davies's book, one most often encounters Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens (and also Kafka, Woolf, and García Márquez, treated quite literally). Now, analytical philosophy of literature has been investigating questions related to the character living at 221B Baker Street for decades. What if, instead of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes works and their logically impossible, bell-rope climbing Russell's vipers, we broadened the concept of narrative fiction to include, say, so-called 'postmodern' narratives in which multiple narrators give conflicting accounts of events?

By its character, *Aesthetics and Literature* is both an introductory textbook and an argumentative essay. Some of its chapters are more critical and subjective than others: for instance, Davies's views concerning the nature of literary interpretation are stronger in their theses than those which concern the ontological status of fictional characters. As the investigation changes from general-level reporting to detailed analysis and *vice versa*, the work becomes a bit unbalanced. The bibliography also seems a bit odd: while Davies has included most of the central publications concerning the multiple questions he considers, the work lacks many important ones: for example, works by Stein Haugom Olsen, an influential scholar in literary aesthetics, are completely missing; nor does Davies treat Noël Carroll's major works on the philosophy of literature. Also, there are some misspellings and mistakes in the text, such as

'Anne Radcliffe' and de Sade's *100 Days of Sodom*, but not so many that they would annoy the reader.

To conclude, while *Aesthetics and Literature* is explicitly intended as an introduction, Davies does not only well and clearly examine various wide and complicated contemporary debates on the philosophy of literature, but also expresses insightful and significant thoughts about the questions under consideration. Much of the critique presented here can be easily dismissed by referring to the aim and the nature of the extensive work. The criticisms are, nevertheless, caused by the book's thought-provoking tone: *Aesthetics and Literature* invites the reader critically to assess and ponder the topics of the work. And this is a true virtue for any textbook on philosophy.

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