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McGregor, R. (2015). *The Work of Literature* by Derek Attridge Oxford University Press | 2015 | ix + 324pp | isbn 9780198733195. *Critical Quarterly*, 57(3), pp. 112–115. doi: 10.1111/criq.12220

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Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature*

(Oxford University Press, 2015)

ix + 324 pp

ISBN: 9780198733195

In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), Derek Attridge set out the three cornerstones of his literary theory: *singularity* describes the work of literature's capacity for endless transformation while retaining its identity as an act-event; *inventiveness* characterises the work as something absolutely new that has been both made and discovered; *otherness* is the quality of unpredictability and difference that challenges the expectations and values of the reader. In *The Work of Literature*, Attridge amplifies, clarifies, and refines these 'three different aspects of the literariness of the literary work' (p.57), which are irretrievably interlocked in the experience of the act-event and cannot be elucidated in isolation. A culture is sustained by that which it excludes and authors exploit this exclusion by means of inventiveness, creating a space in which otherness (also called *alterity*) can be apprehended. Otherness is not merely other to the culture in which the work is produced and received, but necessarily other such that it cannot be assimilated without the deconstruction of cultural norms that facilitates the work's singularity. A central concern of *The Singularity of Literature* was the relationship between the institutions of literature, modernism, and form on the one hand and ethical responsibility, irresponsibility, and insignificance on the other. Attridge offered a compelling argument for the continued significance of form to literature, augmented with a critical response to ten of J.M. Coetzee's works in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (also published in 2004). A central concern of *The Work of Literature* is

the similarity between literature and other art forms – music and painting in particular. Attridge is, however, over-ambitious and his case for singularity, inventiveness, and otherness as three different aspects of the artiness of the work of art is somewhat unconvincing.

This comparison and contrast of *The Singularity of Literature* with *The Work of Literature* is unavoidable because Attridge is explicit that the latter is ‘conceived to some degree as a supplement’ (p.11) to the former. As such, Part I consists of a cross-examination of the earlier book, a device that initially seems pretentious but is in fact very effective in articulating his mature conceptions of singularity, inventiveness, and otherness. Part II, constituting two-thirds of the monograph, comprises nine essays (parts of which were published between 2005 and 2011) under the following headings: Justice, Singularity, Criticism, Context, Culture, Metaphor, Knowing, Affect, and Hospitality. In his introduction Attridge states that ‘[e]ach of the chapters may be read on its own (and I’ve permitted myself a certain amount of repeated exposition of key ideas to make this possible)’ (p.12) and indeed the only serious problem in the work lies in the parenthesis. There is simply too much repetition. Part I makes an excellent supplement to *The Singularity of Literature*, but the addition of Part II makes for tedious reading in places. This becomes particularly evident in the seventh chapter (Metaphor), which is both original and insightful, but begins with two pages wherein the by now all too familiar trio of singularity, inventiveness, and otherness are trotted out once again. Similarly, Part II makes an excellent supplement either to Part I or to *The Singularity of Literature* – just not both together. The best way to read *The Work of Literature* is thus – *contra* Attridge – on its own, as a detailed and rigorous defence of his literary theory, albeit it one lacking in the concision and elegance of *The Singularity of Literature*.

The contention that a book of literary theory stands alone is hardly condemnation and Part II foregrounds Attridge at his best, raising difficult and perennial dilemmas and addressing them without evasion or recourse to jargon. To take three examples: can the benefits of literature be specified without reducing the value of a literary work to being a pleasing means to an educational end; how can one criticise a poem in a manner that simultaneously responds to the demands made by the work, acknowledges one's cultural and personal limitations, and illuminates the work for other readers; and how can one take pleasure in reading a realistic representation of a decapitation without being a sadist or voyeur? Attridge answers all of these questions in a straightforward yet sophisticated style, employing penetrating analyses of Emma Donoghue's *Room*, Paul Muldoon's 'The Loaf', and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* respectively. The relationship between form and meaning had been discussed in both the works published in 2004 but Attridge adds a new dimension by exploring the relationship between form and emotion in his discussion of *Blood Meridian*. The relation he identifies builds on his conception of *staging* (discussed briefly in *Metaphor* and in detail in *The Singularity of Literature*), the way in which the literary use of language both performs and distances itself from the functions of everyday usage. The theatrical metaphor has great explanatory power and has been adopted in philosophy of literature. John Gibson, for example, employs a phrase that is both a compliment and complement to Attridge when he defines a literary narrative as 'a sustained dramatic gesture'.<sup>1</sup>

If readers familiar with Attridge's oeuvre are likely to be troubled by the repetition across *The Singularity of Literature* and both parts of *The Work of Literature*, those same readers will appreciate the evolution of his thought in several key areas. Perhaps the most impressive of these is the development of what, following J. Hillis Miller, he calls the ethics of reading.

Attridge inaugurated his three aspects of the literary triumvirate in 1999, in a paper entitled ‘Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other’; there he spoke of creativity itself as essentially virtuous, without considering the vicious ends to which it can be a means. He elaborated his position in *The Singularity of Literature*, employing the rather awkward term *ethicity* to describe the way in which literary works stage ethical values. It was never entirely clear why Attridge regarded ethicity as a desirable quality for, as with creativity, there is no necessary relation between virtue and the ethical values staged by a particular work. In his critique of *The Master of Petersburg* in *J.M. Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading* (a book which is more concerned with the ethics of *writing* than reading), Attridge acknowledged the potential for ethical irresponsibility in inventiveness, but left the issue unresolved. This omission is rectified in *The Work of Literature*, where he is very clear (to the point of being repetitive) that the otherness to which one responds in the literary work can affect one in a positive or negative way. The experience of the act-event of certain works – such as Céline’s *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* or Sarah Millin’s *God’s Step-Children* – is more likely to be vicious than virtuous, but the immorality (or amorality) does not disqualify the work as literature. This admission is crucial in establishing the ethics of reading that emerges in Part II of *The Work of Literature*. The demand made by the work of literature to be read *as* a work of literature is an ethical demand and it is the reader’s responsibility to read responsively. For Attridge, reading is an ethical act because it involves the acceptance of both the invitation of the author and the otherness to which the work exposes one. The reader who engages with the work as a work of literature has this responsibility imposed upon her and this is particularly relevant to critical practice. The ethics of reading is thus – to use Attridge’s earlier distinction – an *ethics* as opposed to a *morality* of reading since the moral valence of the act-event is determined by the particular otherness involved.<sup>2</sup> Attridge’s recognition of this distinction makes his account of the relationship between literature and

ethics so much more astute than those of the many theorists and philosophers who have attempted to weld the literary to positive ethical value irrespective of the practicalities or consequences. Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* is a paradigmatic example but her thesis that reading the literary canon is an exercise of the moral imagination which is instrumentally valuable seems naïve in comparison to the inclusiveness and nuance of Attridge's alternative. His ethics also underscores an important aspect of reading that Nussbaum and other moralists ignore, the element of risk. To read a work of literature responsibly is to open oneself to being transformed by that work and there are no guarantees that the transformation will be a desirable one. If there were guarantees, then the work could not be truly transformative in the first place, which is precisely why the institution of literature requires perceptive, responsible, and sincere critics and theorists – like Attridge himself.

### Notes

1 John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 117.

2 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 126-7.

### Further Reading

Attridge, Derek, 1999, 'Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other,' *PMLA*, 114:1 (1999), 20-31.

Attridge, Derek, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Miller, J.Hillis, *The ethics of reading : Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

Nussbaum, Martha, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).