

What is Literature?

von
Arthur Gibson

1. Auflage

Peter Lang Bern 2007

Verlag C.H. Beck im Internet:
www.beck.de

ISBN 978 3 03910 916 6

Chapter One

Introduction

Sartre's What is Literature?

In the middle of the twentieth century Sartre invigorated the pulse of debate with his *What is Literature?* No extensive book with that title, by one author, specifically devoted to the title's topic, has been published since. So it is time for the next contribution. Perhaps some will assume that it is now too daunting a task to reduce the subject to the attention of one writer, to one book, especially with the flush of valuable highly specific research works on the vast areas of concern in the world's literatures. Yet it is not the absence of a sense of marked ignorance that has attracted me to write this book. Rather, precisely because scholars usually attend either to narrow recondite slices of investigation within literature, or write popular accounts, there is scant attention to or the absence of a type of sustained concentration upon, certain general questions or deep ones, though studies in comparative or specific language literatures, and ranges of theoretical explorations, thrive in their own valuable ways.

Hopefully, then, the opportunity is ripe for a philosopher, with research experience in some literatures, to form and address questions, in variously probing ways; or, as some may think, this is to embark foolishly on an impossible task. One might attempt to avoid the latter excess, by being careful not to tread on other scholars' feet; and offer a committee-like compromise (or compromised) statement on 'the' mean that seems to be the consensus of typical established dispositions about what is literature. Such a boring feat would assist my demise, and aid readers to sleep. There is also the issue, which many rightly suppose applies here: there is urgency to answer questions about how we might sustain and

revive good or sublime values. The present book offers a personal assessment, which is a challenging original interpretation. For the author, this is another part of his philosophy. For readers, it could be a provocation to disagree and do something equally different.

Although benefitting from Sartre's *What is Literature?* in various ways, the present work is not an introduction to Sartre; nor is it a survey of his literary philosophy; neither is it Sartrean, though it is not antithetical to a number of Sartre's concerns. It periodically engages with Sartre's study as a sounding board by which to speak, not least by way of contrast, to twenty-first-century concerns. My world view differs from Sartre's. I share some of his priorities, if not all his views: in addition to addressing theoretical questions about literature, this book considers how literature should be involved with fundamental practical problems. The present book sustains the view that there should be revolution, but not as with Sartre's emphasis on violent revolution. Rather, as Philip Allott concludes in his book, *The Health of Nations* (p.421): 'The necessary revolution is a world revolution. The world revolution is a revolution not in the streets but in our minds.' The present book is not academic policy. It concerns the identity of creativity, which, it will argue, is an internal condition for the emergence of pioneering practice that is sustainable for problem-solving.

Pursuing this combination of priorities, the use of the many literary examples is not for mere analytical attention. The close readings and general interpretation of literature convey my conception of how literature hangs together, in the knowledge that other readers' preferences properly differ. No authoritative claim is intended by this presentation of choice, though it nudges notions of diet and typicality.

The book is not concerned with the narrow form of philosophical method, though it is concerned with philosophical issues. This combination results in the exclusion of some subjects, while the book is an attempt broadly to engage with some fundamental problems of the question 'What is literature?' Unpalatable decisions have to be made when attempting to include answers to relevant questions within a book like the present one.

A philosophy of literature should attempt to tackle concerns in comparative literatures and varying cultures. The present book selects examples from ancient through to contemporary literature. Choice is also a function of the author's ignorance, as well as maverick roaming, albeit in, for example, specialist research in the widely separated areas of some ancient languages and contemporary languages such as French.

Philosophy with literature

The book's perspective is that of examining literary examples blended with philosophy. Some readers will be more familiar with philosophy, others with literature. One way the book attempts to resolve this difference is by introducing quite elementary information about both philosophical topics, and also literary background. If the literary specialist finds such trimmings redundant, please allow that others will not so read it. The same consideration applies to the philosophical reader. Nevertheless, even with basic material readers may find original details of interpretation. Although this book is not an introduction to what literature is, I have attempted to introduce the philosophical reader to literature, and the literary reader to philosophy, while moving on to typical instances of the meat that comprises both subjects, original interpretation of them, and their meeting of ways.

The use of examples

The book's manner of sometimes using – and repeatedly returning to – particular authors (while wishing no detriment to those who are not cited) relates to my symbolic use of their works to argue for a fresh philosophy of literature. Certain creative authors have been cited more than others. Sometimes this is due to their importance. On other occasions this frequency concerns the ways

an author typifies clusters of influences, which the present book pursues. For example Mallarmé's book-length poem *Un coup de dés* (*A Throw of the Dice*)¹ is repeatedly quoted and discussed in various parts of the present book, rather like a landmark being returned to – with refocused attention as a result of fresh triangulation utilising other sites. In this way an author is frequently employed as a sort of motif for interpreting a focus of influences or ideas in comparative perspectives. The absence of reference to or only brief mention of an author should not be interpreted as a negative judgement; on occasions it reflects my ignorance, however.

Although this book confers serious attention on specific narratives and their interpretation, it deliberately engages with a very diverse variety of literary examples with such frequency that this often prevents the detailed exposition to which a literary critic is accustomed. I cite some specialist literary researches published elsewhere, which can be studied in detail, including my own, to counterbalance this absence. These obliquely contribute to building up critical dialogue in the book, and supply readers with what are in effect recommendations for further immersion in the debate on the topics under consideration.

Another strategy of the book is to employ very familiar literary examples, such as those from the Brontës' writings. Those readers, whose familiarity is with philosophy, rather than literary research, might note that the present book contributes detailed original interpretation to such cases. Such interpretation arises out of extensive first-hand research on the original literary sources.²

Birth and death: Beginning and ending

Having spent time on many examples and issues throughout the first three Parts of the book, it will be helpful to show how its philosophy and approaches to interpretation of literature will

1 Abbreviation of the full title, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard*.

2 See, for example, my *Text and Tablet*.

obtain in sustained detailed study of two particular subjects towards the end of the book. Chapter 1 of the book commences with a study of the birth of literature. The final section of the book – Part Four – ends with death. It addresses two different types of literary examples, and secondarily their relations. The choice of these examples exemplifies attention to a priority for which the earlier parts of the book have prepared the way: a range of relations between the central and the marginal in the emergence and continuance of literary influence or its absence. The central example (Chapter 11) presents an original interpretation of the fate of Emily Brontë's second novel, and how it impinges on her family's literary perceptions in the last year of her life. Chapter 10 discusses a marginal case in literature: the perceptual world of autobiographical literature that is not published, and its relevance for the identity of published literature.

I have not hesitated to combine discussion of familiar or basic literary examples with unfamiliar or recondite issues. The former is often a bridge to the latter. This strategy is not for the sake of novelty. Its purpose is to explore the original and frequently unexpected connections that comprise literary identities and their collisions with themselves and our perceptions of them.

Counter-intuition

This stylistic custom – of connecting the familiar with the unexpected – involves a range of cases that displays a gradient, from mild surprise to those that may attract a feeling of irrelevance. With respect to the latter it is worth reading the section entitled 'Straight digressions and counter-intuitions', that presents the explicit rationale for this, and which draws on my account of counter-intuition. This has parallels with Diderot's employment of digression to discover fresh insights into normal literary sense. As suggested above, such digression provokes turbulence in a reader's assumptions about or in his or her consciousness of style. This destabilises the reader's sense of what is relevant and what is a plausible connection between literary elements.

I variously develop and implement this cluster of moves, and explore the subject of counter-intuition in literary creativity. This research together with some of my other books comprises the first publication of the philosophy of counter-intuition.³

3 See *God and the Universe* (Routledge, 2000), *Biblical Semantic Logic* (Continuum, 2001), *Metaphysics and Transcendence* (Routledge, 2003), *Text and Tablet* and *Counter-Intuition* (forthcoming).