

Aesthetic Investigations

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Interview

Special Issue – Is There Truth Through Fiction?

Literature and the Nugget of Knowledge.
An Interview with Derek Attridge and Peter
Lamarque.

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The idea of an interview with Peter Lamarque and Derek Attridge on the cognitive value of literary fiction arose in the wake of an aesthetics course on the relation between literature and truth at the University of Antwerp. In Spring 2015 Peter Lamarque contributed to this course with the lecture ‘The Opacity of Narrative and Fine-grained Reading’. In Spring 2017 Derek Attridge elaborated his view on the relation between literature and truth in his lecture ‘The Event of Truth: Literature’s Singular Relation to Knowledge’. After each lecture, we had the occasion to discuss with the author the stakes of the debate and we were rapidly convinced by the many points of convergence between their views, even though Derek Attridge is influenced by a continental approach to the theme whereas Peter Lamarque is obviously not. We intended to explore these similarities and differences through a face to face interaction and were happy that both thinkers accepted our invitation for an interview. This interview was conducted by Arthur Cools and Leen Verheyen in York on 9 July 2018.

Peter Lamarque and Derek Attridge, you have both been thinking and writing about what literature is and what literary works are. How would you define these two concepts?

PETER LAMARQUE: Analytic philosophers, of which I am one, are renowned for trying to define the concepts that they are discussing. But I have always been reluctant to attempt a definition of literature or art as I think in this case it is not needed or helpful. Nevertheless, one can say certain things that one feels are characteristic of literature. I suppose the obvious thing to say is that there seem to be different concepts at work when people use the term 'literature'. We have the very broad notion of literature, which includes more or less anything that is written. That does not involve us at all. But the two more prominent notions of literature do very much come into play. One is a general sense of fine writing or *belles lettres*, which is a purely evaluative concept of literature, and it includes not only imaginative works of fiction and poetry and drama, but also works such as biographies, works of history and philosophical treatises. These kinds of works are included principally because they are well written, because the language is of an elevated kind. This *belles lettres* sense of literature hangs over into the narrowest sense of the three, where literary works are a subset of certain kinds of writing which we describe as novels, drama, poetry, short stories, and so on. I say subset, because normally not every novel (or poem or drama) is counted as literature, although that is a matter of controversy. To call a novel a *work* of literature gives it a little bit more weight. You expect more from that. So there is a sort of evaluation. And certainly when I write about literature, while not offering a definition, it is that narrower sense that I am interested in. But it is very difficult to pin down. One might suppose that the key to it is fiction, but I have come to think more and more that poetry, for example, should not, at least automatically, be thought of as works of fiction. For a long time there was the assumption that poems are a kind of fiction spoken by a persona. But I have been persuaded by *Theory of the Lyric*, a recent book by Jonathan Culler, that actually it is wrong to think of a lot of lyric poetry as fictional at all.¹

So then, of course, thinking of a subclass of novels, short stories, drama and poetry as literature of the kind that we are concerned with, means asking the question: what do they have in common? And my view, which has become something of an orthodox view, and which I believe I share with Derek, is that there are no intrinsic qualities of a text in virtue of which it is a work of literature. There might be clear indications that a certain kind of text is a work of literature, but I think the idea of trying to define literature in terms of specific rhetorical, textual or formal features alone is probably not going to work.

So I am inclined to think that you have to locate literature within a practice, a practice which is very loosely rule-governed or convention-governed, whereby certain texts are seen as inviting a certain kind of response or appreciation or attitude. And readers in turn come to such works with expectations of what kind of work it is and therefore what kind of appreciation might be appropriate or might be rewarded for a work of that kind. Now lots more has to be said about that, but that is the grounding where I would put literature. I would not try to define it, but I would characterise it in terms of certain kinds of texts that are offered to reward a certain kind of interest or appreciation.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: I agree. Literature, like art in general, is not something we can define, for reasons that are not just accidental. Artists have continually found ways to go beyond whatever prevailing norms are at work around the production and perception of art. A constitutive feature of art is that it cannot be defined. But we can of course talk about it and characterise it, as Peter says. Just the fact that in different periods and different parts of the globe different bodies of works have been called literature, is one indication, I think, that literature is not a fixed and final subdivision of textual bodies, but is something that is continually being re-examined and rethought by a succession of artists and critics as culture evolves. I also agree with Peter that there is a kind of reciprocal situation where the literariness of a work emerges only when it is read in a particular way, but certain works lend themselves more fully to that kind of reading than others, and my interest is in those that lend themselves to a literary reading.

For me, what is particularly important about those works and those ways of reading, is that the point of the reading, putting it very simply, is not to carry away some nugget of knowledge about the world or some moral truth about how real people should live their lives, some fact about the Napoleonic wars or whatever the subject of the work might be. These outcomes can all be characteristic of the reading experience, but they are equally true of readings of non-literary works. Louise Rosenblatt, a very interesting American critic who died a decade or so ago, talks about *efferent* readings, readings that carry something away, which would be non-literary readings of a text. For me, a text becomes a work of literature when it is the experience of reading it, hearing it, or seeing it performed which constitutes the value or importance to the reader, listener or viewer. It is not anything that that person could put into words afterwards as the message or the truth that the work has conveyed, but rather something that has happened during the course of the experience that has left that individual different. It is to be hoped the change has been for the better, but you cannot say that it is always a good thing to have read a certain work of literature or watched a certain play. It could actually be dangerous or damaging. However, for the most part what occurs during the event of the literary work is a healthy change.

*This reminds me of something you write in the introduction of *The Singularity of Literature*, where you state that ‘literature [...] solves no problems and saves no souls’, but that it is effective, even if its effect is not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program.² What kind of effectivity do you have in mind when talking in this way about literature?*

DEREK ATTRIDGE: At the beginning of that book I wanted to make it clear that, although I am a sceptic when it comes to many of the claims that are made about literature and art in general as being politically efficacious or morally improving, I strongly believe that literature *does* something. What I set my face against, is what I call instrumental readings, readings of literary works with the assumption that literature could and should be read in order to fulfil a certain external and already accepted purpose or agenda. If a poem by Shelley rouses the workers to strike, it is not because it is a great poem; it is because something else in that piece of writing has worked on his readers with particular force. If I say I am a sceptic with regard to the instrumental function of literature, it might sound as though I am saying that literature is useless, that it is just fun, but that it does not make a difference in the world. But I believe that it does; I believe that literature, and the arts more generally, are potent presences and events within a culture, though they are not easily controllable. So when talking about effectivity, I am talking about the fact that a work of literature that functions *as* literature, opens doors and introduces what I call otherness into the reader’s field of assumptions, habits and ways of seeing the world. The literary work is effective in expanding horizons or introducing new ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding the world, but not in a manner that could be formulated as a moral lesson or a nugget of truth. And we are not necessarily talking about contemporary art: one can read Greek tragedy or Shakespearian comedy and have the experience of a new world being opened up, even if one cannot say exactly what that experience was when one leaves the theatre or puts down the book. One feels enriched in some way, sometimes maybe shaken up quite devastatingly, at other times maybe just aware that the colouring with which one sees the world has changed slightly. But if the work is functioning as art, the experience of it is an event that will leave the individual not quite the same as they were when they started it.

PETER LAMARQUE: I completely agree. When I was giving the characteristics of literary works, I should have included that we should think of them, as it seems we both agree, as works of art. Now, in a way, we easily take that for granted, but there was a time in the twentieth century, in literary criticism and in literary theory, when that was not an assumption that was made. Actually, people thought that seeing literature as art took it away from where it really belonged, which might be politics or activism or being what Sartre called ‘*engagée*’. Of course, works of art might do that as well. But if you assume that works of literature are works of art, this actually

affects quite a lot of things one might want to say about literature. If you think of other works of art, such as music, film, painting, and so on, and you put literature into that category, then that gives an insight into the values we might seek in literature and in the importance of, as Derek has pointed out, experience when we are talking about literature.

And I certainly agree with Derek's remarks about instrumental values, and in particular political or moral values. I too do not think that the value of literature is primarily an instrumental value, in the sense that it is designed to change political behaviour or moral thought. It might have those effects, but I do not think that is a primary value of literature and I think that is where the truth-debate really bites. If you think that these instrumental values are not the key to the values of literature, then you are going to have to say something rather different about truth as a value for literature.

So I agree with Derek that the idea that literature offers us some kind of nugget of knowledge or moral truth, a sort of take-away detachable proposition which gives the work its interest and its value, is very reductive and not the best way to think of literature. If you start with literature as art, as offering some kind of experience, you are less inclined to think of literature in terms of something that offers us nuggets of knowledge. There are lots of ways of reading literary works, lots of kinds of interests. There are sociological interests, psychological interests, historical interests, . . . The famous works of literature can be read in all sorts of ways, but there is something distinctive about reading these kinds of works *as* literature, which sets it apart from reading it as, for instance, history or sociology. What I am insisting on is that works of literature can illicit lots of kinds of interests, not necessarily literary interest, and what I think Derek and I and others are trying to do, is to identify what it is to take a specifically literary interest in a work and to read it from a literary point of view. What kind of interest, what kind of response, does that entail? And that, I think, is the starting point for the discussion on truth and the relevance of truth to the kind of response sought in a work *as* a work of literature.

And is this criticism of an instrumental approach of literature the most important reason you defend, what you call, a 'no-truth' theory of literature?

PETER LAMARQUE: That phrase, 'no-truth', is actually an expression that the philosopher R.K. Elliot used in his paper 'Poetry and Truth', in which he saw himself as attacking theories that denied the relevance of truth in poetry.³ So, rather cheekily, Stein Olsen and I thought that that was the very theory we would like to advance. Of course, 'no-truth' is a provocative phrase. In fact Olsen and I made clear in our book *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* that there are all kinds of connections between works of literature and truth.⁴ Literary critics, for instance, presumably aim at truth, they want to say something true about the works they are discussing. And, of course, there

are lots of facts that one can learn from novels, plays, and poems. Even when they are works of fiction, they nearly always have a setting in the real world and we can learn about the setting. So, of course, one can pick up facts, and thus truths, and learn something about a place, a people, a period, a style of dress, etiquette, and so on. There are lots of facts that one can pick up from works of literature. It is absurd to deny that.

So the ‘no-truth’ theory is essentially a view about value and the value of literature. It is not saying that there are no truths in works of literature. The question is whether truth is one of the values that one seeks in literature. And that is a much more difficult question. I think the truth-debate is a debate about value and about those so-called deep insights into human beings or human nature, about human psychology or morality, that are sometimes taken to be the very essence of literature. And there is something right about that, there is something right in saying that the great Russian novels or the Shakespearian tragedies, to take the obvious examples, represent and explore deep issues about human behaviour, human psychology. That could not be denied. And then the question is how that relates to truth. Do we value such works because they are offering us truths we can extract from the works? That, I suggest, is not the right way of thinking about it.

But these great works are indeed exploring something about humanity and they seem to be making an important contribution precisely in exploring it through fictional representations, through works of the imagination, rather than through works of psychology or philosophy or sociology. They make us reflect, they offer an experience, they shape our imaginings. For me, there are different modes of thought here: on the one hand, you have got scientific, philosophical, psychological explorations of those big ideas, on the other, you have got imaginative, literary explorations of very similar ideas. But the former call for rational, truth-focused appraisal, while the latter invoke something quite different, an enriched experience, a stretching of the imagination. I am sure that you need both. You need to have the imaginative exploration. Literary works offer finely crafted imaginative depictions of people behaving, interacting in a certain way, making moral choices, confronting tragedy, finding redemption. As such they provide a deeper experience of some of the big concepts we are interested in as human beings, like human obligation, mortality, choice, despair, and so on. You might have all the scientific study of that you like, but something is missing: the imaginative realisation of these ideas in the great works of art.

I’d be happy to say there are different kinds of truth here, the broadly scientific and the artistic. But they shouldn’t be conflated – one characterises propositions, the other, kinds of experience – and speaking of truth in both contexts can be highly misleading. In other artforms as well we find artistic realisation of ideas, yielding their own visions (pictorial as well as linguistic) of the human world. My view is that the scientific and philosophical exploration of these ideas is not in competition with the artistic, as if you have to choose. Again we surely need both.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: Again, I agree with pretty much everything Peter has just said. I agree that we cannot simply ignore the experience readers have had for centuries that great works of art, and, in particular, great works of literature, are true. There is a feeling of deep, powerful truths being conveyed in some way, and we cannot say that this is just the result of bad faith or ignorance or is not the right way to read. I am not in the game of prescribing how we should read; I am interested in what this experience of the literary is. What does it mean to feel that one is being exposed to truths, to something that is profoundly true? For me, an important term to understand this feeling is otherness. When a writer succeeds in producing a work of literature that is genuinely new, a work that genuinely says something of importance within its time and place, it seems to me that this achievement entails the ability to find, through a heightened sensitivity to the culture, something within that culture that is not quite what it seems and behind which lurks something that the culture is not able to accept as true, or real, or valuable. If you look at the history of Western art you see that every artist is trying to do something new, every artist is trying to find ways to introduce into the culture something that this culture is unaware of. That is my sense of otherness, something other that the culture has excluded or is not able to acknowledge, even though it might be something that the culture depends on. It might be the hidden truth, if that is the right word, that enables the culture to exist. If an artist can manipulate the materials of their art in order to open these new spaces, they are not simply bringing something contingently new into being, something that people happened not to have thought about before, but they are actually bringing into the light something deeply important and true. And, for me, this sense of truth means that the reader is acknowledging, and is being moved by, a way of understanding human beings, human relationships or social norms that had been obscured. What makes this a literary event is that it is not truth as a proposition about the world that is at stake, but the *experience* of a truth.

The big problem this view produces, and it is one that I am still wrestling with, is how it is possible for me to read Jane Austen or Philip Sidney, who were writing in completely different cultural circumstances, and still feel that they are opening doors for me, that they are still exposing ways of feeling, ways of thinking, ways of being that had been closed off to me. That is an issue to which I think more attention needs to be given, and perhaps somebody else will come up with a better answer than the one I have so far been able to articulate.

PETER LAMARQUE: Furthermore, there is the question of what makes some works of art survive across time and retain their interest whereas others, one assumes the majority, simply die out. They might have been immensely popular at the time they were written, but a generation or two generations later they are gone. What makes some works survive, able to retain their interest? One sort of clichéd answer, but I think there is an underlying

truth in the cliché, is that such writers or artists in some way transcend the circumstances of their writing and offer something more universal, something that will resonate in different periods or different cultural contexts, whereas so many others simply fail to do that.

Some years ago, I wrote an essay where I was playing with those ideas. It was not about literature; I took as an example that well-known painting by Jacques-Louis David of the death of Marat. At its inception, the painting was used as a piece of propaganda for the revolutionaries in France in the early 1790s. And then, when the tide turned and Robespierre was executed, David avoided the guillotine by the slimmest of margins. A lot of people thought his painting ought to be destroyed, because it was just a piece of errant propaganda for a regime of Terror that had come to be despised. But David managed to hide it away. About fifty years later, the painting was rediscovered in a completely different context; in fact, Baudelaire was one of the first to recontextualise it. Now it was assimilated into eighteenth century French Classicism. Although David's historical paintings had dropped out of favour, this one seemed to resonate with people. And now it is one of the most popular paintings in the Brussels Art Museum; people flock to see it, they love it. Is it because they are all revolutionaries? Are they persuaded that Marat was a friend of the people at whatever cost? Now, of course, much of the 'aura' of the original has gone, and it has transmuted into just a very clever, powerful image from the revolutionary past.

I was using this example as a sort of case study of the way that a work begins life with one instrumental end in mind, in this case propaganda, and then grows into arthood, and becomes admired for its own sake, as we might say, as a work of art. And I think this happens with literature, it happens with other works of art. They begin life in a very specific context, with a very specific end, and then, as the generations go by, that initial context is diluted or lost or forgotten and the works that survive come to be judged quite differently. Does it matter? Maybe as an art historian you better know what the origins are, but the works grow into, and seem to reward, a different kind of appreciation. One is inclined to think there must be something about an image like that that allows this to happen, for it to transcend its circumstances so that it retains some interest, a different interest no doubt, but retains an interest across time.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: The David painting is a fascinating example, but I am not sure that it can really be used to defend the idea of universal values. You might say, rather, that it shows us in fact how cultural value changes, that when a work of art falls out of favour and is rediscovered later it is because of cultural change. The poetry of John Donne is an interesting example of this. People in the nineteenth century found his poems virtually unreadable, but readers like T.S. Eliot saw them as one of the pinnacles of English poetry, because poetry and the arts in the early twentieth century were much more conducive to the appreciation of what was in those works. For

me the important question is whether or not those rediscovered qualities were the *same* qualities that Donne's original readers saw in his poems, whether one can match up those initial responses in the seventeenth century to the twentieth century responses. I do not know. There may be a certain amount of chance here in the fact that David's painting happened to suit the viewers who rediscovered it later in the century. What was at work may have been to some degree coincidence, the historical coincidence that the time is once again suitable for the appreciation of a particular work of art.

PETER LAMARQUE: I take the point you are making. I wonder how much chance does play. To some extent it is chance that this painting was not destroyed, it was chance that it cropped up again, and so on, but there has to be a quality there. Surely Donne is a wonderful example: the quality is there, people like Eliot recognised the quality, but it does not happen to every work. The ones that just disappear are very likely not be rediscovered, unless they have got something, some sort of universal value, some sort of quality, that allows them to be appreciated in this new context, because it does not happen all that often. When it does happen, one story to be told is that there is something here, a mark of genius as it were, which is being revealed.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: I think we do differ at a very basic level there, because for me a notion like quality or value is dependent on the one doing the valuing, the one who is pointing out the quality of the work. For me, works of literature are both produced and read as cultural artefacts, and there is no outside of the culture that can be said to be the source of what they are valued for. The quality of a Donne poem is there because we can see it. His work had no value in the nineteenth century because there was no way of accessing something that could be called value. So, for me, value is not something that is permanently there and simply not recognised in certain periods. It does actually disappear and then comes into existence again, as the same or different. We are back to the question of whether literary works have literariness built into them which we just simply respond to or whether we approach literary works in order to, as it were, activate their potential literariness.

PETER LAMARQUE: So you do not see it as discovering value, but simply as giving it value. There is a lot more to be said here! I believe there is a distinction – a thin line admittedly but an important one – between something's being valuable and something's being valued. I do not think they just collapse. If I am right in putting words into your mouth, you think they do collapse: to be valuable is just to be valued by someone.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: Well, by a large enough body to constitute a cultural norm, yes; certainly not by an individual. It is not because I find something valuable that it can therefore be pronounced valuable. There has to be agreement among a community of readers.

Peter, in The Opacity of Narrative, you describe a literary reading of a literary work as 'reading for opacity'.⁵ Is 'reading for opacity' then the way in which we encounter the value of a literary work?

PETER LAMARQUE: Basically, the idea of opacity is that when you read a work *as* literature you engage the content through the form. And that means that the content is given through its mode of presentation. I see it ultimately in terms of ways of reading: you can read any work opaquely or transparently. If you read a work opaquely, then you think of the content through the form, you envisage it, you imagine it, think about it, you engage with it, specifically through this form of expression and one might think, certainly in poetry, that there is no other way to do that. You engage with the imagery, metaphors and thoughts in a poem through their presentation in this form. But surely it is also true with novels. If you are interested in it as a work of literature and as a work of art, you must be interested in the way the content is presented, the way the characters are presented. In the transparent mode of reading, which is maybe the mode of reading through which most people approach novels, the primary interest is not the way the content is presented, but simply the content itself, however expressed.

A prime example of transparent reading is an adaptation of a novel in film. Most people nowadays know Jane Austen's novels through the famous film adaptations. And these adaptations are fine and they introduce you to the characters, the story, the plot, and so on, but they do so, in my terms, transparently. They are not introducing you to this through Jane Austen's text, they are not concerned with the mode in which these characters were introduced originally. If your only knowledge of a Jane Austen novel, or any other novel that has been adapted, is through a film version of it, that is fine, it introduces you transparently to the story and the characters, but it is not part of literary appreciation. It could not be, because you are not looking at it, or attending to it, opaquely.

The difference between a transparent and an opaque reading is most clear when you compare it to a glass. If it is a transparent glass, you look through it to something else. With an opaque glass, you look at the glass. And so, to read opaquely is to look at the form, in effect. But it is not to attend just to the form, you are not just interested in the metaphors or the verbs or the uses of the definite article, or some such, you are looking at the content through the form. That seems to me the absolutely standard way in which literature is taught: you are taught to read opaquely. It is certainly the way you are taught to read poetry.

I already said that I think that literature cannot be defined, but I think we could characterise the opaque reading of literature as an essential response to it *as* literature. And I think it comes out most clearly in poetry because the idea that form and content in poetry are somehow deeply intertwined is something of a commonplace in poetic reading. Perhaps it is less of a

commonplace in relation to the novel, but I think everyone who thinks about it would realise that opaque readings of novels, which is attending to the mode of the text, the textual qualities and properties, and so on, is the literary way. So I have a problem, for example, with novels in translation, because reading a novel in translation is essentially reading it transparently, unless you think of the translation as in itself a new work to be read opaquely. And if it is a really good translation, you are indeed reading it as a novel in its own right, as a work of art in its own right. But, strictly speaking, it is a transparent reading of the original. A translation is always a transparent reading of a novel, because you are using a different vehicle to try to capture the same content.

Is the aesthetic experience then closely related to this principle of opacity?

PETER LAMARQUE: Yes, because the aesthetic experience is an experience of the content through the form. This is also the way in which people are taught to read: look at the symbolism, look at the sentence structure. . . . You do not have to be obsessive about it, but you are understanding the content through the form.

So what is the difference between your position and formalism?

PETER LAMARQUE: Formalism could mean many different things. There is, for instance, an extreme kind of formalism, the one that is advocated by someone like Clive Bell, who simply dismisses or downplays representational content, particularly in painting. The only thing that matters is an artwork's significant form, as he called it. I am certainly not of that kind. Of course you have to be interested in the content of a novel, even if you are attending to that content through the form. Over and over, I have been described as a formalist, but that is unfair. I talk about interpretation, I talk about the themes being explored in literary works and the way they arise out of, and give shape to, the work's subject. This highlights both thematic and subject content. But I am still seen as a formalist. Basically, this is connected to the 'no-truth' theory: if I am not interested in truth, it is said, then I must be a kind of formalist. Because truth, for such critics, is a way of characterising content, and if I am dismissing truth, I am dismissing content.

But does then, according to you, the content have an aesthetic relevance? Would you accept that a content-oriented reading could still evoke an aesthetic experience?

PETER LAMARQUE: If you are attending to the content, in the way that I am describing, opaquely, you are attending to it through the form. In that way, you have an aesthetic appreciation of the content, but the content characterised in this fine-grained way. What I am saying is that form and

content are indivisible. This indivisibility of form and content is usually associated with poetry, but I do not think it is restricted to poetry. I think it is a feature of literature. Literature *as* literature. Again, if you have a historical or geographical or sociological interest in a work of literature, then I think your interest is transparent. You are transparently looking through the work's mode of expression to an independent reality beyond, which becomes the focus of interest separate from aesthetic experience, and while that is a totally legitimate way of reading, I do not think it is reading it as literature.

Derek, the way you use the notion of singularity seems to be somewhat similar to this notion of opacity, although there is another dimension to it as well.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: Yes, you might think of singularity in other terms, but the way I think of it is very closely connected to ideas of form. What I emphasise and Peter does not is that for me form means something that happens in the event, in the experience of reading. So I also see the sequences of events that make up the plot of a novel, for instance, as an aspect of its form. I would not go as far as Peter as to say that a translation is simply a transparent version of a novel, because what will survive in most translations would be things like the sequence in which things happen and the way in which tension is built up. If form is something that happens during the reading of a work of literature, it is part of what distinguishes the experience of a particular work from the experience of every other work, and this contributes to its singularity. However, the singularity of a work of literature lies not in its uniqueness, its difference from everything else, in the sense of a particular which has no relation to the general or universal, but rather in the way in which the general norms, general habits, general ways of thinking and feeling are given focus as a nexus within a specific reading event.

It is also important to remember that we are responding to the author's creative work and not simply to a text, even if it is Sophocles we are responding to. In reading one of his plays today I am enjoying something he created in its singularity at a particular historical moment and that singularity is the singularity precisely of form and content coming together in an inseparable way. (Whether that singularity was the same for Sophocles and his original audience as for us is a problem we have already touched on.) Now, I am not able to read *Antigone* in ancient Greek but I do so in two or three modern translations to try to get what I can of the original, and I would say that a fair amount of the formal singularity experienced by a present-day reader of Greek – and perhaps by the original audience, too – survives in these translations, even when the subtlety of individual words is lost. When I have to rely on a translation, I hope that the translator has found some way of using the English language to create what Peter is calling opacity – opacity that does not stand in the way of, but that actually enhances the sense of the truthfulness of the work.

In The Singularity of Literature, you stressed the fact that reading a literary work is a far more complex event than is usually assumed in the way one talks about it. In what way is this complexity related to the inseparability of form and content?

DEREK ATTRIDGE: There is an awful lot going on in allowing the form to do its work. If you read poetry well, you are not thinking ‘oh, yes, this is a sonnet and therefore there will be another rhyme here’. The rhyme is actually doing its work on you and you are responding to the rhyme at the same time as you are responding to the two words that are rhyming and to the potential connections between them. They may be completely contrasting words. They may be reinforcing one another. That is how I see form as working with, sometimes against, content. It is possible for the sounds to be mellifluous, but the content to be shockingly brutal.

This inseparability of form and content that you both stress can be seen as a critique to some evolutions within literary theory. Researchers nowadays for instance often use digital methods to analyse opacity, such as computer generated programs that are able to analyse the distinctive features of a certain literary style. But, in a way, these kinds of analyses put content and the reading experience between brackets.

PETER LAMARQUE: I share your reservations about that. One thing that seems to be lost is indeed the idea of experience. When you have a computer grinding out the stylistic peculiarities of a text, that might give you some sort of data which might help explain why certain passages have the resonance or the effect they do, but it does not seem to promote an experience in any deep way.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: The idea of meaning is important here. Part of what a writer may be doing in being inventive, to use the term that I take from Derrida, is to introduce new meanings into a culture. Take the example of Joyce, who, in *Ulysses*, did lots of things for the first time which were hugely influential; I still revere him partly because no self-respecting novelist after Joyce can ignore the fact of *Ulysses*. There is a scene early on in *Ulysses* in which Leopold Bloom goes to the outdoor lavatory at the back of his house and is described defecating – for the first time, as far as I know, in the history of the novel. What is important is not just the fact that this bodily function is being described but also the fact that the genre of the novel is being expanded in such a way as to allow this description to take place. Joyce does not just shatter convention by using words or depicting scenes that have not been written or depicted before, he reconceptualises the genre of the novel in order to make it possible to do these things. And every writer after him has gained new capabilities, new capacities. I think this kind of – as Kant calls it – exemplary originality, where you are not just being

original, but you are original in a way that others can build on, is crucial to the operation of literature. Exemplary originality can involve meaning, but not in a simple way, not just something that had not been written before, but by using form, using the opacity of the novel, in order to make it possible to say things that had not been said before. So I do think in that sense theme or content or meaning can be part of the singularity and inventiveness of the work – and therefore part of the experience of the reader. For me, then, meaning is a verb. It is something that happens. It is not *the* meaning or *a* meaning. What matters in the literary work is the way meanings follow one another, working together or in tension.

And what is the role of interpretation in this story? Derek, in your book on Coetzee you object to allegorical readings of his novels.⁶ Are those kinds of readings a way of extracting the meaning of the novel, of looking for a nugget of truth, instead of letting the form work, having the event of reading?

DEREK ATTRIDGE: Absolutely, yes. There is no prohibition against reading something allegorically and if, for instance, you are reading Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and you do not read it allegorically, you are missing a great part of the point of the book. But that is not reading it *as* literature, that is reading it as a guide to religious thought and moral behaviour. To read *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a work of literature means that you are responding to the opacity of the writing, to the way the form emerges as you read. And you can do these things together. I suspect that if you picked up *The Pilgrim's Progress* and read it with full enjoyment, you would both be registering the allegory and be enjoying and being moved by the power of the writing and the way in which it is written. As for interpretation, it is going on all the time. If the work has meaning for you, as you read it, it is because the process of interpretation is at work. And this process of interpretation is part of the experience of the literariness of the work. One of my constant complaints about the criticism I read today, in student papers or PhD's in literature departments, is that there is such a pressure to say clever things about texts that I think half the time people are just doing that, rather than honestly interrogating their own experience and saying what the work did to and for them, as they read it. Critics sometimes find wonderful allegories and analogies, or integrate great historical detail, but leave behind the experience of reading, which should be central.

PETER LAMARQUE: I agree certainly with Derek about the importance of experience. But I am not sure whether interpretation goes on all the time. Monroe Beardsley made a distinction between explication, elucidation, and interpretation. Explication is just the process of getting to grips with the meanings of the sentences that you find in a novel or a poem. Elucidation is trying to reconstruct the world of the work and, if it is a novel, the world of action, plot, character, and of what is actually happening. But interpretation,

Beardsley proposed, is distinct from either of these and resides in the pursuit of themes or theses. Themes are very often single concepts (grief, love, trust) partially capturing what a literary work is about beyond its immediate subject matter. Themes can be identified non propositionally (as with these single concepts), but theses, of course, are propositions. And only at that point does interpretation overlap with the truth issue.

But, returning to the thought that we do interpretation all the time, if you are just reading a novel and you are understanding the sentences and grasping the characterisation, I do not think of that as necessarily involving interpretation. When I talk about interpretation, I tend to think of it in the same terms as Beardsley did, although I am less inclined to use the idea of a thesis. If you characterise a theme with a proposition (e.g. 'Individuals can never escape their past'), then it is a thesis, as he describes it, but to me it is still a theme, described or identified in a proposition.

And then the question is: what is the point of the themes? I think that identifying themes in a novel is a way of enriching the experience that you are having, because you are setting the particulars of the novel in a broader conceptual framework. It is a way of connecting particulars, episodes, characters, and so on. So interpretation, as I see it, is very much part of an aesthetic response to a work. It enriches the aesthetic experience that you are having by characterising some wider context to make sense of the particulars. And that can deepen imaginative experience. Now, of course, not all readers read thematically. But it is a mark of literature in addition to the opacity that we have talked about, to invite and reward a thematic reading, to engage an interest in a broader perspective that is on offer in a work. Beyond the particulars, you have to grasp some wider vision, you have to make sense of what is going on, why it matters, where things are going, how things connect, That is where interpretation comes in and where its value lies.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: The way you describe interpretation, with which I entirely agree, is very much in terms of interpreting as you read.

PETER LAMARQUE: Oh, yes. It is not something that happens at the end. In that sense, it goes on all the time.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: And in fact, when you realise something is going on thematically, it can actually change the way you read the particulars.

PETER LAMARQUE: Yes, how do you understand the particulars until you have understood the point, the bigger picture? If that is what you meant by interpretation going on all the time, I entirely agree. But on the question whether interpretation relates to truth: the fundamental aim of interpretation, even if it is in terms of propositions, is to shed light on the work. If you are interested in truth, it is not in shedding light on the work, it is a matter of shedding light on the world outside the work.

So, if you are reading Kafka, for example, and you are experiencing a dark vision of humans being oppressed by bureaucracy and mindlessness, it is natural to ask, of course, whether that is true of the world we live in. My

own view is that I would like to think that it is not true broadly speaking of human reality. It is not true of all lives at all times that we are just oppressed by the weight of authority or forces that we do not understand. It happens sometimes, but it does not happen all the time. So, as a vision of human life, suggesting something deep about human nature, it might not be (literally, scientifically) true. But, as a theme of the novel, you can say that it is true for instance of the world of *The Trial*. This powerful thematic vision given through interpretation heightens, and perhaps explains, our interest in the novel. It might be a good interpretation, it might be a bad one. Maybe it is a misreading of the novel, so you have to assess it, but that is an assessment of the truth of the interpretation to the novel.

But the interesting point is that some such interpretative theses could be true of the novel, but false, broadly speaking, of the real world itself. My thought about interpretation is that the more important side is what it says about the work: does it enhance the experience we have of the work? Does it stir the imagination? In that sense interpretation is inward looking when you are making these connections, when you are connecting the particulars under some conceptual arch or framework, rather than constantly asking whether this vision or theme is applicable to the real world. That is a question you can ask, but I do not think it is the interesting one. Partly because it is often very difficult to assess the truth of that. Is the sort of Kafkian vision of the world or Samuel Beckett's vision of the world or Camus' vision of the world true to the real world? How do you ever judge that? That looks like a big psychological, sociological question, which is probably unanswerable, because it is such a generality. It is not particularly interesting. But what is really interesting, is that all these authors offer us very powerful, well described, finely delineated imaginative visions which play around in our minds. It could be very important for us, to have that as a resource, to have in our mental economy, to have been through that experience. It is doing something for me, experientially, which I might not otherwise have been exposed to and above all we have been in the presence of great works of art.

Another problem when you try to extract the truth from a novel, is that you then in a way only allow for one possible interpretation to be 'true'.

PETER LAMARQUE: Possibly. Although I think Beardsley would recognise that we might identify different theses in a work. And that seems right.

But can they all be true? Maybe you can identify different theses that contradict one another.

PETER LAMARQUE: Yes. There is a wonderful article by Torsten Pettersson, who argues there can be multiple well-grounded interpretations of any given work, even ones that contradict each other.⁷ He gives the example of *King Lear*. There can be a perfectly intelligible nihilistic reading of *Lear*,

which says that all is hopeless and the world is without meaning. But there can also be a ‘redemptivist’ reading where the idea is that this is the suffering you have to go through in order to be redeemed later, in the afterlife. That is a sort of Christian reading. And he thinks that there is strong evidence in the play for both of those readings, even if, because they are incompatible, you cannot hold in mind the nihilist and the redemptivist perspective at the same time. Now it is debatable whether or not the play sustains both of those readings; maybe there are reasons why one is stronger than the other. That is a matter of assessing an interpretation. But supposing they are each sustainable, that really makes it difficult for any take-home moral lesson. What do you take home from *Lear*? Perhaps if you are a depressive character, you take home the nihilist reading. But, going back to my earlier point, how do you assess that more widely? How could you possibly assess it as a truth about the world? And does that matter? As an imaginative vision, which we can hold in mind and think about, it is very powerful indeed. But I reiterate the point that its being powerful, interesting and engaging is something quite different from its being true of the actual world.

There is still one question that I wanted to ask. We could say that there is a transformation going on in the way people encounter fiction today. Thanks to the technological revolution, people discover the themes we were debating in a very different way, starting from, for instance, video games and films. Does that change the basics of the debate? Will there be a future generation for which fiction will no longer start from a notion of opacity or singularity?

PETER LAMARQUE: I guess the opacity indeed gets lost, but what does not get lost, is the idea of theme, some bigger picture. But reading for opacity does not seem to be so relevant. If you are a student of film, then you are the sort of person who freezes a clip from a film and you analyze it deeply. You study what techniques are used, what is going on, what we are prompted to see. And that looks like a kind of opaque reading, because it is attending to the form. But I doubt whether children would respond in that way. But they never did, they always, in a sense, read transparently, because the stories that are written for children are not meant to be opaquely read. But as long as there is something like literary education, people are going to be trained in something like opaque reading. I do not see how it could be different.

DEREK ATTRIDGE: I think that there is a real danger that intense and complex verbal experience is going to diminish. But I do not see why the visual experience should not be as intense and complex. The singularity of the videoclip is just as singular as the singularity of the sonnet. I think there are losses and gains. Maybe successive generations will be far more visually acute and far more sensitive to the formal arrangements of the visual than we are, with our bookish interests. So I am sad, because my whole life has been

enriched, to use that word again, by what I read, but I am not pessimistic, in the sense that I do not think culture is going to become a feeble thing if the visual starts to play a bigger role than the verbal.

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NOTES

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| 1. Culler 2017. | 4. Olsen 1994. |
| 2. Attridge 2004b, 4. | 5. Lamarque 2014. |
| 3. Elliott 1967. | 6. Attridge 2004a. |
| | 7. Pettersson 2002. |

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