

MCGREGOR, RAFE. *The Value of Literature*. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016, xii + 161 pp., \$120 hardcover.

In this brief but dense monograph, Rafe McGregor develops an argument for literary autonomism, understood as the claim that literary value is not instrumental but final. While there are many values associated with literature—literary works can be cognitively, morally, and even financially rewarding, for instance—there is only one value characteristic of literature *qua* literature. McGregor argues, following Malcolm Budd, that this value must be a value of the experience of literary appreciation and, further, that this experience is one of literary thickness: the inseparability of form and content in a literary work. If literary thickness is in fact characteristic of the experience of literary appreciation, then literary value is final, since pleasure is uncontroversially a final value and literary appreciation is a kind of pleasure. I will give a brief overview of each chapter before raising some critical comments about the book's structure, several steps of the argument, and McGregor's treatment of instrumentalism. Although I did not find myself swayed to the autonomist camp, I believe that everyone working in the philosophy of literature will benefit from considering McGregor's probing line of inquiry.

Following a succinct and informative Preface, Chapter 1 constitutes an introduction, with helpful orienting discussion of types of value, the relationship between literature and fiction (McGregor stipulates that he regards “the literary stance as characteristically incorporating the fictive stance” (p. 11), thus setting aside discussion of non-fiction literature), various candidate literary values, and the distinction between autonomism and heteronomism about literary value. Here McGregor distinguishes autonomism from its less plausible cousins, such as formalism (the view that the representational elements of art are irrelevant to its appreciation) and aestheticism (the view that art is the supreme end of life). Chapter 2 charitably lays out the views of McGregor's primary antagonists, Noël Carroll and Martha Nussbaum, who then disappear from the argument until the final Chapter 7, which responds to their arguments using resources from the autonomist position. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present McGregor's conception of poetic, narrative, and literary thickness, respectively, arguing that the experience of a literary work is one in which the demand for form-content inseparability is satisfied. The ordering of these chapters reflects the intuition that poetry is the most obvious candidate genre in which readers attend to the integration of form and content, whereas it might seem that other literary genres could be read, *qua* literature, for content only. The crucial Chapter 6,

“Literary Value,” contains the completed autonomist argument from literary thickness, and a reader pressed for time could profitably read that chapter alone.

One curious feature of the book’s structure is that neither Carroll nor Nussbaum is committed to denying literary thickness. In fact, as McGregor acknowledges, Nussbaum positively insists that form and content cannot be separated in the experience of a literary work (p. 44). This elevates the dialectical interest of McGregor’s argument, since he takes on board a claim typically associated with heteronomist approaches to literature, but it also places significant weight on the final premise of his argument, namely that literary value is final if literary appreciation is characterized by literary thickness (more on this below).

That said, there is much to recommend in McGregor’s wide-ranging middle chapters. Leaning heavily on Peter Lamarque’s notion of opacity, McGregor argues that form-content inseparability—which should not be confused with identity or indistinguishability—is a relation such that “once form (or content) is separated from the work (the form-content unity), it is no longer identical with the form (or content) in that work” (p. 51). The London described in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) is not identical with the London described in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), and a reader whose interest lies solely in gaining historical facts about turn-of-the-century England will thus neglect much of literary value. In particular, such a reader will miss out on the function that descriptions of London play “in the work as a unified whole” (p. 115). Again following Lamarque, McGregor insists that literary thickness is not, strictly speaking, a property of literary works, but an interest we take in, or a demand placed on, literature. Genuine works of literature are such as to reward that demand, yielding satisfying experiences of appreciating the function—to illumine the complexities of multiculturalism, to depict the anxieties of upper-middle-class Londoners during the early years of the Iraq War—of “formed content” (p. 107). Meeting the demand for literary thickness is thus a necessary condition on whether something counts as literature.

It would be difficult to deny that McGregor has richly described one important mode of engagement with literature, enhanced by suggestive, if not decisive, discussions of why Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) is not a didactic literary work (and therefore a potential counterexample, since autonomists deny that a work can have literary value in virtue of its moral value) and why a hypothetical novel that embodies a racist perspective might nonetheless be deserving of praise *qua* literature. But even a sympathetic reader could be

forgiven for asking why there must be a single value of literature *qua* literature, and who philosophers are to decide this anyway. McGregor quotes an objection from Peter Kivy: “until someone comes along to convince me that any *single* way of reading poetry is *the* only *echt* way of reading it, *qua* poetry, I will continue to take *echt* poetry reading practice to be just those many ways in which competent readers do indeed read poetry” (“Paraphrasing Poetry (For Profit and Pleasure),” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (2011), 367-77: 374, cited on p. 59). Lamarque could respond to Kivy with his conception of literature as a rule-governed practice in which the reader’s proper role is to demand literary thickness. But while McGregor endorses contextualism about the ontology of literary works (p. 10), he is explicitly uncommitted as to the definition of literature (p. 12) and therefore may or may not be able to avail himself of Lamarque’s response.

In any case, McGregor appears to qualify his thesis in ways that may comfort readers who are affronted by apparent philosophical presumption. He clarifies that his conception of autonomism “does not involve a commitment to the primacy of this characteristic value” (p. 20) and even concedes that “a work’s ethical value may *always* be more important than its artistic value (except when the work is being evaluated *qua* art)” (p. 140). Yet this official neutrality as to the value of literary value is called into question by other statements, in particular McGregor’s insistence that the autonomist freedom enjoyed by literary language—freedom from constraints of truth, virtue, and any laws except those internal to the practice of literature—is not just the source of literary satisfaction but “the most important feature of literature” and “why [the literary use of language] matters the most” (p. 130). Such quotations threaten to suggest, contrary to his more cautious formulations, that literary value is the most important *value* associated with literature (“why it matters the most”). Again, when discussing *Elizabeth Costello*, McGregor seems to slip into a different register; while he agrees that there are multiple ways a reader could approach the work, “the reader who reads it *qua* philosophy is likely to have an impoverished experience, because part of the work’s value is the way it engages with philosophical issues in a literary manner” (p. 89). If the claim is that such engagement is part of the work’s *literary* value, then the argument may go through, but as written it implies that one mode of reading is less valuable than another. That implication would be especially troublesome on a non-essentialist, practice-based account of literature, which should, in recognizing that our reading practices are historically contingent, acknowledge that certain modes of engagement might become more valuable as the literary canon itself changes. In fraught political climates, for instance, literary autonomism may come

to seem less attractive, because readers demand that literary works play an ameliorative political role, or, alternatively, more attractive, insofar as readers demand a larger degree of escapism. So McGregor would be better off, both on his own terms and if he is to align himself with Lamarque, remaining neutral as to which values of literature are most valuable.

Because McGregor's argument is largely built by modifying the views of others (he frequently begins a section by citing one philosopher, explaining on which points he agrees and disagrees, and then responding to the objections another philosopher has made to the first), his defense of his conception of literary thickness feels somewhat incomplete. He does not address objections *to* autonomism so much as he responds to arguments *for* heteronomism, understood as the claim that literary value is instrumental. McGregor is clear that he takes this issue "to be prior to the question of whether a moral defect is (also) an artistic defect" (p. 15), which is taken up by the separate debate about value interaction (where common positions include ethicism, contextualism, and a distinct form of autonomism). But even if that is true, one would need to be convinced that the experience of literary thickness excludes an interest in cognitive or moral value. To McGregor's credit, he addresses our interest in cognitive value at length, arguing, by example, that factual errors are not even *pro tanto* literary defects. A crucial plot point in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) requires that a myopic character be able to light a fire using his glasses, but myopia-correcting lenses would be diverging, not converging, and therefore unable to light fires. Yet few readers notice the error, and even fewer find it "an impediment to their imaginative engagement with the work" (p. 101). But McGregor says less by way of arguing that literary thickness is exclusive of an interest in moral value. A puzzle going back to Hume, and lately much-discussed, concerns imaginative resistance: the difficulty we have in imaginatively engaging with certain works. Resistance can have many sources (some of them cognitive), but morally deviant scenarios are particularly salient. Given that the locus of literary value is not the literary work but the type of experience it affords, and that imaginative resistance precludes an experience of literary satisfaction, it would seem that a literary work might, in virtue of embodying a moral defect, be unable to reward the demand for literary thickness, and therefore lack literary value. McGregor wants to claim that the contribution that moral content makes to literary value "is not a function of the virtue or vice of the perspective a work embodies" but rather "a function of the way in which that content is integrated with the novel's form" (p. 144), so presumably he would respond that even a morally vicious work, such as his hypothetical racist novel, can be praised for its style or artistry (the way it

develops its repugnant theme). Yet it seems plausible that there are hard moral limits for readers beyond which they simply cannot enjoy literary satisfaction, understood in the autonomist way McGregor does.

This line of objection is certainly not conclusive. As Lamarque puts it, to start with the abstract question of whether a genuinely literary work could sustain a certain theme “distorts the whole process of literary interpretation, which always begins with a specific work and reaches a judgment of value, if at all, on a plurality of measures” (“Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries,” in Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 127-39: 138, cited on p. 102). It is more than a little ironic that McGregor quotes this passage just before going on to present his own hypothetical example, since Lamarque’s observation militates against McGregor’s argumentative strategy. So more needs to be said in defense of his characterization of literary thickness as a demand that excludes moral interests that have nothing to do with how successfully moral (and immoral) content is realized in a work’s form.

I turn now to the argument’s key premise, namely that if literary appreciation is characterized by literary thickness, then literary value is final. As stated above, McGregor takes literary works that meet the demand for literary thickness to produce literary satisfaction, an experience which is finally, i.e., non-derivatively, valuable. But although almost all philosophers would agree that satisfaction is finally valuable, it is controversial that literary *works* are finally valuable. Both Carroll and, more recently, Nicholas Stang have argued that if an artwork is valuable for the sake of the experience it provides, then the artwork must be instrumentally, not finally, valuable (if we take the distinction between instrumental and final value to be exhaustive, as McGregor does). Or, to put the point more cautiously, as Stang does, the artwork may be finally valuable in virtue of other properties, but “not in virtue of its contribution to a finally valuable whole [i.e., the experience].” This is because “necessary concomitants, even necessary constituents, of things valuable for their own sake are not necessarily valuable for their own sake” (“Artworks Are Not Valuable for Their Own Sake,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2012), 271-80: 273). In addressing Stang’s objection, McGregor admits that “there is indeed a tension between the *finality* of artistic value and its location in the *experience* of the work” (p. 124), but he believes the tension can be resolved by insisting that ultimately there is no distinction between the work and the experience of the work: “The work is not part of the experience—it is all there is to experience” (p. 125). But this seems

a heavy price to pay to secure the conclusion McGregor wants about final value. For one thing, there are several theoretical reasons to preserve the distinction between a literary work and the experience of it, such as being able to recognize the ontological differences between works and experiences, and to criticize certain experiences as not properly *of* the work (e.g., the experience of a reader who fails to grasp the political allegory of *Animal Farm*). Even if we restrict the value of a literary work to the value of only a certain ideal type of experience characterized by correct understanding, as Budd does, we may wish to allow that differently backgrounded ideal readers can nonetheless enjoy different experience tokens with concomitantly varying degrees of literary value, on penalty of having to claim that only *one* experience-type affords literary satisfaction. For another thing, running together the distinction forestalls one natural line of response to my above objections concerning imaginative resistance, which would allow that imaginative resistance impedes us from enjoying finally valuable experiences but insist that even morally flawed works have literary value in virtue of their *potential* to produce satisfying experiences in readers with fewer moral scruples. Finally, the solution lacks independent motivation. McGregor offers the helpful analogy of an analgesic pill, which could be pleasurable in virtue of its taste or in virtue of the pain relief it provides, and claims that the former is an instance of final value and the latter an instance of instrumental value. But even if the source of pleasure is the *taste-of-the-pill*, which could not, by stipulation, be realized in any other type of pill, rather than the *taste* of the pill, which could be multiply realized, we would still need a reason to believe that the pill itself, which has many other properties, is thereby finally valuable.

I close with a related remark on McGregor's treatment of instrumentalism. The autonomist argument carries the implication that cognitive and moral values must be instrumental and that, if truth and virtue were *pro tanto* literary merits, then literary value would be instrumental. McGregor objects to Nussbaum's instrumentalism in particular, claiming that "instrumental accounts of literary value are reductive, marginalizing literature's capacity to afford satisfaction as the means by which the useful end for which literature is valued is achieved" (p. 148). But instrumentalism does not have to be reductive. If literary works are the means to the end of literary satisfaction (whether satisfaction is autonomous or cognitively and morally inflected), that need not entail that literature is a mere husk that we could discard once we have harvested the kernels it contains. Literary works might only be means to valuable, even finally valuable, aesthetic experiences, but they could still be *essential* means to *unique* experiences, i.e., experiences that can be acquired through no other means. When we shake off the reductionist

baggage, instrumentalism may no longer seem quite so unattractive, and the restricted conception of literary thickness not quite so compulsory.

KUBALA, ROBBIE

Department of Philosophy

Columbia University