

Book Reviews

Bernard Harrison, *What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xxvi + 593 pp.

One is faced with a complex task when asked to review such a massive and learned work as Bernard Harrison's *What Is Fiction For?* The challenge is that of doing justice to the sheer amount of knowledge and insight the author presents in a book that is so sharp and penetrating — and at the same time so vast and multilayered.

Harrison is a philosopher, and this book constitutes a philosophical defense of the importance of literature and literary humanism. For Harrison, these concepts are intrinsically connected with a redefinition of the philosophy of language (especially Wittgenstein's) and a redefinition of the task of the literary critic.

Harrison's major claim in *What Is Fiction For?* is that "literature — serious literature . . . — teaches the reader what words mean, and how things look through the prism of those meanings" (246); or, in other words, that fiction "makes comprehensively visible deep features of our use of language of which we are normally only fragmentarily aware" (228).

This is, the book states, the very specific cognitive gain that only literature can offer: it can teach the reader what words mean, and since words are related to human practices, it can teach the reader to re-question meanings in the human world. It is a peculiar type of knowledge, which Harrison calls "*dangerous knowledge*" — dangerous "because it possesses the power to change its possessor by destabilizing his view both of the world he inhabits and of his own place in it" (xii).

This is also associated with the reason why Harrison's argument targets much of the critical practice of the last decades. Many current academic approaches treat major works of literature as "quasi-scientific specimens nailed to a board for dissection in the interests of one or another brand of 'theory,'" and in doing so "they encourage kinds of uninvolved scrutiny that are capable of yielding every kind of cognitive gain *except* the one kind that literature exists to provide" (xii). In other words, objectivity, the notion of the detached observer, when associated with literary criticism, is fundamentally wrong (Harrison produces an example of an alternative type of criticism in chapter 11, titled "Houyhnhnm Virtue," in which he analyzes Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, to then show, in Chapter 12, "Sterne and Sentimentalism," how Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* constitutes an inquiry into Hobbes's *psychological egoism* and Butler's *deliberative individualism*).

What makes this book so valuable is that it inserts itself into historical conversation with theorists and philosophers; in other words, it is specifically designed to attack (and to defend itself against attacks from) philosophers and theorists who hold opposite positions. Consequently, Harrison's prose is detailed, pointed, and requires high degrees of attention from the reader.

The book highlights sundry attacks made against literary humanism. It first asks whether — according to the demands made on literary humanism by “theory” under the influence of the physical and social sciences — the study of literature can contribute kinds of understanding that satisfy the criteria of “logical rigor” and “fidelity to the facts.” The negative answer to this question, based on the divide between a fictional world and objective extra-fictional reality, is then traced back to Marxist criticism which, Harrison states, is grounded in the belief that “the primary function of culture, including literary culture, . . . is to disseminate false but persuasive visions of the human condition whose function is to promote belief in the legitimacy of one or another form of class exploitation” (20).

The book then proceeds to delineate the aspects of philosophical and critical thought — in deconstruction, analytic philosophy, and Continental philosophy — that demote the cognitive value of literature and literary humanism. These, Harrison argues, find their roots in Cartesian individualism, which splits, with no hesitancy, mind and matter and which claims that everything nonmaterial must be subjective, private, strictly “internal to the mind,” and, therefore, devoid of objective, communal, cognitive value. Cartesian individualism, Harrison claims, has permeated all subsequent philosophical and critical thought and has given rise to the *Dual Source Account* (DSA). The DSA constitutes the ways in which philosophy has historically understood language and includes two opposing views: “the first presents language as essentially a device for describing the nature of empirical reality” while the second “denies that the natural world is the source of meaning in language. On the contrary, meaning in language is determined internally to language through the relation of words to one another and is thus never finally or definitively determined” (269). On both accounts, literary humanism is doomed. If meaning is created externally to language, then fiction, by being *fiction*, does not relate to the natural world and, therefore, cannot bear meaning. If, however, meaning is created internally to language, fiction cannot refer to anything outside itself and cannot further any kind of understanding.

To protect literary humanism, a third alternative must be sought, and it can be found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Harrison terms this approach the Practice-Based Model (PBM).

“The Practice-Based Model of meaning is helpfully ambiguous on the question of whether meaning arises ‘internally’ or ‘externally’ to language”: PBM disturbs Cartesian Individualism's

austerly binary vision of how things stand by introducing a third level of reality, one that stands between the individual mind and the natural world and relates each to the other in the shape of what I have called “human worlds.” As I understand it, a human world is essentially a system of socially devised and maintained practices. On the side of language, words and sentences acquire meaning as a consequence of the roles assigned to them in the conduct of one or another such practice. On the side of natural reality, the practices that enter into the composition of a human world engage in indefinitely many and multifarious ways with the aspects and features offered by the natural world to creatures enjoying the sensory and motor capacities of human beings. (77)

This view is extensively covered in chapters 3, 4, and 5, titled, respectively, “Truth, Meaning, and Human Reality,” “Leavis and Wittgenstein (1): A Living Language,” and “Leavis and Wittgenstein (2): ‘The Third Realm.’” Harrison explicitly states that the ideals maintained in this book derive from both Wittgenstein and Leavis (especially the Leavis of *The Living Principle*) and that his redefinition of Wittgenstein’s philosophy counters the dominant view that the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* rebuts the philosophy of Frege, bringing back Frege’s concept of “the third realm,” which is, through Leavis, translated into “the human world.”

What makes creative writing so precious, therefore, is precisely the fact that language is a communal medium, that which stands *between* individual minds, connects them, connects them to the world, and is the practical foundation of the human world. The value of literature is therefore seen as rooted in its bringing “before the bar of consciousness the vast fabric of human practices that serve both to constitute meaning and in part to constitute us” (152). The purpose of literature is “the examination of something that, though perfectly real, normally escapes our notice, concerned as we are to use language to state facts — namely, the foundations in shared practice of the meanings of the words deployed in it” (172).

In stating so — besides showing how these ideas are shared by Virginia Woolf through an analysis of Woolf’s essays in chapter 7 (“Virginia Woolf and ‘the True Reality’”) — Harrison also elevates feelings to the status of primary moral interests: feelings are an indelible part of understanding the human world, a world which is found in the awareness of who we are and of where we are. This awareness cannot do without feelings, and it cannot do without subjectivity: “in the human world we are necessarily both observers and participants, and both at the same time. We both determine its laws and are determined by them” (89).

It follows that our appreciation for literature must depend on our inclusion of “the human world” in our discourse about reality. Only then can we state that “what literature has to offer us — and it is both enough and indispensable — is

the extension of the range of our responses [to the human world] and, at the same time, their chastening and education” (200).

The DSA is rejected through practical example in chapter 8, titled “Aharon Appelfeld and the Problem of Holocaust Fiction,” in which Harrison takes Appelfeld’s novels as a point of reference for the type of fiction which, were the DSA a satisfactory account of language (therefore rendering fiction valueless), would do a disservice to humanity by misrepresenting such a key historical fact as the Holocaust.

Instead, a thorough reading of Appelfeld’s fiction leads to the following conclusion:

what literature can do that factual discourse cannot is to show us what it feels like to inhabit a *Lebenswelt* constituted by an unfamiliar set of practices or circumstances and to show us that by actually allowing the reader to briefly *become* a dweller . . . in that *Lebenswelt*. (245)

This book is not an easy read, but the effort is rewarding since its argument may very well represent a cornerstone in the history of ideas. It can certainly be a cornerstone of one’s career: if one is a student in the humanities and has not yet developed needed certainties, this book can provide the grounding needed to develop them. The book’s ideas are stoically, logically, and brilliantly defended. Working through Wittgenstein, Russell, Frege, Derrida, Foucault, Leavis, Hobbes, Butler, Locke, Sterne, Appelfeld, and others, Harrison’s account ultimately defines itself as mandatory reading for anyone concerned with literature and literary humanism.

Paolo Pitari

Ca’ Foscari University, Venice

Molly Clark Hillard, *Spellbound: The Fairy Tale and the Victorians*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014. 278 pp. incl. bibliography and index

At the outset of *Spellbound: The Fairy Tale and the Victorians*, Molly Clark Hillard delineates a general ambivalence toward fairy tales during the Victorian era. Although Victorians tended to consider them “a nostalgic refuge from an industrial age” and “a narrative space outside of progressive modernity,” fairy tales demonstrably contributed to the articulation of the age, leaving their mark on the “language and images of industrial, material England” (1). Thus writers, too, generally viewed these tales as a marginal, childish, or primitive form, on the one hand, but often found them a source of intense interest and inspiration, on the other. Hillard underscores the ironic results of this ambivalence: “Valu-