

ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS



Derek Attridge
The Singularity of Literature

ROUTLEDGE



PREFACE

What does it mean to respond to a work of literature as literature? When we read a novel, attend the performance of a play, or hear a poem on the radio, we are clearly doing many different things at once and experiencing many different kinds of pleasure (or displeasure). Which of these things is a response to specifically *literary* qualities? Can these qualities be found in works that are not normally classified as literature? And what kind of importance should we attach to them?

These are old questions, to which many answers have been suggested, and yet they remain puzzling. The new answers proposed in this book (some of which are old answers reinterpreted) arise from my own experience of literature, and art more generally, and from my engagement with philosophical discourses directly or indirectly concerned with such experiences. If I advocate the rethinking of a number of concepts familiar in the tradition of literary criticism—among them

meaning, form, context, reading, inventiveness, responsiveness—this is because I believe that literature, fully appreciated, demands such a rethinking.

A great many others have responded in recent decades to these demands, and if *The Singularity of Literature* had been a different kind of book, it would have been awash with citations and references. However, my aim has been to write as accessible a work as possible, and I have therefore resisted the temptation to identify precursors and allies, engage in polemic, and situate my thinking in the various debates that have churned around the topic for a very long time. Instead, I have added a short appendix in which I try to be explicit about my major intellectual debts and to point out avenues for further reading.

I began trying to write about these questions with a double-barreled project in mind: a theoretical discussion of literature and the literary combined with a reading of J. M. Coetzee's fiction, an *œuvre* which explores and exemplifies with particular intensity and urgency the theoretical issues I wanted to follow up. It eventually became clear to me that I would have to write two books, and the poetry-centeredness of the examples in this book will, I trust, be made up for by the detailed readings of prose fiction in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. I have allowed occasional references to Coetzee's writing to remain as indications of its importance in the book's genesis.

This book owes far too much to far too many people to allow proper acknowledgment here. In the section "Debts and Directions," I mention the many friends who have over a long period helped me understand the importance and implications of Derrida's work. More specifically, I have had valuable feedback on the manuscript from Kathleen Davis, Michael Eskin, J. Hillis Miller, Andrew Parker, and Henry Staten. Others with whom I have had instructive conversations about the topics broached in this book include Peter Edmonds, Tom Furniss, Marjorie Howes,

Julian Patrick, Bruce Robbins, Mark Sanders, Peter Osborne, Meredith McGill, Elin Diamond, and Carolyn Williams. The last four were, like me, members of the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, in 1997–8; for a year of immensely pleasurable learning I extend my thanks to all the seminar members as well as to the Director of the Center, George Levine. Students in my graduate classes at Rutgers were an abundant source of stimulation and reformulation, and I was led to many valuable clarifications and necessary complications by questions after talks on various aspects of this project at the Universities of Oxford, Sussex, Stockholm, Stirling, Salford, Essex, Waterloo, and Western Ontario, Amherst College, the State University of Arizona, Manchester Metropolitan University, New York University, and Queen’s University, Ontario. I thank Lindsay Waters for suggesting an apt title. Liz Thompson at Routledge has been all one could wish for in an editor.

This book reworks arguments, and sometimes repeats phrasing, first published in two essays: “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other” (PMLA 114 [1999]: 20–31) and “Singular Events: Literature, Invention, and Performance,” in *The Question of Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont-Bissell (Manchester University Press, 2002, 48–65). Material from the first of these is reprinted by permission of the copyright owner, the Modern Language Association of America, and from the second by permission of Manchester University Press. Some paragraphs have been derived from another essay: “Literary Form and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*,” in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (Rutgers University Press, 1994, 243–63, copyright © 1994 by Rutgers, The State University; reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press). I am grateful to Jonathan Ball Publishers (Pty) Ltd for permission to reprint “The actual Dialogue,”

by Mongane Wally Serote, first published by Ad. Donker (Pty) Ltd in 1973 in *To Whom It May Concern*, edited by Robert Royston.

For financial and institutional support that allowed me time to read, think, travel, discuss, and write, I am glad to acknowledge the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Rutgers University, the Camargo Foundation, and the Leverhulme Trust. My daughters Laura and Eva have constantly provided the most welcome of distractions, and my parents-in-law Ronald and Joyce Hall have been a sustaining and cheering presence. The debt I owe to Suzanne Hall goes far beyond anything I can express here or signal in dedicating this book to her.

York, 2003

PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

The Singularity of Literature had its beginnings in 1997, at a desk in the library of the Camargo Foundation, in Cassis, not far from Marseille. The library had few of the books I needed for my research during my residency, and the World Wide Web was still in its infancy, so I found myself, as I looked out over the little harbour to the glorious cliffs of Cap Canaille, indulging in self-reflexive introspection: what exactly was going on, here, now, as I tried to compose sentences while typing on my computer? What form did my thoughts have before they became articulated as strings of words? If this was a kind of creativity, and it seemed to be, how did it relate to the creativity of the writer of a literary work? And how did that creativity relate to the creativity that I felt was involved in reading literature?

In trying to find answers to these questions, I wasn't, of course, deliberating in a vacuum; I was drawing on the store

of arguments I had read and heard over a lifetime, and as the book took shape over the many years that followed there was much more reading and thinking to be done. But an important property of the book that finally emerged is that at its heart is an awareness that creativity is a phenomenon that is finally beyond the reach of introspection, or of empirical science as we now know it, and a conviction that any account of literature that failed to understand this fact would be deficient in a crucial respect. Importantly, however, the private act-event of creation (the rather inelegant neologism is necessary to capture its dual nature) needs to be contrasted with what I term *invention*, which occurs within, and to, the wider culture.

After going through several revisions, the book came out in 2004, and it has been extremely gratifying to learn, in formal and informal ways, that it has been fruitful for students, teachers, and scholars, and that its value has not been limited to literary studies. As I explain in the introduction, this could have been a book about art in any medium, and one day I may write that book: many of the issues I raise—singularity, invention, otherness, authoredness, form, idioculture, performance and more—are equally relevant to music, film, painting, sculpture or photography. In a later book, *The Work of Literature*,¹ I elaborated at greater length on some of the issues pertaining to literature, offering some comments in defense of the earlier book's argument, and making more explicit the relation between my thinking and that to be found in other theoretical accounts of literature.

In the twenty years that have elapsed since that moment in the Camargo Foundation library, much has changed in the culture within which literature is produced and consumed, and I have asked myself if I would be writing a very different book if I were starting now. The following paragraphs were among the many I excised in order to keep the book down to the manageable size I planned, and, as they suggest why my sense of

the cultural landscape at the time led to its writing, they form a useful test of the continuing validity of that analysis:

Literature is something we take for granted. The scale on which literary works are written, edited, published, distributed, read, discussed, taught, and written about seems continually to increase, despite the advent of film, television, the personal computer, the Playstation; and the idea of “literature” is, thanks to the continuing process of Westernization, a familiar one in every corner of the globe. Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its ubiquity, the peculiarity of literature as an activity and a concept is seldom fully registered, whether in our day-to-day lives or in the specialized arena of the academy. When we talk about literature, and about individual literary works, we talk, inevitably, about what we *can* talk about; in our casual conversations we discuss plots, settings, incidents and characters, and express admiration for or disappointment at the power of the writing and the accuracy of the depictions; in our published critical and theoretical works we draw on a vast armory of terms and concepts to compare, analyse, and historicize.

There has been, it is true, no shortage of attempts to define literature, as a concept or a body of texts or a cultural practice, but what if the most important reason for our high valuation of literary works, that which has kept literature alive for so long and against such odds, is something we *can't* talk about, or at least that none of our readily available vocabulary and conceptual tools—whether those of informal discussion or those of the traditions of philosophy and aesthetic criticism—is able to handle? What if the immense scholarly and critical resources we are now able to draw on in our debates about literary works obscure the nature of the object being discussed as much as they illuminate it? The singularity of literature, the subject of

this book, may be what makes it at once a continuing force in contemporary culture and resistant to our ingrained habits of thinking and speaking.

Turn to the catalogs of academic publishers today and you will find that literary criticism is dominated by studies that take little account of the question I am posing. Literature is taken to be a cultural phenomenon to be analysed in its historical context in conjunction with a host of other cultural, political, economic, and social phenomena; there is no suspicion that it might present a challenge to such modes of analysis. Literary theory, on the other hand, tends to involve the ever more ingenious re-reading of a familiar canon of philosophical works rather than a direct engagement with the problems posed by any attempt to do justice to a work of literature as literature. Voices countering these trends usually take the form of calls to turn the clock back, to resist, rather late in the day, the inroads of “theory” and “politics” into a nostalgically recalled practice of critical appreciation and evaluation. It’s not difficult to find illuminating and enriching work among these varieties of study (although the last by its very nature exhibits a tendency toward repetitiveness), nor are explanations for their prevalence hard to come by—for one thing, they sit easily within a wider climate of increasing professionalization and instrumentalization in advanced societies of the twenty-first century.

Although I would write much the same today, the emphasis would be a little different. The opening of the last paragraph, in particular, strikes me as being less true today than it was fifteen or twenty years ago; there are many indications that the type of analysis that takes literature purely as a cultural index is not as dominant as it was then. What is sometimes called “new aestheticism” or “new formalism” is increasingly in evidence, and though I think these are somewhat unfortunate names, the

very fact that these labels have emerged in critical discourse shows that the climate is changing. Even less in evidence these days is the approach that takes the task of criticism to be the ferreting out of ideological failings in literary works of the past, or, conversely, treats them as heroic subversions of the oppressive political forces of their time. What I called “literary instrumentalism” has been in retreat, and more attention is being paid to the distinctiveness and literary value of the works of the past. (Contemporary literature is always more likely to be discussed on its own terms, there being less incentive to focus on the retrieval of context and the exposure of hidden prejudices.) We hear much less of “reading against the grain” or “the resisting reader,” and the notion of a politics of reading is shifting. A work such as Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique*,² challenging the “hermeneutics of suspicion” along similar lines to this book but coming from someone already well-known as a feminist critic, is received not as the scandalous rejection of prevailing modes of criticism that it would have been twenty years ago. Even Terry Eagleton, once the UK’s most vocal advocate of an instrumentalist Marxist approach to literature, has started writing literary criticism with distinct echoes of the moralizing close reading of F. R. Leavis.³

No less in evidence now than when I wrote this book, however, are the ill effects of the pressures that academics are under to produce “original” commentaries on literary works: the search for ever more ingenious interpretations ranging ever more widely around possible contexts or invoking ever more byzantine formal connections. Admittedly, this particular polemic featured only briefly in this book; I’ve developed it elsewhere, and most fully in a collection of exchanges with Henry Staten.⁴ I also sense that literary scholars are still often loath to make value judgements about the works they are examining, as if the objectivity of the scholarly enterprise

would be threatened by the expression of admiration or dissatisfaction. This reluctance is only one sign of the increasing hold of the science model on the humanities today, driven in part by the nature of the available funding opportunities.

Central to the arguments of *The Singularity of Literature* is the work of Jacques Derrida. Although conservative opponents of the advent of “theory” in the Anglophone world during the last quarter of the twentieth century frequently lumped Derrida’s approach to literary works with ideology-hunting “political” readings of literature, the two approaches are entirely different. For Derrida, literature is of immense cultural and philosophical importance, and his many studies of literary works are attempts to show how they challenge the habits of thought that characterize both “common sense” and Western traditions of philosophy. It was, in part, his high valuation of literature that drew me to his work. (Another important influence on *The Singularity of Literature* is that of Emmanuel Levinas, but it’s a Levinas mediated by Derrida’s not altogether faithful reading of him.)

Now that the name Derrida no longer provokes widespread alarm and despondency in academic and journalistic circles, and the aspiring literary scholar no longer feels obliged either to champion or to dismiss his work, it’s possible for a more measured and detailed stocktaking to take place. My own sense is that we have yet to fully appreciate the implications of Derrida’s thought, and that in order to do so, much of the early commentary on his work needs to be revised. The careful study that is necessary to do justice to the terrifyingly large corpus of his writing—in addition to the fifty or so books published during his lifetime, work has begun on the publication of the approximately 14,000 pages of his seminars—continues to appear in the pages of journals like *Derrida Today* and in books

like Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism*⁵ and Juliet Fleming's *Cultural Graphology*.⁶ My own collaboration with Derrida on the selection of his writings on literary works, *Acts of Literature* (Routledge, 1992), and in particular the interview I conducted with him for that volume, were immensely important in the gestation of *The Singularity of Literature*, and I believe there is still a great deal in those essays, and that interview, that has yet to be fully taken on board.

Derrida and Levinas were not, of course, the only philosophers whose thinking influenced the arguments of this book, but it was never conceived as an introduction to the varieties of literary theory and I made no attempt at potted summaries of the approaches that had been important to me. I've always resisted the supermarket approach to the teaching of "theory": feminism this week, Marxism the next, post-structuralism the week after that, all to be "applied" to literary texts. (In my own teaching, I prefer to engage as deeply as possible with a particular theorist or set of theoretical works, and then let this engagement affect the students' reading as it may.) Much theoretical writing on literature has appeared since 2004, of course, and a question that arises is: would I change the arguments of this book in the light of work that has appeared since its publication? The short answer is no: the current luminaries in the theoretical universe have not, to my mind, thrown any important fresh light on the nature of literary practice or of literary experience. But in smaller ways, my thinking has been sharpened by a number of commentators and interlocutors—too many to acknowledge here. I will, however, note that the writing, fictional and non-fictional, of J.M. Coetzee has continued to be a spur to thought, as it was for this book; and on questions of poetry I have had valuable exchanges with the poet and poetic theorist Don Paterson.⁷

One topic that has recently gained a great deal of attention and that I would want to discuss more fully if I were writing this book today is literature's movement between national literary traditions and languages. Though there is much to arouse concern about the growing academic field of "World Literature"—which too easily becomes a version of "global literatures in English translation"—the interchange between writers and languages has always been a fruitful process for literature, and it is something that needs to be fully taken into account in any attempt to say what is distinctive about literary practice. Indeed, the very notion of a single literary practice is put in question by approaching it in this context.

One of starting points of this book is the way in which a literary work can speak powerfully and immediately to us from across centuries or across cultures. This is a fact about literary experience that awaits a full theoretical explanation, but one outcome of taking it seriously as a basis for thinking about the specificity of the literary is a conception of singularity not as a matter of closure but as one of openness. The literary work is singular not because it is locked in a historical safe whose combination we can never be sure of finding but because it changes every time it is read; singularity means staying the same through being open to any possible new context (Derrida calls this "iterability"). The same is true of some theoretical works: only in being read and re-read do they remain what they are. My hope is that *The Singularity of Literature* falls into this category.

Derek Attridge
York, 2017

NOTES

- 1 Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

- 2 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- 3 See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
- 4 Derek Attridge and Henry Staten, *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 5 Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 6 Juliet Fleming, *Cultural Graphology: Writing after Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 7 See Don Paterson, *The Poem* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017).