



The Singularity of Literature

Derek Attridge

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The Singularity of Literature

What is literature? What makes a text “literary” and how do we explain its extraordinary ability to unsettle, intoxicate and delight its readers? Throughout the centuries, influential thinkers have struggled with these questions, but no one has succeeded in pinning down the essence of literature. Derek Attridge invites us to take this resistance to definition as a starting point, in order to explore afresh not only literature, but the wider practices of Western art.

Drawing on a range of philosophical traditions, Attridge here crystallizes many years of thinking about what happens when a writer produces an innovative work or a reader responds to it, at the time of writing or much later. He brings out the implications of regarding the work as an event performed anew each time by the reader, responding to its singularity, inventiveness and otherness. Calling for a “responsible” form of reading that does justice to these aspects of the work, Attridge retheorizes the place of literature in the realm of the ethical. His theory is anchored in scrupulous practice through new readings of well-known texts and, for those wishing to trace the theoretical underpinnings of key arguments or explore the major issues in greater detail, an appendix of “debts and directions” is provided.

Returning to arguments begun in his influential volume *Peculiar Language*, Derek Attridge here provides us with a remarkable new framework for the discussion of literature and the literary. Never losing sight of the pleasures of the text, this book will inspire all those who teach, study or simply enjoy what we call “literature.”

Derek Attridge is Professor of English at the University of York, UK, and Distinguished Visiting Professor at Rutgers University, USA. He is the author and editor of acclaimed volumes on literary theory, beat prosody, sixteenth-century poetry and twentieth-century fiction.

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J. Hillis Miller, UCI Distinguished Research Professor, University of California, Irvine

“Inventive, novel, singular, just. These words not only define the theory of literature propounded in this book, they also describe the virtues of Derek Attridge’s writing. Circling around the claim that the singularity of literature is an irruption of otherness into the field of our experience, the event of an invention, Attridge builds a powerful account of literature and an original account of the relation of literature to ethics. Written accessibly and without jargon, this book will excite old and new readers of literature alike.”

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“A brilliant, major theoretical work that will change ‘literary studies’ as a term and as a discipline.”

Kathleen Davis, Princeton University

“A truly important contribution to the study of literature and the arts.”
Michael Eskin, Columbia University

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Derek Attridge

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For Suzanne

An absolute hospitality . . . graciously offered beyond debt and economy, offered to the other, a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor.

Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 83

To introduce a meaning into Being is to move from the Same to the Other, from *I* to the other person; it is to give a sign, to undo the structures of language. Without that, the world would know nothing but the meanings that inform the minutes or reports of corporate board meetings.

Emmanuel Levinas, writing on Blanchot, in *Proper Names*, 147

. . . the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will.

Elizabeth Costello, in J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 98

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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 *oeuvre* 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 appendix, 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

Opening questions

There is no shortage of testimony, in the pages of daily and weekly publications, in reading groups and book clubs, in off-the-cuff comments, to literature's unsettling, intoxicating, moving, delighting powers. A small number of philosophers and literary theorists have taken these powers seriously without, on the one hand, attempting to reduce them to a system or, on the other, taking refuge in vagueness and irrationalism. And there are some signs of an increasing willingness among those who study literature to address, as an issue of major importance, the question of aesthetic effect (as well as aesthetic affect), thus restarting a very old debate that had, for a time, almost fallen silent. I do not wish to begin, however, as many theoretical accounts of literature do, with the various philosophical projects that have largely determined our approach to these issues and the vocabulary we use, but rather with the observable phenomena themselves: the paradoxes inherent in the way we talk about literature, the pleasures and the potency that we experience in reading it.

My title, *The Singularity of Literature*, may be heard as an echo of that of an earlier book of mine, *Peculiar Language*. The arguments I work through in this book arise to some degree from the argument in that study: to put it over-simply, that all attempts since the Renaissance to determine the difference between "literary" and "non-literary" language have failed—and that this is a *necessary* failure, one by which literature as a cultural practice has been continuously constituted.¹ In pursuing further this question of literature's evasion of rules and definitions, and trying to elucidate my own experience of and pleasure

in particular works of literature, I have found myself coming back again and again to two issues that have received much acknowledgment in passing but surprisingly little close attention as theoretical questions that extend well beyond the particular histories of artistic movements. The first of these is the role of *innovation* in the history of Western art;² the second is the importance to readers, viewers, and listeners of the *uniqueness* of the individual artwork and of the artist's *oeuvre*. I redefine these two widely acknowledged properties of art and of our understanding of art under the names "invention" and "singularity" (giving the book's title a second implication), and bring them into conjunction with another property that has been much discussed, though also much abused, in recent theoretical writing: "alterity" or "otherness." Such a coming-together involves more than a conjunction, in fact: I see invention as inseparable from singularity and alterity; and I see this trinity as lying at the heart of Western art as a practice and as an institution.³ This conception of the artwork brings into focus two further dimensions which, I believe, are crucial to our understanding of it: its occurrence as a particular kind of *event* to which I give the name "performance," and its participation in the realm we call "the ethical." These topics are all addressed in the chapters that follow.

That the history of Western art in all its genres is a history of innovation—a long sequence of artists or groups of artists constantly searching for new modes of expression to exploit, new facets of human life to represent, new shades of feeling to capture—is a familiar fact, but the significance of this fact has not always been appreciated. That we can read a poem or watch a play written hundreds or even thousands of years ago and feel we are experiencing directly its creator's inventiveness is a phenomenon most of us would recognize, but accounts of this phenomenon have tended either toward the mystical or the dismissively demystifying. That we experience literary works less as objects than as events—and events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same—is something many have acknowledged, but the implications of which few have pursued. In all our transactions with art, whether as creators, consumers, critics, or dealers, we put a premium on the uniqueness of the work and the distinctiveness of the *oeuvre* or school, yet our aesthetic theories often make little of this central fact. And although many attempts have been made to describe or analyze the act of creation, artistic or otherwise, few of these face head-on the puzzle which it entails: how does an entity

or an idea unthinkable or unimaginable within existing frameworks of understanding and feeling come into being as part of our understood and felt world? And why is it so often described by creators not as an experience of doing something but of *letting something happen*?

This could have been a book about art in its widest sense, and I hope it will be read with profit by some whose particular interest is in an art-form other than literature. It is only by an artificial and often arbitrary act of separation that the qualities of the literary can be discussed, as I shall for the most part be doing, in isolation from related qualities in other art-forms. My decision to limit the discussion to literature springs from two sources: a hesitation to make pronouncements about other fields in which I have less training and experience, and the realization that the need to pay due attention to the specificity of each art-form would result in a book much longer and more unwieldy in its argumentative procedures than I was willing to contemplate. Although I give some attention to “the singularity of literature” in the sense of its difference from other art-forms, I do not discuss those other practices as such. However, there is some consideration of the aesthetic field more generally in the early chapters and an occasional glance toward other art-forms in the rest of the book. It would not, I believe, be an especially difficult task to extrapolate from the main points of my characterization of literature to the wider arena, including those developments in electronic media that may—who knows?—spell the end or at least the transformation of the verbal arts as we presently understand them.

Since my claim is that literature, or rather the experience of literary works, consistently exceeds the limits of rational accounting, what I offer is less a logical argument than a report and an invitation: a report on a certain living-through of the literary, and an invitation to the reader to share, at least for the duration of the reading, this living-through. In the interests of economy and pace, I limit literary examples to a few short poems; this may skew the argument to some degree, but not, I hope, damagingly. (In Chapter 8 I discuss the possible objection that my approach privileges poetry over other literary modes.) I refer the reader to my companion book, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, for further exemplification of these arguments.

One point that needs to be made clear is that this attempt to understand the “literariness” of certain written texts is not an attempt to state what is *most important* about such texts in our private lives and

social existence. Importance can be measured in many ways, and in our day-to-day lives the scale on which the literary comes high may not be a scale that counts for a great deal. We rightly value the works belonging to the tradition of literature for a number of different things they are capable of being and doing, most of them not strictly literary. Poems such as Henley's "Invictus" or Kipling's "If" have clearly given comfort or courage to thousands, but it is not obvious that it is as literature—in the sense which I try to develop in this book—that they possess this remarkable and much prized power. A work like the *Iliad* or *Beowulf* can serve as a rich source of historical information; Fielding's and James's novels may be instructive in the art of moral living; Zola and Stowe perhaps played a part in ameliorating the lives of many individuals in unhappy circumstances: none of these capacities, however, falls peculiarly within the literary preserve. My argument is that literature, understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading), solves no problems and saves no souls; nevertheless, as will become clear, I do insist that it is *effective*, even if its effects are not predictable enough to serve a political or moral program.

Understanding "literature"

Do the terms "literature," "the literary," and "literariness" refer to actual entities—objects, institutions, or practices—to be found in certain cultures at certain times, or are they categories that have come into being as a way of organizing and simplifying the complex and fluid processes of linguistic production and reception in those cultures? Where such questions are taken seriously today, the second of these alternatives is no doubt the favored one, and for good reason: there seem few grounds for thinking that the concepts named by these terms correspond in a one-to-one fashion with objects or patterns of behavior that exist independently of the language that labels them. There have been many discussions of the long and convoluted history of the idea of literature, and of the closely related (though significantly different) histories of similar concepts named in other Western languages, which serve as valuable reminders of the complicated past and continuing ambiguity of this group of interrelated words.

But in order to understand the importance today of this cluster of terms and concepts to the broader web of ideas and practices that

make up what we call Western civilization, and thereby perhaps to encourage fresh thinking about the future direction of that civilization, it is necessary to embark on something other than cultural history or lexicographical investigation. Literature always seems to present itself in the final analysis as something *more* than the category or entity it is claimed to be (writing that has a particular institutional function, say, or writing with a particular relation to truth), and as valuable for something *other* than the various personal or social benefits that are ascribed to it. This “something more” or “something other” remains obscure, however, although many different attempts have been made to specify it.⁴ It is as if the linguistic and intellectual resources of our culture, while registering the importance of the property or process or principle to which the term “literature” and its cognates serve as witnesses or which they bring into being, are unable to provide direct access to it.

Analytical language is already beginning to break down in my attempt at lucid exposition. I have employed the words “property,” “process,” and “principle” to refer to what it is that literature might be said to witness or bring into being in the full knowledge that all these words are unsatisfactory, as, in this sentence, is the use of the word “it” and the notions of “witnessing” or “bringing into being.” This difficulty is, of course, a direct outcome of the curious state of affairs we are discussing: were it possible to find unambiguous names, to use pronouns with confidence, to talk in terms of simple acts of referring or constituting, there would be no need to ascribe to the non-discursive mode of literature a peculiar potency not possessed by other linguistic practices. There is something fundamentally paradoxical, perhaps even wrong-headed, in an attempt such as the present one to use a non-literary discourse to convey what literature, most importantly, can do. Nevertheless, there might be some profit in pursuing the attempt to the extent that theoretical and descriptive language will allow it, as a corrective to other—often even more reductive—accounts of literature, and as a complement to the primary activity of the reading of the works we call literary.

Although I have acknowledged that the entities named by the terms under scrutiny—the (ill-defined) body of literature, individual literary works, the practice of reading those works, and the literary as a property of certain texts—can be thought of as in fact produced by the concepts that appear to designate them, it is also the case that the

difficulties that beset any theoretical analysis derive from the resistance of those categories to the process of conceptualization. If the term “literature” does not uncomplicatedly name something in the world, it does not uncomplicatedly bring something into existence either. Rather, by putting the processes of naming and constituting themselves into play, by, in a sense to be developed later, *performing* them, it complicates that very opposition. Literature may be a cultural product, but it is never simply contained by a culture.

Literary instrumentalism

Once a professor of modern languages, he has been, since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications. Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrolment, because that is good for morale. This year he is offering a course on the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications 101, “Communication Skills,” and Communications 201, “Advanced Communication Skills.”⁵

J. M. Coetzee’s satiric portrayal, in his 1999 novel *Disgrace*, of the impact of reductive, management-driven methods on universities, and on their teaching of literature in particular, no doubt struck many a chord among its readers in a number of countries. The plethora of fashionable buzz-words that emerged in the world of education during the last two decades of the twentieth century—quality assurance, benchmarking, accountability, outcomes assessment, performance indicators, and all the rest of them—are symptoms of an attitude toward teaching and learning, and toward what we can loosely call the aesthetic domain, that is far from new—Dickens parodied it in *Hard Times*, Weber, Adorno, and Horkheimer in their very different ways addressed it as a significant historical phenomenon—but that is now, as one aspect of increasing globalization, permeating more areas and activities than ever before.

A large majority of literary critics, scholars, theorists, and historians have been strongly opposed to this approach as it has manifested itself in the policies of government departments, funding bodies, and educational institutions. It is regarded, quite rightly, as a threat to much

that is valuable in humanistic learning. However, some of the modes of literary study that became popular in the same period might be said to share to a certain degree its underlying assumptions, or at least to operate with a notion of literature that poses no challenge to those assumptions. Let me, for the sake of brevity though at the risk of oversimplification, give it the single label “instrumentalism,” collapsing together under this term a diverse but interconnected group of preconceptions and tendencies.

What I have in mind could be crudely summarized as the treating of a text (or other cultural artifact) as a means to a predetermined end: coming to the object with the hope or the assumption that it can be instrumental in furthering an existing project, and responding to it in such a way as to test, or even produce, that usefulness. The project in question may be political, moral, historical, biographical, psychological, cognitive, or linguistic. This book is an attempt to conceive of literature (and by implication other artistic products and practices) in a different light, as, in fact, defined by its *resistance* to such thinking. In doing so, I have been able to draw on a number of thinkers who have made similar attempts—most important to me in this regard have been Derrida, Blanchot, and Adorno—but whose arguments have not had the impact on our practices of literary commentary they deserve.

What I am calling an instrumental attitude to literature, I must at once add, is a necessary one for most of our dealings with verbal texts: it enables us to process them efficiently, it prevents the continual re-evaluation of our beliefs and assumptions, and it is in accord with the main function of most of the writing and speech we encounter. In the field of literary studies, this attitude has been highly productive, giving us valuable accounts of literary works as indices to the historical, sociological, and ideological texture of earlier periods and other cultures and to the psychic and sometimes somatic constitution of authors, injecting literature into political struggles (in the name of humanism, the working class, oppressed races and nationalities, women, and homosexuals, to name just a few), and exemplifying in literary works important features of linguistic structure, rhetorical and formal organization, and generic conventions. The experience of immediacy and vividness which we often gain from literary works of the past leads naturally to their being pressed into service as a source of evidence for lives led before ours or in foreign places; and although there is a danger that the “reality effect,” the created illusion of a real referent, may

interfere with as much as it aids accurate historical and human judgment, the judicious use of literary evidence is clearly as valid as other modes of access to a vanished or otherwise inaccessible culture.

Literature's powerful effects, and the high estimation it is accorded in cultural formations, inevitably lead also to its being appealed to and utilized when a political or ethical cause is being fought for. Although there is an inescapable tendency on the part of those whose professional lives center on literature to exaggerate its potency as a political weapon, there is no doubt that it has had a role to play in significant, and frequently laudable, social changes, like the ending of slavery or the reduction in the use of capital punishment in some parts of the globe. Its complex handling of language makes it a prime source, too, of linguistic and stylistic investigation and education, even though its complexity is sometimes too great for a science that is still finding extraordinary complications in the operation of simple sentences. In all these ways, literature functions, and is made to function, as a powerful and invaluable instrument of individual and social advancement.

There is a quite different sense in which an instrumental attitude operates as a motive force in the academic study of literature. The desire to be noticed, to gain promotion and material rewards—a desire which it would be foolish to try to condemn or proscribe—continually produces new readings of literary works and new goals for reading.⁶ Graduate students frequently choose courses or dissertation topics, with eminent good sense, on the basis of their usefulness for their chosen career, rather than on the intellectual provocations and rewards they might offer; articles and books are written with an eye to the marketplace and the syllabus; and “theoretical approaches” are mastered (or their salient catchphrases learned) in order to utilize them efficiently in reading and writing instead of being approached with an openness that allows for a range of possible outcomes—including a challenge to the very project they are supposed to be serving. Instrumentalism of a kind is evident every time a commentator observes, disparagingly, that such-and-such a theoretical approach or literary preference is now “out of date,” as if their value resided wholly in their fashionableness and marketability.

No doubt it has always been thus in human dealings with language; even when some kind of space has been made for a non-utilitarian linguistic or semiotic practice, it has quickly been transformed by the pressures of survival and competition into a tool. But it is evident that

instrumentalism has become unusually dominant in the academy in recent years, as it has in all spheres of education, and it is now something of a rarity to encounter a response to a literary or philosophical work which attempts to postpone the moment of purposive co-option, or a theory which argues for the importance of such an attempt. It would be naïve to think that reading could be innocent of exterior motivations and goals, if only because since Marx, Darwin, and Freud we know how little we can be aware of the hidden processes and drives that condition our plans and performances. There is, however, an obvious distinction between a reading that sees as its task the pragmatic utilization of the work it reads and one that comes armed (or rather disarmed) with a readiness to respond to the work's distinctive utterance and is prepared to accept the consequences of doing so.

This shift to an increasingly instrumental approach to literature is, of course, part of a more general, globally experienced increase in the weight given to the values of the market-place, to the success ethic, to productivity as a measure of worth. Everything I have said about attitudes to works could be said about attitudes to other persons and other cultures. Although the majority of recent studies claiming a political function for literature to have appeared in recent years have situated themselves on the left, there is a sense in which many of them could be said to participate in an instrumentalized system of literary education, criticism, and publication. Bitterly opposed though Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were by the majority of literary academics, their governments' profit- and productivity-oriented approaches came to pervade the academy—not so much by dint of persuasiveness or example, but by the creation of a situation of reduced resources and increased competition and an ethos founded on self-promotion and material accumulation. Their successors (of whatever political party) have done nothing to reverse this shift.

The instrumental approach that dominates literary criticism today has produced a number of extremely original and illuminating works;⁷ and the fact that it has also produced a number of pedestrian or incoherent works—works, for instance, based on a crude notion of the relation between “text” and “context,” or on a wild overestimate of the power of literary works to effect political change—is largely a function of the inevitable unevenness in quality of the works that spring from any fertile cultural movement. One often hears the claim that there has been an overall decline in the quality of published literary criticism (using

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