

## Literature and Reality

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THIS TOPIC is too big for adequate treatment in a few pages, but Beardsley and Hospers discuss it as one topic among many. Both of them also deal with music, painting, and other arts, and not only fail to do justice to literature but seem to me to be wrong about it in important respects. Their mistakes are similar and by no means incidental to their central contentions. I shall consider Beardsley first and then Hospers, venturing some constructive suggestions along the way.

### I

In his paper, Beardsley distinguishes two theories about art and suggests that they are "at bottom . . . recommendations about how works of art are best approached." Orally, he adds that the alternative is meant to be exhaustive and that he does not think that when it comes to literature there are any really good grounds for the Immanence Theory; literature, he says, calls for the Significance Theory.

Indeed, Beardsley says in his paper that he considers "literature—surely the most favorable case" for the Significance Theory; "plainly and thoroughly representational" painting or sculpture "the next easiest"; "nonrepresentational paintings and sculpture" more difficult but still manageable; and music scarcely more difficult. The Immanence Theory, conversely, seems to be based on music and nonrepresentational art, faces trouble with representational art, and breaks down confronted with literature—all according to Beardsley.

In fact, however, the Significance Theory does not offer fruitful recommendations for approaching literature: the "two rules which in effect define the Significance Theory" hardly make sense when applied to literary works.

"Rule 1: Works of art, as nonutilitarian human artifacts, are to be taken as indicating what they most resemble in form or regional quality." What does Milton's sonnet on his blindness ("When I consider. . . .") resemble in the form of regional quality? And what does it indicate?

Yet according to Beardsley himself Rule 1 marks the only hard-core difference between his two theories; for "a modified Immanence-Theorist, of course, might accept . . . Rule 2 as far as symbolism in literature is concerned. . . ." It is clearly implied that even the "modified Immanence-Theorist," and a fortiori the authentic one, would balk at Rule 1 when it comes to the interpretation of literature, while the Significance-Theorist, whose approach to literature seems the only feasible one to Beardsley, would insist on Rule 1.

Actually, the second rule does not make a great deal more sense when applied to most literary works. "Rule 2: Utilitarian objects prominently depicted or described in works of art are to be taken as symbolizing the dominant qualities of the activities in which they usually function." In Milton's sonnet on his blindness, for example, no utilitarian objects at all are prominently depicted or described. If these two rules really "define the Significance Theory" we have to conclude that this theory breaks down before Milton's sonnet, not to speak of other poems.

In fairness, we should recall that the Significance Theory is initially introduced as a comprehensive term for the claim that a work of art "copies, or imitates, or represents, or expresses," and what these admittedly different claims are said to have in common is the view that "it is the very nature of a work of art to point beyond itself to something else." At this point one may recall Plato's and Aristotle's influential term *mimesis*, which has been variously rendered as copy, imitation, or representation; and it seems that Beardsley lumps the ex-

pression theory, so different on the face of it, with the mimetic theory in order to form an inclusive and exhaustive alternative to the Immanence Theory. One may even wonder whether "Reference Theory" would not be better than "Significance Theory": the term "significance" is patently ill chosen, for "significance" and "immanence" form no exhaustive contrast any more than "significant" and "immanent."

The inadequacy of this scheme, however, is not reducible to a poor choice of words. When the Immanence Theory is introduced at the beginning of section II it is said to include statements not only about what the work of art *is* but also about what it "resembles," while statements about what it refers to are said to belong to the Significance Theory. After this, "resemble" drops out of Beardsley's paper—even in his discussion of examples from the visual arts where "resembles" would often be far more idiomatic and natural than "represents," which is often unclear—but the term "resemble" reappears again near the end of Beardsley's paper in the formulation, already quoted, of the first of the two rules "which in effect define the Significance Theory."

Let us return to Milton's sonnet on his blindness. We have seen how both rules are inapplicable to it. Neither does it seem to copy, imitate, or represent anything. It *says* a number of things, and the first task of interpretation is surely to lead readers to see *what* the work says. It is not clear that what it says lies outside it instead of being immanent in it. The biographical fact that the poet really was blind might be said to lie outside the poem, and so does the Calvinistic tradition which emphasizes action so much more than Luther did. Both the biographical fact and the tradition enhance our understanding of the poem: A Lutheran of the same period would not have found any such problem in being blind as Milton did. But what the poem itself says is in the usual sense of both words immanent in it as well as significant.

The same considerations apply to Milton's sonnet, "Me-thought I saw my late espoused Saint. . . ." Again the two rules break down and Beardsley's scheme does not help us.

The question "how people should be induced to approach works of art" of this kind remains wide open.

Let us try then to offer some suggestions of our own: In the case of such short and relatively straightforward poems the task of stating what they say may seem so simple that some critics are led to assume that a theory of interpretation should concentrate on what remains to be done after such an initial interpretation. But any interpreter must surely explain Milton's allusions to Alcestis in the second sonnet and to the parable of the talents in the first. Neither poem can be understood adequately without such explanations. It is not clear whether we depart from the Immanence Theory when we insist on this.

The reader who does not understand "Alcestis" and "Jove's great son" because he has not read Euripides and does not know the ancient Greek traditions is not in an altogether different situation from one who does not understand "God," "Saint," and "the Old Law" because he has not read the New Testament and does not know Christian traditions. Nor is the perplexity of such readers altogether different in kind from that of foreigners or "children from culturally deprived homes" who do not know the meaning of "chide" or "vested." It would hardly be difficult to describe analogous problems in painting and music where understanding also depends on some knowledge of the idiom, of conventions, and of earlier works, and those lacking such knowledge understand much less than those who do.

The *Iliad* plainly does not say something simple in the same relatively straightforward way in which Milton's two sonnets do. It offers us a more nearly self-contained world, and if there are allusions to earlier works or traditions we are less likely to notice them. What concerns the interpreter is plainly what is to be found *in* the poem. The following questions do not take us outside the work: whether the characters develop; what ethic, if any, is implicit in the poem; what conception of the human condition we find in it.

Most works of literature lie between the *Iliad* and a sonnet, at least in length; tragedies, for example. Here, too,

the same questions are fruitful: what moral ideas are implicit in the *Oresteia*? do the characters develop? how is the Apollo of Cassandra's story in the *Agamemnon* related to the Apollo of the *Eumenides*? Even when we say that the *Oresteia* evinces a belief in the possibility of moral progress through the use of reason, we are not claiming that the work "copies, or imitates, or represents," or even "expresses" a belief which had existed outside the work before it was written. It is not as if Aeschylus here expressed his well-known belief in progress; rather the trilogy says or implies that such progress is possible. Whether the poet consistently maintained this belief in his private life is quite a different question.

We might go on to ask whether this belief is characteristic of his work generally or only of this particular trilogy. Even as the *Eumenides* must be interpreted in the context of the trilogy of which it forms, as it were, the last act, one may interpret an author's single works in the context of his whole *oeuvre*.

We can go a step further and ask whether the world view of the *Iliad* is also that of the *Odyssey*, or whether in the latter poem we find a concern with property and wealth that is largely alien to the *Iliad* which is much more concerned with honor and status. If we answered the last question in the affirmative we should have some grounds for doubting the common authorship of the two epics and some evidence, albeit not conclusive, for assigning a later date to the *Odyssey*. Comparisons of style and vocabulary might help to establish a higher probability.

Some critics may find some of the questions raised here philosophical and irrelevant to works of art as works of art. But when we deal with some of the greatest writers, including Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, and many of the most interesting writers of the twentieth century, such questions as these are central to any understanding of their major works.

To return to Beardsley, we have seen that our questions form no part of his Significance Theory. Neither do they fit

into his Immanence Theory which "considers no work of art, taken by itself, as being interpretable (unless the explication of metaphor—and, it might be added, the elucidation or analysis of implied character and motive in novels—be considered interpretation)."

Beardsley's dichotomy was evidently suggested to him by his assumption that meaning depends on reference, and interpretation on meaning. But his paper leaves the notion of reference, though it seems all-important for his scheme, utterly in the dark. On behalf of the Immanence Theory, he quotes two lines from Housman to point out a difficulty in the Significance Theory:

The night my father got me,  
His mind was not on me. . . .

"Who is the 'me' in this poem?" asks Beardsley. And who, one might add, is Cordelia, or Oedipus, or Macbeth?

We are merely told that according to "some critics," evidently Immanence-Theorists of whom Beardsley disapproves, we are here offered "pseudo-references," and "the literary work uses only . . . the surface and contour and texture and emotional impact of ideas, but not their living substance. . . . How else could we enjoy the horrors of tragedy?"

If what we want are "pedagogical proposals about how people should be induced to approach works of art," we need not enter into the intricacies of recent philosophical discussions about "referring"; and short of that the alternative of references and pseudo-references is as unhelpful as that of surface and living substance. But it may be of some slight help to distinguish the following cases:

- (a) Some literary figures closely resemble historical figures whose names they bear.
- (b) Some bear the names of historical persons but differ from them in important respects.
- (c) Others closely resemble historical persons whose names they do not bear.

(d) Yet others combine features of several recognizable historical figures.

(e) And others, finally, seem entirely "fictitious" or, to put it more positively, creations of the poet's imagination.

Whether historical names or resemblances to historical figures are crucial for an understanding of the significance of literary figures has to be decided in each case, not once and for all. To decide this, one has to see first how we can interpret a work without going outside it and then what, if anything, is added by bringing in additional information about the historical prototype. Sometimes what is added is a realization how the poet changed historical characters and events, and the changes he made are often invaluable clues to his intentions. But this is at least equally true in cases where previous authors have dealt with the same, or similar, material—in cases, in other words, which do not take us outside the world of literature into nonliterary "reality." The changes rung on the Orestes story by authors who came after Aeschylus furnish an outstanding example, as does the way in which Aeschylus himself departed from the Homeric tradition.<sup>1</sup>

## II

John Hospers, in his paper on "Art and Reality," also overestimates the dependence of literature on nonliterary "reality"; and what he says about literature is in some instances simply wrong. Thus he says—and I interpolate numbers to facilitate discussion of his claims:

"Even if the character in question does a totally unexpected thing . . . [1] the novelist must have prepared the ground for us by characterizing him as the kind of person who is subject to such sudden characterological changes. . . . Otherwise [2] the event is left totally unexplained, [3] the reader is left baffled, and [4] the required tie between art and reality is broken."

All four of these claims are wrong, and so are the last two sentences of the preceding paragraph, which are in the same vein. To begin with the first claim, there is no good rea-

son whatever why a writer cannot reveal character to us through unexpected actions, without first preparing the ground for us. If he wants to present one of "those wrecked by success,"<sup>2</sup> he need not tip his hand before.

Nor does it follow that if the ground is not prepared for us, (2) "the event is left totally unexplained." Not only might the explanation come later but there is a wide area indeed between the *totally* unexplained and the completely explained.

Hospers' third claim, that if the ground has not been prepared for him "the reader is left baffled," is clearly meant to suggest that this would be bad and would invite just censure. In fact, precisely what is left unexplained invites attempts at explanations by readers and interpreters and is often found most fascinating. Thus Freud devoted the first half of his paper on "Those Wrecked by Success" to Shakespeare's characterization of Lady Macbeth and concluded, before considering Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* in the second half: "Confronted with the character of Lady Macbeth we have been unable to answer the question why she collapses, sick, after the success. . . ."

Kafka's two-page parable "Before the Law," in *The Trial*, furnishes a more extreme example. The behavior of the two characters in the parable is not illuminated "through prior characterization," yet this is not felt to be an artistic defect. It is from what they do and do not do that we learn to some extent what they are like, but Kafka deliberately leaves room for a wealth of conflicting explanations and actually goes on to produce such explanations, one after another. These pages, moreover, are probably intended to furnish a clue to his own conception of *The Trial*, and they also throw a great deal of light on *The Castle*—and on the problem raised by Hospers.

Hospers' fourth claim, that "the required tie between art and reality is broken," shows how his conception of reality differs from Homer's and Sophocles'. In the *Iliad* Hector says: "In a moment, Zeus can make a brave man run away and lose a battle; and the next day the same god will spur him on to fight."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Menelaus says in Sophocles' *Ajax*:

Nay, though a man should tower in thews and might,  
 A giant o'er his fellows, let him think  
 Some petty stroke of fate may work his ruin.<sup>4</sup>

While Menelaus generally does not speak Sophocles' mind in the *Ajax*, this sense of radical insecurity pervades not only this play as a whole but also Sophocles' other tragedies, as well as the *Iliad*. What matters in the present context is that this unreliability and unpredictability of the world do not even stop at the threshold of character: even such apparently strong and firm characters as Hector and Ajax may suddenly act, as we might put it, out of character. That is the sense of reality we encounter in some of the greatest works of Greek literature. And in this respect some existentialist literature is closer to the world of Homer and Greek tragedy than it is to the novels of which Hespers seems to be thinking.

It might be argued that Hespers is right about "reality" and that these writers are wrong and exaggerate the element of uncertainty and insecurity. This is not the place to try to establish a view of the human situation. But so far from being baffled and inclined to condemn the writer's characterization, as Hespers supposes, most readers simply fail to notice such difficulties—at least in some types of literature, such as Greek or Shakespearean tragedy and much twentieth-century fiction.

In a conversation with Eckermann, April 18, 1827, Goethe noted that Lady Macbeth says in one of her most striking speeches:

I have given suck and know  
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me. . . .

But after the murder of his children, Macduff says of Macbeth: "He has no children." Most readers overlook this problem. And even Goethe ignored a really profound difficulty when he excused this apparent inconsistency by saying: "the poet always lets his characters say what in some particular place is fitting, effective, and good, without worrying a great deal, or anxiously calculating, whether these words might not perhaps offer an apparent contradiction to another passage." Of

course, the Lady might have had a child from a previous husband; but why does Macbeth try to murder Banquo's sons to keep them from inheriting the throne if he has no children? The impression we receive from Shakespeare's play is that Macbeth has no children. Here is a matter of central importance, left in utter darkness by one of the world's supreme poets in what is generally considered one of his most successful plays. It would seem that the characterization of Macbeth violates that "fidelity to human nature" which Hospers considers crucial.

That *Hamlet* abounds in similar difficulties is well known among Shakespeare scholars, yet most of these problems escape the attention of all but a very few readers, not to speak of playgoers. In Greek tragedy absolutely central points are frequently left unexplained. Take three of the seven extant tragedies of Sophocles whose masterly plot construction has been admired by critics ever since Aristotle.

In *Oedipus Tyrannus* the hero is outstanding in his relentless attempts to discover the truth, and the plot depends on this characteristic. Oedipus also tells us that when a drunk told him long ago that he was not the son of the king and queen of Corinth, he first tried to pry the truth from them and, failing in that, went to Delphi to gain enlightenment, and there he was told that he was fated to lie with his mother. To avoid this fate he left Corinth. Jocasta, who had much earlier received a similar prophecy, had exposed her son to escape the calamity. Yet Oedipus married a woman old enough to be his mother, and it seems that neither of them asked any questions at the time or for years thereafter. It would be misleading to say that we are asked to believe this; for the atmosphere of Greek tragedy and the conventions governing it are so remote from naturalism that such points are almost bound to be overlooked—unless one makes a deliberate effort to imitate the Higher Critics of the Old Testament who on similar grounds would infer that there must have been two or three different authors.

In *Antigone* it is never explained just what the heroine

believes ought to be done to her brother's corpse, and why—to prevent what. She is caught when she returns to the corpse for a second ritual; but it is left unexplained why she came back—and whether, if not caught, she might have come back again.<sup>5</sup> Yet *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone* are generally admired as the two most perfect works of the most perfect tragedian of all time.

In Sophocles' *Philoctetes* the central purpose of Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' mission remains unclear: do they need Philoctetes with his bow to conquer Troy, or only the bow? Kitto has discussed this question very fully, and there is no need here to go into it. C. M. Bowra has said in his book on *Sophoclean Tragedy*,<sup>6</sup> and Kitto agrees:<sup>7</sup> "There is uncertainty about almost every play of Sophocles . . . about the whole meaning of an episode or even of a play."

These considerations are anything but tangential to Professor Hespers' arguments about "Art and Reality." He tells us at the outset: "We shall begin with the art-medium in which it is most obvious that there is a relation of art to reality . . . namely literature, and then see whether any conclusions that emerge therefrom can also apply to visual art." Two paragraphs later Hespers speaks of "the closest relation that exists between art and reality: the relation between characters in literature and people in life." I have tried to show that he misunderstands this relation, presumably because he takes his cue exclusively from one kind of novel while ignoring other types of literature.

Thus Hespers' naturalistic standard of "fidelity to human nature" does not stand up any more than Beardsley's assumption that literature "copies, or imitates, or represents, or expresses" some independent reality. Great works of literature often say something or crystallize an experience of life; but it is not necessarily an experience that existed—even in the artist's mind—before the work was created: it may be an experience that is crystallized for the first time in the work and of which the writer himself never had any clear and articulate consciousness.

I agree with Beardsley that recommendations "about how works of art are best approached" could be helpful, but neither he nor Hospers seem to me to furnish fruitful recommendations, at least as far as literature is concerned. I have tried to be constructive by suggesting some questions that it *would* be fruitful to ask.

## NOTES

1. See my article on "Nietzsche Between Homer and Sartre: Five Treatments of the Orestes Story" in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 67 (1964.1), 50-73.
2. Sigmund Freud, "Die am Erfolge scheitern" in *Einige Charaktertypen aus der psychoanalytischen Arbeit*, *Imago*, 1915, often reprinted; e.g., in *Gesammelte Werke*, X, 370-89.
3. 17.176 ff. Rieu translation, Penguin Books, p. 320. Cf. also pp. 377; 20, 433 ff.
4. 1077 ff., Storr translation in the bilingual Loeb edition.
5. H. D. F. Kitto discusses this and the following points more fully in his *Form and Meaning in Drama* (1956).
6. 1944, p. 2.
7. *Op. cit.*, pp. 90 f. Many of the questions touched here I hope to treat more fully in a book on tragedy.