Introduction

WHY WE READ: THE PLURAL VALUES OF LITERATURE

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1. Introduction

Why we read literature and why we should read literature are questions that have been discussed since antiquity, but in recent years, against the backdrop of what has been perceived as a world-wide crisis in the humanities, these questions have gained unprecedented scope and intensity. Never before has the value of literature and of literary studies been questioned so fiercely as in the current world situation in which everything that does not produce short-term profit needs to justify itself. In recent years literary scholars and philosophers have arisen to defend the value of literature with a range of perspectives that emphasizes the need to understand this value in a wider sense than purely instrumental terms. One of the most influential contributions to the current debate has been Martha Nussbaum’s Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (2010), in which she defends the significance of literature for educating democratic citizens to have a sense of a plurality of perspectives. Other notable recent examples are Narrative Ethics (edited by Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn, 2013), which discusses the ethical value of narrative fiction from the perspective of narrative studies, and the New Literary History theme issue “Use” (edited by Rita Felski, 2013), which explores the different ways in which literature affects us through its manifold engagements with the world.

Many developments in the literary studies of the past few decades have fostered a renewed interest in issues of value. Values have been an integral part of literature and literary debate ever since the ancient quarrel between Plato and Aristotle on whether literature is good or bad for us. The emergence of the modern conception of literature, however, is bound to the separation of the spheres of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics, as articulated, for example, in the three critiques of Immanuel Kant. The efforts of literary studies as a discipline to acquire scientific status in the twentieth century were linked to an aspiration—perhaps best exemplified by structuralist approaches—to purify literary research of any considerations of value. By contrast, over the past three decades the modern separation of the realms of ethics and knowledge has been called into question by a range of developments that are often described as constituting an ethical turn in literary studies and in the humanities at large.
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(see Davis and Womack, 2001; Korthals Altes, 2005; Hawthorn and Lothe, 2013). This turn partly overlaps and intertwines with what have been dubbed the narrative, cognitive, and affective turns, all of which draw attention to those aspects of literature and the dynamics of reading that point beyond pure aesthetic value. For example, the narrative turn in the humanities has drawn attention to the ways in which we give meaning to our experiences through storytelling practices and to how literary and other cultural narratives affect our narrative sense-making processes in which we are engaged as subjects of action, cognition, and affect (see Meretoja, 2014).

Often scholars work within the context of one of these turns and focus on the corresponding aspect of the value of literature. By contrast, the present volume approaches values in the plural: the interrelated ethical, aesthetic, cognitive, affective, social, historical, and existential values of literature. We endeavour to bring together discussions that have too often remained disconnected, yet can produce new insights when brought into dialogue with each other. Moreover, we want to point out how these different values and the corresponding dimensions of literature are intertwined in complex ways that are relevant for the ongoing discussions. For example, the debate on the value of literature has recently centred largely on the question of whether literature can cultivate our capacity for empathy and perspective taking. This capacity is ethically valuable and also has a cognitive, affective, and social aspect. Further, it is important to pay particular attention to the aesthetic aspects of literature to appreciate the specific ways in which literature makes its ethical, cognitive, and social contribution. The discussion has often neglected the particular literary means through which literature can develop our ethical and cognitive abilities, cultivate our sense of history, and engage us in socially and philosophically significant explorations of values. Moreover, the potential of literature to contribute to our understanding of different cultural and historical modes of experience—and, ultimately, of our whole being in the world with others—has wide-ranging significance, which could be characterized as not only ethical, but also existential. This contribution, in turn, takes place through the emotional engagement of the reader. Hence, we argue, the ethical, aesthetic, cognitive, affective, social, historical, and existential values of literature should be thought of in connection with each other.

What makes issues of value particularly important for many contemporary literary scholars is their interest in exploring how literary studies could develop in a direction that might make them more relevant in the contemporary world. Contributions such as Tzvetan Todorov’s La littérature en péril (2007), Rita Felski’s Uses of Literature (2008), and Colin Davis’s Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell (2010) have recently articulated, from different perspectives, dissatisfaction with the critical tradition that emphasizes either the formalist self-sufficiency of