

21st Century Theories of Literature: Fiction, Value, and Essence

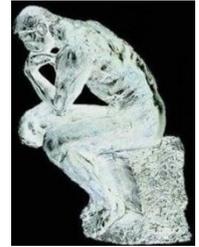


27th-29th March, 2014

Warwick University

Organisers: Philip Gaydon, Andrea Selleri, Dr Eileen John

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/21stcenturytheoriesofliterature/>



The conference was attended by over 80 delegates from around the world who represented a variety of literary and philosophical backgrounds. There were three double key-note sessions, a presentation on the interweaving of poetry and philosophy in a practical context, 24 talks selected from over a hundred abstracts, and a final round-table discussion.

The opening evening saw Mike Rose-Steel and Suzanne Steele (Exeter) present on some of their recent works of poetry. Steele displayed part of a digital installation that emerged from her experiences with the troops in Afghanistan and touched upon some of the larger ethical and metaphysical questions poets face. Rose-Steel presented on the current installation their Exeter-based group *Exegesis* has on show: *The Wittgenstein Vector*. They finished with a performance of some of the poetry the installation is based on.



Friday morning centred on the idea of 'essence'. There were five talks in two panels, after which the 'Essence' double keynote was given by Stein Olsen (Østfold) and Sergia Adamo (Trieste). Olsen spoke on 'Essence, Intentions, and Institutions' and Adamo on the question 'Do We Need Essence?'. The former focused on what background of concepts and conventions one must have in order to identify the features of a literary work. The latter addressed the question of whether there are in fact any definite and non-negotiable criteria for what literature is; can or should we even ask the question 'what is literature?'



The afternoon session was allotted to contemplating 'fiction'. After five more papers – including a hotly debated presentation from Derek Matravers (Open University/Cambridge) on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction – Peter Lamarque (York) and Catherine Belsey (Swansea) gave talks entitled 'Opacity and the Values of Fiction' and 'Fiction and the Opacity of Language: A Response to Peter Lamarque' respectively. Lamarque attempted to develop a notion of 'opacity' as a convention of reading fiction as opposed to non-fiction. Belsey agreed with some notion of the opacity of literature but rejected Lamarque's move towards a 'thought theory' as an example of the wider, unachievable ideal of analytic philosophers working within the field of the philosophy of literature: a precise grasp of clear ideas beyond the words of a text.

Saturday morning was dedicated to exploring 'value'. After six stimulating talks, Greg Currie (York) gave a presentation entitled 'Psychological Realism and Literary Value' and Jean-Michel Rabaté (Pennsylvania) spoke on 'Literature, Affect, Ethics: The Non-Moral Values of Joyce and Proust'. Currie asked whether truth can be a pertinent literary value, particularly in light of the tendency of critics to praise literary fictions for their moral truths. Rabaté agreed with much of what Currie presented about the value of truthfulness but used examples from psychoanalysis to explore how opaque things can become in these circumstances and claim that there is an ethics that cannot be reduced to morality.



Saturday afternoon was then spent exploring the relationship between philosophy of literature and literary studies. There were eight further talks that covered a wonderful plethora of topics. The conference closed with a final round-table discussion which sparked vibrantly intense yet healthy debate about whether and the extent to which the analytic aestheticians, literary theorists, and continental

philosophers present had managed to engage with each other and whether there were any fruits to be borne from such a relationship.



Feedback was overwhelmingly positive both about the conference as a whole and the experience of engaging in impassioned and frank dialogue with academics from other disciplines. It is hoped that conference proceedings will be published and that such a collaborative event will happen again, preferably in another country and venue in order to further grow the discussion and network. The organisers will also be giving a presentation at Durham's "Transfusion and Transformation: the Creative Potential of Interdisciplinary Knowledge Exchange" conference in July about the successes of and issues with the notion of interdisciplinarity uncovered during these three days.

