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PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The nineteenth century marked the emergence of literature's philosophical importance in several crucial new ways. In the wake of post-Kantian developments in both romantic and Idealist thought occurring at the end of the eighteenth century, literature emerged (in the words of Hegel and others) as “art itself,” “art par excellence”—not simply one genre of art among many (or, for that matter a form of discourse removed from comparison with other artistic genres), but the epitome of artistic experience. Perhaps even more strikingly, given the literary output of the century, these new philosophical construals of literature more than met their match—were in fact in many ways overtaken by the artistic development of new forms which owed their origins to the eighteenth century but their development to the nineteenth. In particular, the novel, which until the late eighteenth century had been written in a primarily epistolary form, came to acquire the sprawling and narrative form associated with many of the great nineteenth-century Russian, French, and English novels and raised new questions about the relation between literature and a rapidly changing social and political world.

In what follows, these developments will be traced in terms of three large considerations. In the first section, I will explore the general question of what overarching philosophical frameworks were relevant for the construal of literature over the course of the nineteenth century and to what extent these frameworks still have relevance for contemporary philosophy of literature. Two of these approaches—lyric expressivism and the conception of the objectivity or independence of the literary artwork—will be of particular interest. In the second section, I will take up the status of literature within the shifting contours of the nineteenth century’s accounts of aesthetics and artistic genres—in particular, how the reflection of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on the non-mimetic character of music had broader consequences for the philosophy of art and literature. Finally, in the third section, I explore in light of these considerations of philosophical and aesthetic approaches to literature a tension that becomes especially important over the course of the century between literature’s internal importance as a work of art and its relation to the world—the question of whether and to what extent art is engaged with social and cultural realities, for example, or is concerned with the creation of something independent from them.
I Two Nineteenth Century Philosophical Frameworks for Considering Literature

It is clear that a consideration of literature was an important issue for many nineteenth-century philosophers, from Hegel to Mill to Kierkegaard to Nietzsche. The roots of this new philosophical interest in literature can be traced in many ways back to currents within late eighteenth-century literature and philosophy. As Dieter Henrich has noticed, for example, there was a remarkable explosion in German-language literary production—both the publication of new literary works and philosophical and critical reflections on them—in the last two decades of the eighteenth century (roughly following the time of the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason; see Henrich 2003, 74). In this section, I will argue that there were two especially important and opposing approaches to the philosophical construal of literature that developed in the nineteenth century that have remained important for contemporary discussion: the first, lyric expressivism, which had a loosely romantic origin, and the second the objectivity or independence of the literary artwork, which had somewhat more emphatically Idealist roots, although some heritage among the early German romantics, as well. (This issue of the artwork’s independence is distinct from the related and much-discussed issue of the autonomy of literature itself.)

Before we examine these two approaches, it should be noted that the prevailing terms of philosophical discourse about literature in the nineteenth century were frequently different from those used in contemporary discussions in the field: not only had the academic sub-discipline known as “philosophy of literature” not come into being as such, but “literature” had not yet come to be widely used as a broad term referring to the category of “significant imaginative or aesthetic writing in general” including both poetry and the novel. The primary eighteenth-century meaning of “literature” was still, as Johnson’s Dictionary had defined it, “learning; skill in letters” (see Speight 2013b); according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first indications of the use of the word in general to mean “written work valued for superior or lasting artistic merit” without reference to a specific national or technical literature such as “German” or “scientific” literature, come in the mid-nineteenth century, and the strongest evaluative uses of it to distinguish writing that matters aesthetically or ethically are from twentieth-century writers. Most of the philosophical writers from the nineteenth century to be considered in what follows mark off their territory of philosophical interest in this area not as “literature” but rather as “poetry”—and what is serious in prose fiction is often treated by them on a somewhat ad hoc basis, not always neatly fitting into the larger aesthetic structures within which they work.

Whether this difference in usage matters only historically or philosophically is a good question. Peter Lamarque is certainly right to say (in the context of a discussion of the institutional theory of literature) that we should not confuse the history of a word with the history of a concept (Lamarque 2009, 64). There are, however, I would argue, both linguistic as well as conceptual questions relevant in this context as one looks at nineteenth-century contributions to the philosophy of literature.

Philosophically, one question of particular relevance that might be asked is whether a general philosophical approach to literature construed around poetry (as are those of our nineteenth-century philosophers) does in fact pose different conceptual issues than one framed in terms of literature (as is the case with most contemporary discussions in the philosophy of literature). One obvious difference that a contemporary
philosopher would remark between the two construals is that the poetry-centered
nineteenth-century discussions seem to focus perhaps more immediately on questions of
form and origin (what account can we give of what makes a poem come to be, as opposed
to “ordinary” prose?) rather than, say, the contemporary question of value (what makes
something significant enough—ethically or otherwise—to be considered literature?).

These are, of course, not exclusive questions: as we will see shortly, the nineteenth-
century concern with poetry also—especially in Hegel—never leaves aside the question
of value, (especially, as it turns out, the value of truth), and the literary perspective of
contemporary philosophers of literature is certainly not unconcerned with issues of form
and origin. The difference, however, is one of emphasis, and it is a question, as it turns
out, which will prove illuminating not only for the issue we are interested in at the
moment—under what general philosophical framework should works of literature be
viewed?—but also for the other two central questions of our discussion, concerning
aesthetic genre theories and the relation of literature to the world.

Let us begin with two famous yet quite different discussions of poetry—and its antith-
eses—that stem from the first third of the nineteenth century: those of Hegel and Mill.
The contrast that interests Hegel in his discussion in the Lectures on Fine Arts is one
between poetry and what he calls, in a memorable phrase, “the prose of the world.” Poetry,
in Hegel’s view, “is the original presentation of the truth,” which does not divide its
subject matter as prose does but rather presents it “as a totality complete in itself and
therefore independent” (Hegel 1975, 973). The real origin of poetry is thus not to be
found in considerations of diction, rhyme, or rhythm, but in “the form which the way
of imagining things [Vorstellen] must take in order to be expressed poetically” (ibid., 1000).
Hegel gives as an example of poetry’s independence and distinctness from its prosaic
surroundings the elegiac distich commemorating the Greeks who fell at Thermopylae,
as reported by Herodotus: “Here four thousand from the Peloponnese fought against three
myriads.” Such a commemorative expression is “of such a high dignity that it tries to
distinguish itself from any other mode of speech,” and thus poetry can be said to have
“the vocation of being a sphere of its own” (ibid., 974). Hegel’s point here is worth
contrasting with many views of the poetic (or the literary, for that matter): it’s not that
the Thermopylae distich is “fine writing” and therefore poetic, but rather that it some-
how stands out with some independence from other writing. Within the sphere of
independence visible even in a distich, a work of poetry has an organic unity which “gives
in its parts the appearance of close connection and coherence and, in contrast to the
world of mutual dependence, stands there for its own sake and free on its own account”
(ibid., 965); the whole which it articulates (even in the relatively short compass of a
distich, but obviously more so over the course of an entire epic):

may be rich and may have a vast range of relations, individuals, actions, events,
feelings, sorts of ideas, but poetry must display this vast complex as perfect in
itself, as produced and animated by the single principle which is manifested
externally in this or that individual detail.

(Ibid., 973)

Poetry thus must avoid merely retailing the endless particular details that prose by its
nature cannot satisfactorily unify (or so claimed Hegel, writing before the appearance
of many of the great nineteenth-century novels). But poetry must likewise avoid attempt-
ing to unify details under the abstract universals found in philosophy or scientific
thinking: it must instead present them within a unity that is “animated, manifest, ensouled, determining the whole, and yet at the same time expressed in such a way that the all-comprising unity, the real animating soul, is made to work only in secret from within outwards” (ibid., 973).

Mill’s discussion of poetry in his two well-known essays (“What Is Poetry?” and “The Two Kinds of Poetry”) begins with Wordsworth’s contrasting of poetry with its “logical opposite”—in this case, not prose in the broad sense, but elements that Hegel would consider central to the world’s prosaicness: the realm of fact and science (Mill 1833). But Mill then moves to differentiate poetry from fiction, narrative, and the novel more broadly in terms of their origin. An interesting difference emerges: in Mill’s view, poetry derives at its depth from a concern with heart and feeling, whereas fiction derives from a concern with incident (the details of stories—from the latest gossip to travel narratives to novels—which can attract a reader’s attention. Mill acknowledges that novels can have a poetry to them—and not merely be in verse—but maintains the underlying contrast in this distinction between concern for feeling and concern for incident.)

The different interests in poetry taken by Hegel and Mill generate differing histories of literature, both on the level of society and the individual character that is drawn to literature: for Hegel, phylogenetically speaking, poetry is somehow more original or primal within the development of the human race. For Mill, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically—i.e. both in one's own individual childhood and in the childhood of the human race—narrative prose, thirst for gossipy details and incidents, comes first, whereas poetry comes later; these are for him above all the result of different kinds of character.

The differing approaches that Hegel and Mill take to poetry correlate closely with the final two of the four general approaches to literature outlined in M. H. Abrams’ well-known typology of critical approaches to literature and art. As Abrams presents it, critical approaches can be either mimetic (deriving ultimately from Platonic and Aristotelian understandings of art as primarily a form of representation or imitation); pragmatic (concerned with the effect a work of art or literature has on a reader or spectator); expressive (concerned with the romantic impulse of the poet to express himself above all); or objective/autonomous (construing works of art and art itself as having no purpose but its own creation). It is not surprising that the two of Abrams’ approaches that we have associated with Hegel and Mill were perhaps most important in the nineteenth century. The mimetic tradition had been roundly attacked in the eighteenth century and left (by many) for dead (although, as Halliwell among others have argued, that tradition has persistent elements that continue even into the twentieth century [see Halliwell 2002, as well as his contributions to this volume]). Meanwhile the pragmatic tradition’s prominent eighteenth-century exponents had in turn been criticized especially by the post-Kantian Idealists who turned away in their philosophies of art from the Kantian and pre-Kantian discussion of aesthetics and aesthetic reaction. But both the expressivism underlying Mill’s approach and the objectivity of the artwork articulated by Hegel remain important across the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Mill’s view is well represented across the nineteenth century in a romantic strain that can be said to run from Wordsworth and the English romantics at the beginning of the century to such different figures as Tennyson, Carlyle, Wagner, and Nietzsche. Hegel’s understanding of the work of art or literature as independent or objective has further articulation in his fellow Idealist Schelling (and to some extent as well in the early German romantic Friedrich Schlegel); this approach suffers perhaps more diminution over the nineteenth
century than does the lyric, but it nonetheless remains an important approach up through the early and mid-twentieth century in figures like A. C. Bradley, T. S. Eliot, and the American New Critics.

Both the romantic and the Idealist traditions are decisive as well in the nineteenth century’s approach to literature in the context of aesthetic theory more broadly, which is the topic of the next section. On the Idealist side, as we will see, one of the prime motivations behind considering works of art as independent lies in a broader aesthetic commitment that is implicit in their emphasis on the objectivity of the art work: a commitment to the *unity of form and content* in art more generally. The systematic genre theory motivated by this commitment, however, was challenged by new approaches to genre stemming from an essentially lyric impetus, as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and others discovered newfound importance in music. Yet, as will be seen, neither approach still engaged fully such rapidly developing nineteenth-century genres as the novel.

II Literature and Artistic Genre: Changing Nineteenth Century Approaches

Although certainly not all literary critics have approached their field with an eye for how literature fits within a larger theory of art, recent work within analytic philosophy of literature has placed a useful emphasis on doing so—and hence on seeing how literature as a distinct *genre* connects with other artistic genres in a broader theory of aesthetics (Lamarque 2009, 12–16). When we look at literature from the perspective of broader aesthetic theory in the nineteenth century, we see a division of approaches that in many ways follows loosely (though with some qualifications) the lyric and Idealist models we saw in the first section.

Most of the prominent treatments of genre in the early part of the nineteenth century still worked within a set of assumptions that had largely been inherited from the eighteenth century. The classification of the *fine arts* (the *beaux arts* or the *schöne Künste*) as a group distinct from the useful or mechanical arts—and including especially the five arts of architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry—had reached its canonical form in the mid-eighteenth century in Batteux and others, and represented, at least according to the view of Kristeller, a decisive “modern” break from the ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of the arts (see Kristeller 1951–2, as well as recent debate about his claims concerning the importance of these eighteenth-century developments in Kivy 2012 and Porter 2002). At the same time, central questions about how the arts within this broader genre classification relate to one another were influenced by important distinctions such as that of Lessing’s between the visual arts and poetry (Lessing 1984).

If we look at the most prominent philosophically-inspired theories of aesthetics at the start of the nineteenth century—for example, the extensive and influential lecture series on aesthetics given by the Idealists Hegel and Schelling as well as those of the critic A. W. Schlegel—all sketch a view of the individual artistic genres that draws on these eighteenth-century views with impressive similarity. In each of the three lecture series, for example, it is poetry that is placed at the height of the scheme of genres (as somehow offering a unification or reconciliation of the visual and musical arts) and drama that is regarded as the supreme form of poetry (as offering a recapitulated version of the same unification within poetry itself, bringing together both lyric and the visual qualities of epic).
The Idealist account of this genre scheme follows in important ways on a commitment that underlies the emphasis we have seen on an artwork’s unity and objectivity: a commitment to the unity of form and content in aesthetics more generally (Zuckert 2010). Hegel and Schelling (despite their differences) both saw this unity as most visible, for example, in the representation of the Greek gods, who were both universal and particular at once (for the Greeks, they claimed, Athena did not simply mean or stand for divine wisdom but in some sense was divine wisdom itself as a particular god). Hegel’s notion of classical beauty is construed with this unity of the Greek gods in mind in terms of a union of universal meaning (Bedeutung) and particular shape (Gestalt) according to which each of the two must harmoniously “interpenetrate” the other—something most fully visible in the anthropomorphic sculptures of the Greek deities. And such a commitment to the unity of form and content makes clear the Idealist need to work out a genuinely systematic account of the genres: specific artistic media could not to be regarded somehow just as natural kinds but rather must be construed in terms of a more thoroughly unified approach to art.

Within this account of the genres, it is above all drama that achieves the highest unity of form and content, according to both Hegel and Schelling. Thus Schelling in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Art calls drama “the highest manifestation of the nature and essence of all art” (Schelling 1989, 247) and Hegel valorizes drama because of its ability to represent above all human action. While all the artistic genres are somehow concerned with the adequate (formal) representation (of the essential content) of the human, it is drama, Hegel says, in which “the whole man presents, by reproducing it, the work of art produced by man,” thus rendering the whole man “fully alive” onstage, “made into an animated work of art” (Hegel 1975, 627, 955). Drama as a kind of “living sculpture” thus most fully unifies aesthetic form and content.

Hegel’s praise of drama here is, however, not one which can be read as free of tension—if only because his engagement with the question of unity in art’s high human task as a whole must include some consideration of that side of his aesthetics that is often taken up in terms of his supposed “end of art” thesis—that in the modern (post-romantic) world “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (ibid., 11). A correct construal of this side of Hegel’s view of literature would notice that the obverse side of Hegel’s having a sculptural ideal of tragedy is that he has a tragic ideal of sculpture—that is to say that the unity of form and content captured by the ancient Greeks in sculptural renderings of anthropomorphic divinity is a unity which we in the modern world experience necessarily retrospectively, from a distance at which we are always aware of the downfall of the civilization that gave us the beauty of Greek art (Speight 2013a). From this perspective, Hegel’s own appeal to the lyric as that literary mode which might best voice aspects of modernity (as opposed to ancient beauty) offers a presentiment of the decline over the nineteenth century of the general project of looking to art to find the adequate rendering of human significance in human shape.

So it is of course true enough that the broadly holistic approach to works of art that stems from Hegel’s Idealist commitments retains an importance for many later philosophical views of aesthetics stretching into the twentieth century—and not only for those, like A. C. Bradley (Bradley 1901), who worked within an essentially Idealist frame of reference but also for others like Arthur Danto, for whom the notion of embodied meaning became central for other reasons (Danto 1997). But—as the tension in Hegel’s account of artistic modes suggests—the Idealist approach to genre had already begun to fade in crucial ways by the middle of the nineteenth century and was
challenged in particular by the new stress from the lyrical side to be found in the conflict between music and the rest of the arts in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

If the eighteenth-century views of aesthetics the Idealists had drawn upon had particularly compared poetry as a genre with painting and the visual arts, culminating in the Idealist sculptural view of tragedy, it is more typical of the later nineteenth century—on the other side of the romantic movement and the critique of mimetic poetry—to view poetry as having what Abrams calls its “most profound affinity” with music (Abrams 1953, 50). The emphasis in the title of the first edition of Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, is the result not only of Schopenhauer’s appeal to music’s non-mimetic character, but also to a radical way of re-envisioning what the tragic spectator experiences. Tragic drama may still bring together the lyrical and the epic as it did in the systematic aesthetic theories of Hegel, Schelling, and Schlegel, but Nietzsche’s revaluation of aesthetics in terms of the Apollinian–Dionysian opposition construes the grounds for such unity in tragedy in a different way. A remark of Nietzsche’s in *The Case of Wagner* makes clear why the Idealist view of tragic action as unifying the spectator’s experience of the drama needs to be replaced with the more lyrical experience of pathos or feeling:

> It has been a real misfortune for aesthetics that the word drama has always been translated ‘action’ [Handlung]. It is not Wagner alone who errs at this point, the error is world-wide and extends even to philologists who ought to know better. Ancient drama aimed at scenes of great pathos—it precluded action (moving it before the beginning or behind the scene).

(Nietzsche 1968)

But the lyric expressivist strain behind Wagnerian opera and Nietzsche’s appeal to the Dionysian are not the only aesthetic forces which represent the needs for potential shifts within nineteenth-century accounts of literature. Philosophical attention to how the great nineteenth-century novels should be thought about in terms of genre theory was, for example, scant. Partly this is because systematic genre theory itself was in real disarray by the later nineteenth century; in any case, the boldest new theoretical attempts to construe, for example, the nineteenth-century Russian novel were made in the early twentieth century (by, e.g. Lukács and Bakhtin).

### III Literature, Philosophy and the World: Nineteenth-Century Influences in Contemporary Debates?

Given the important nineteenth-century shifts we have seen in philosophical conversations both about the status of literature and its place within aesthetic genre theory, what assessment can we make about the role of these approaches from the perspective of contemporary debates about the philosophy of literature? Are there elements of the nineteenth-century debate about these topics that have continued to persist with influence in discussion in our own day, or has philosophy of literature simply moved past the considerations of greatest importance to nineteenth-century thinkers?

The landscape of the contemporary debate—both in current literary theory and in analytic philosophy of literature—certainly seems to be cast in quite different terms. In literary theory, the most recognizably Idealist cousin left in twentieth-century theory, New Criticism, was largely supplanted mid-century by successive waves of structuralist,
post-structuralist, and ideologically grounded (Freudian, Marxian, feminist) approaches to theory, which have in their turn by now each gone past a certain heyday. For a moment, there was a declaration—by some parties, at least—of an “end of theory,” with a new interest in the writing of memoir and the explicitly autobiographical satisfactions of individual critics in their own reading. If the social and cultural forms of ideological criticism have come to be seen by some as outmoded, the newest theoretical turns after the end of the heyday of theory have sought a more naturalized home for literary theory in contemporary work in evolutionary biology—a project which, of course, bears a proper nineteenth-century point of origin in Darwin, although the author of the Origin of Species appears to have written little about literature, and contemporary theorists have charted somewhat different lines connecting evolutionary and literary theory than Darwin himself may have contemplated (see, among others, Boyd 2009).

In analytic philosophy of literature, the landscape has been well described in terms largely of reactions to Frege’s insistence that in listening to poetry we are “interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused,” not the question of truth (Frege 1970). For many contemporary philosophers of literature—including Lamarque and Olsen (1994), Walton (1990), and Moran (1994)—accepting Frege’s claim means that we may of course be concerned with compelling aesthetic and imaginative issues in our engagement with literature—may even, as Lamarque and Olsen put it, look to literature for some kind of insight or understanding—but cannot hope to find in it knowledge of what our world is actually like. If literature concerns questions of truth, these must refer rather to fictional worlds (in Walton’s formulation, for example, fictional representations serve precisely as props in “games of make-believe”).

In light of the contemporary contour of these conversations, what if anything is left of the nineteenth-century approaches that might offer resources for current work in the philosophy of literature? Can either of the general nineteenth-century approaches to literature we have explored here, for example—given their generally pre-Fregean, pre-Marxist, pre-Freudian commitments—still have an influence in contemporary philosophical thinking about literature?

I would argue that both of these nineteenth-century approaches still have interesting contributions to make within the contemporary context. The Idealists’ approach to the literary work of art offers, for example, a way of preserving what Gibson calls the “humanist intuition”—that literature can present the reader with an “intimate and intellectually significant engagement with social and cultural reality” (Gibson 2007)—while at the same time not losing a second intuition—that literature can present other worlds of aesthetic creation rather than this-worldly representation. While Hegel does not frame the issue precisely in terms of these two competing intuitions, or concern himself (as the post-Fregean discussion has) particularly with the role of fiction as central to the debate, his account of the form and origin of poetry nonetheless engages directly the question of literature’s relation to worldliness in a way which might be contemporarily productive.

As we have seen, Hegel does praise the ability of the poetic imagination to sketch a world that has its own independence and coherence over against the prosaic reality of our this-worldly lives—and it is precisely this essentially creative function of the imagination that makes him think of poetry as the touchstone for art as a whole: imaginative poetry is thus not only the highest artistic genre, as we have seen, but in fact that genre which Hegel thinks can clarify what makes the other genres forms of art themselves (Hegel 1975, 967). Yet however strong Hegel’s praise of the independent and creative
imagination, he makes clear that two important facets of art's historicity and cultural
valence need to be part of the story as well: that (on the side of content) literature's
significance in terms of what Hegel calls the "deepest interests of mankind, and the most
comprehensive truths of the spirit" (ibid., 7) is something that has in fact changed over
time and (on the side of form) that literary artworks have in fact been useful at crucial
moments in human development in helping prompt the discovery of the inadequacy of
certain forms of life (ibid., 967). In both functions, literature is of course not to be
understood in mimetic terms as representing the world in some way but rather as having
a more constitutive role, in showing us what it could mean to espouse or avow the norms
that matter for us in modern life (Pippin 2010). We might note, further, in the wake of
the post-ideological age of literary criticism, that Hegel's overall approach to how social
and cultural reality is figured in literature—given his commitment to the unity of form
and content—might allow a stance in which contemporary critics may avoid the separation
of form and content often associated with the attempt to strip some ideological "meaning"
from a work's aesthetic fabric.

From the lyric expressivist strain in nineteenth-century philosophical engagement
with literature, one might expect—following, for example, Rorty's (1989) contrast
between opposing philosophical tendencies toward perfection and community—less of
an engagement with social and cultural realities than perhaps a more perfectionist
exploration of the freedom and creativity of imagination. Yet here too we might notice
important features of our shared way of life in the modern world that remain important
from the perspective of this philosophical stance toward literature. It might be argued,
for example, that it is only after Nietzsche's engagement with tragedy that certain literary
terms have broken away from the narrower consideration of art and its genres to have a
larger social and cultural impact, as can be glimpsed from the various appeals that have
been made in a post-Nietzschean context to "the tragic" as a phenomenon in a direction
that both Scheler (1954) and Szondi (2002), in different ways, for example, have also
articulated, or, for that matter, to the "Dionysian" itself (Porter 2000). From the vantage
point of peculiarly twentieth-century horrors in social and cultural experience, however,
it is perhaps the more plaintive and persistent, distinctively private lyric voice—in
figures as different as Celan, Kafka, Rilke, and Beckett—that may continue to offer some
of the most provocative re-considerations of literature's connection to the world.
Whether these lyric provocations are best heard, however, in the context of a largely
Nietzschean approach to literature or in the context of that strain of lyric modernism
that emerges from Hegel's reflections on the "end of art" is a question that must be left
for another occasion.

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