

REVIEWS

Alan H. Goldman. *Philosophy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 209 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-967445-9

'Why should philosophers read novels?' Rhetorical as this might sound, the opening line of Alan Goldman's new book is as inviting as it is thought provoking and the whole book might be seen as a response to this question. Though some of the theses presented are already familiar from Goldman's previous publications, *Philosophy and the Novel* provides an interesting and challenging view of the importance and value of art, primarily literature. Structurally, the book is divided in two parts. The first four chapters, gathered under the title 'Philosophy of Novels' are theoretical, concerned with Goldman's overall theories of aesthetic and literary value and his views on interpretation. The second part, 'Philosophy in Novels', revolves around detailed analyses of four major works of the literary canon: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Cider House Rules*, and *Nostromo*.

In the introduction Goldman defends his view of the aesthetic value of art generally, mostly developed against the background of defeating formalist theories. For Goldman, aesthetic pleasure lies in appreciating aesthetic value, where this appreciation includes perception, cognition, emotion, and imagination working and blending together. Literary value, a subclass of aesthetic value, necessarily depends on the ability of a work to engage us cognitively, where this engagement is unified with perception, emotion, and imagination. Literature presents us with situations we might not have come across in real life, enabling us thus to reflect on the possible courses of action that might be taken and developing our ability to empathize with people who are to various degrees different from us.

In the second chapter, Goldman offers a more elaborate version of his paper on interpreting novels. On the one hand, he is concerned with finding the difference in the interpretation of the novels as opposed to the interpretation of other arts. On the other hand, he defends what he calls the 'explanatory account' of interpretation, according to which it is the purpose of an interpretation to explain why work and all of its elements are written precisely as they are. The function of interpretation is to maximize the value of aesthetic experience generated by the work. In the process of arguing in favour of this theory, Goldman offers arguments that are to reveal the crucial shortcomings of competing theories of interpretation, namely, theories which focus on the author's intentions and theories centred on disclosing meanings.

The issue of interpretation runs into the third chapter, which is concerned with incompatible interpretations of the same work. Building on the example of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Goldman rejects the constructivist idea that interpretation creates a work, and claims that in so far as the purpose of interpretation is to guide the reader towards the fullest appreciation of a work, 'new and different interpretations can lead us to see elements in a work that we have previously missed and to integrate these elements in aesthetically more fulfilling ways in the new interpretations' (p. 77). So the fact that there are multiple, mutually contradictory yet acceptable interpretations is not a problem. It simply shows that the work can be aesthetically pleasing in different ways.

The final chapter in the first part, 'The Appeal of the Mystery', is an aesthetic grounding of the distinctive literary value of the mystery genre, detective stories. Much in line with Aristotle's analysis of tragedy and Noël Carroll's analysis of the Gothic genre, Goldman sets out to develop an aesthetics of the mystery, which coheres with his overall view on interpretation and aesthetic value. Relying on contemporary British and American detective novels, Goldman refutes those critics who dismiss this genre as shallow, predictable, not challenging enough for the audience's moral views, and committed to maintaining the social status quo. More than any other genre, Goldman claims, mystery novels engage readers' cognitive and emotional skills, given that the engagement with this kind of work demands that readers pay close attention to all the details in the narrative and try to reconstruct a coherent story of what happened and who did it (even if, as critics say, *why* the crime was committed and *what* moral implications might have been involved are often omitted from the novels and are not supposed to challenge reader's moral values and commitments). This kind of process is bound to bring aesthetic pleasure to the reader, who shares with the detective the task of finding the culprit and with the author the task of creating an aesthetically pleasing narrative. Unlike other novels, detective stories allow for only one right interpretation – namely, the detective's solution to the crime.

The second part of the book is concerned with analysing specific literary works with the aim of showing how philosophy is reflected and developed in them. More to the point, this part of the book deals with the theme of moral development (or the lack of it), moral motivation, moral rules, and reaching moral maturity. The first novel that Goldman analyses is Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, which is, according to him, 'one of the best [examples], if not the best,' (p. 116) of how moral development can optimally be charted by a single extended narrative of the same character. Goldman first offers an analysis of moral development presented by cognitive psychologists and then shows how Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy develop along these lines. The main point here is that mature moral

judgement includes three elements: cognitive-perceptual (manifested in the ability to recognize morally relevant features of a situation), emotional (having to do with the ability to empathize and sympathize with others, which is only possible if an individual is capable of raising above his or her own personal perspective and takes into consideration how others will be affected by his or her actions), and volitional (which includes the willingness to act on one's moral judgement and to know when to conform and when to rise above the moral rules of the society). Applying this theory to *Pride and Prejudice*, Goldman claims that the novel shows the process of reaching full moral development which for the two main characters ends up in marriage. Goldman concludes, 'Reasoned perception, empathy, and the will are the ends of moral development, as *Pride and Prejudice* revealed long before experimental psychology' (p. 134).

The problem of moral motivation is taken up in the sixth chapter, in which Goldman turns his attention to *Huckleberry Finn*. Arguing against some of the most dominant interpretations of Twain's novel, according to which Huck Finn is either irrational (in failing to act on his moral beliefs) or suffers from a weakness of will, Goldman provides an alternative account of Huck's moral motivation and issuing actions. The crucial point in his theory is his claim that moral motivation is not necessary for rationality. What is dominant in Huck's conduct towards Jim is his feeling that Jim deserves sympathy, which implies the belief that Jim ought to be helped. In that way, Huck's core moral motivation is grounded in emotion, even if unconscious, not on the consciously accepted belief that morality demands of him to turn Jim in. The reason why Huck is justified in not acting on his conscious moral belief is the rottenness of this belief, and part of the novel's value lies in the way it shows Huck's moral growth and development, which culminates in his being able to rise above society's morality and to acknowledge Jim's perspective. The novel, Goldman concludes, therefore shows the justifiability of expressivism as the correct meta-ethical theory, and it refutes moral judgement internalism. The extent to which ethical problems can find expression in literary works is obvious already in this chapter, but Chapter Seven presses the point even further. Here, Goldman argues against some dominant views in contemporary literary aesthetics, advocated by Martha Nussbaum, according to which certain works of literary fiction make an invaluable contribution to moral education by teaching readers how to correctly perceive morally significant aspects of situations. Though Goldman does not deny this, he does argue that it is too weak a claim to explain the contribution of the novel to moral development. Novels not only train us to attend to particulars, but can also teach us important general moral rules. In claiming this, Goldman also sets out to refute particularism (defended by Nussbaum), and the literary example he uses for this purpose is *The*

Cider House Rules. Despite interpretations to the contrary, this novel is primarily about the rules and knowing when and how to obey them. There are at least three things that one can learn from this novel. First,

even benign rules are useless if imposed by sheer power on alien and alienated groups. [...]. Second, even justified rules must nevertheless be broken when there are clearly overriding reasons for doing so [...] and third, lacking such clearly overriding reasons, we must sometimes obey rules even when we feel that we could do better in the individual case by acting on personal judgment. (pp. 169–70)

Goldman raises a very interesting question here – namely, whether a reader who lacks philosophical training could recognize these, and he claims that

having these lessons about rules taught to us by means of such detailed narrative still has its pedagogical advantages. It brings home to us, makes concrete, what are otherwise abstract arguments, in this case by having us vicariously experience the consequences of ignoring rules that must be obeyed and of following rules, such as abortion laws, that should not be followed. (p. 171)

All in all, Goldman concludes, a work of literature is better equipped to bring home these valuable moral lessons than philosophical arguments. Indeed, as Goldman continues this line of thought in the concluding paragraph of the final chapter, philosophers as well as social psychologists ‘would profit from more attention to the extended narratives of fictional lives in novels with themes of moral progression, positive and negative’ (p. 199). Negative moral progression is one of the themes of *Nostromo*, the literary focus of the last chapter. Goldman here points towards the fact that in this novel Conrad analyses the problems of self, of character, and of what is today known as moral luck, anticipating philosophical and psychological theories that would be developed much later. Again arguing against the mainstream interpretations of the novel, Goldman claims that Conrad is in fact interested not in the historical events but in the nature of character and its susceptibility to external circumstances. The crucial problem that the novel explores is whether there is a core identity which determines the kind of person one is, or whether character itself is changeable and responsive to factors external to one’s agency.

At the most general level, Goldman’s book can be read as a defence of literary cognitivism, the view according to which literature is cognitively valuable. Though Goldman makes no clear cut distinction between the direct and the indirect (or instrumental) benefits of engaging with literature, the way he analyses the four novels in the second part reveals his deep commitment to appreciating the cognitive benefits of literature. As he shows with the examples of *Nostromo* and

Pride and Prejudice, in some cases literary works can teach us something long before other disciplines come up with theories that explain particular phenomena. Goldman's analysis of the four novels substantiates this, and those who are interested in literary interpretation will surely enjoy his fresh view on these familiar stories. Perhaps the most astonishing feature of *Philosophy and the Novel* is that one can learn a lot about ethics, meta-ethics, and philosophy of psychology from it. Goldman's background in ethics is evident in the way he reads these novels, and it is the balance between the ethical dimension and aesthetics that makes this work such pleasant, rewarding, and revealing reading. On the one hand, this raises the interesting question of where exactly to draw the line between literature and philosophy, given that some literary works (such as those discussed by Goldman) thrive on philosophical themes and arguments and are even better at teaching ethics than philosophy. On the other hand, it is questionable whether a reader not trained in philosophy can recognize these themes in the novels and actually learn something. Unfortunately, Goldman only briefly addresses this question, which for him is not problematic. Philosophy is in the novel and to the extent that the novel engages our cognitive and other capacities, as specified by his theory of literary value, novels are valuable, and even better than philosophy, for teaching us about ethics.

Goldman's book can also be challenging to those interested in more theoretical debates about interpretation. Though he presents solid arguments against intentionalism and constructivism, it remains unclear where the lines are drawn between the text, the work (and, in Goldman's words, the narrow world of the novel), and the story that results from interpretation. In addition, his claim that mystery novels allow for only one right interpretation (namely, what really happened) may justifiably be challenged on the grounds that 'what really happened' is always restricted to the narrow world of the novel, that is, to the fictional story, whereas interpretation goes beyond it. For example, in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* the right explanation is that passengers killed Mr Ratchett to avenge his hideous crime and that Poirot considered this to be a good enough reason not to hand them over to the authorities. Given Goldman's claim about one right interpretation of detective stories, readers should not go beyond this to try to construct a wider explanation for the events. This novel is a wonderful example of how detective stories can be as good a tool as more serious literature to raise moral questions (in this case, the question of just punishment). Goldman himself admits that. Yet, it seems to me, detective novels can only do that if the reader goes beyond what is explicitly given in the text of the novel and builds a more coherent explanation of the character's actions, much as in Goldman's interpretation of Huck Finn (which is, in one sense,

also concerned with hiding a crime and justifying it). Therefore, even if not all detective novels invite this kind of interpretation, in those that do, the 'right' interpretation will not necessarily be the interpretation that is confined to the fictional story.

Philosophy and the Novel is a complex, multilayered book which raises many interesting philosophical questions and should be read by everybody interested in aesthetics and literature. Goldman's style is concise and clear, and his knowledge of art, ethics, and psychology is immense. Throughout the book, his love for literature and his familiarity with literary works of all genres is evident and inviting. All in all, this book should be on the reading list of every literature lover and every course dealing with art, literature, and ethics.

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