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Review Of "Literature And Moral Understanding" By F. Palmer

Richard Thomas Eldridge

Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

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Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (1994). "Review Of "Literature And Moral Understanding" By F. Palmer". *Philosophy And Literature*. Volume 18, Issue 1. 152-153. DOI: 10.1353/phl.1994.0090
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Literature and Moral Understanding (review)

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 18, Number 1, April 1994, pp. 152-153
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/phl.1994.0090



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Benjamin's situation within a specific intellectual tradition and the general dynamics of early twentieth-century German culture itself.

I must confess to feeling slightly shortchanged, however, after reading Chapter Five on Benjamin and surrealism, in which I sensed a certain thinness of contextualization. Although I found McCole's discussion of Benjamin's short piece on "Dreamkitsch" enlightening—the "central insight" of which (per McCole) is that, "just as kitsch has penetrated into dreams, so 'real' kitsch in the everyday world can be regarded as the product of a dreamlike state" (p. 214)—I was disappointed with the cursory references to André Breton et al., for which the ensuing analysis of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* did not seem sufficient compensation. It may be true that this surrealist text warrants close consideration, because it decisively influenced Benjamin's formulation of the *Arcades Project*; yet an additional glance at Breton's works (discussed in both essays on surrealism), at the very least, might have more thoroughly established aesthetic-historical context.

Don't misunderstand me, however: I endorse Irving Wohlfarth's statement that this is "the best book-length study of Benjamin yet to have appeared in English" (back-cover blurb) and enthusiastically recommend it to novice and devotee alike.

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

LYNNE S. VIETH

Literature and Moral Understanding, by Frank Palmer; xii & 259 pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, \$65.00.

Chapters 1 and 2 of *Literature and Moral Understanding* are devoted to the logic of fiction, inquiring into the kind of reality and relation to us that fictional characters have. Chapters 3 and 8 consider fiction as a vehicle for education in nonpropositional moral feeling.

Palmer's results in the logic of fiction are principally negative, directed against Walton, Lamarque, and Pavel. We should not attribute to fictional characters existence in possible worlds, nor should we regard them as sets of properties or as functional roles. Such strategems are motivated by a mistaken commitment to treating the value of fiction as a matter of its factuality, so that "real" entities or properties are needed to serve as the targets of information-giving. We would do better to regard statements about fictional characters as employing Arthur Danto's "is of artistic identification." "Emma Woodhouse is meddlesome" is then simply true, not of some obscure possibilium, but against a background of the practices and institutions of reading fiction. "A particular fictional world is neither a mere figment of the imagination nor a property of verbal arrangements, but the result of a collision between the work and those who have the capacities to respond to it. Interaction between the work and the reader/spectator is itself only possible against the conventions and traditions of artistic representation . . ." (p. 40).

This stance might well be thought to beg the question against Walton or Lamarque or Pavel, who are concerned to ask *how* such collisions take place and *what* our capacities are such that we are able to take an interest in fiction. The deep issue then is whether Palmer is right that the question of how we engage with fiction *should* be begged, or answered only in historico-practical terms, rather than by appeal to a philosophy of mind that explains how we get from “perception” of mere marks to some interesting conclusion about human life. Is extensionalism plausible? Do we “perceive” immediately only physical objects and patterns of them? Or do we, as Palmer suggests, just *see* that Emma Woodhouse is meddlesome? Is it or is it not wise to ask *how* we “see” such things by *first* seeing mere words or marks?

In considering fiction and moral education, Palmer opposes both Humean construals of moral attitudes as mere sentiments and utilitarian construals of moral attitudes as disguised assessments of consequences of actions. Instead, he argues, we can simply see the blameworthiness of a cruel character, which is something that is there before us, evident in actions, not a projection out of our own feelings of aversion. This emphasis on the perception of moral qualities enables Palmer to steer between didacticism and aestheticism. Great works of fiction educate us morally by “getting us to see something and not merely to know” (p. 193), by leading us to “dwell in the experience” (p. 203) of qualities of character. We learn from fiction “what it would be like” (p. 220) to have or encounter certain characters.

Literature and Moral Understanding offers a fine survey of the philosophical literature on the logic and significance of fiction. I find its stances, achieved against a Wittgensteinian background (following Rhees, Winch, and Phillips), compelling. I am tempted to say that it has no peer as a book in the logic of fiction. But it is, I think, a book that is destined to have less wide and enthusiastic an audience than its conclusions deserve, for three reasons, all having to do with the book’s quite dominantly negative tone (“let’s stop thinking in those silly ways!”). Palmer’s contestation of extensionalist metaphysics is not deep enough: extensionalism is not submitted to any socio-historical or moral-spiritual diagnosis of its rise and possible fall. Second, there is in the book not enough excitement at the important possibilities of moral life that are revealed in specific works of fiction, in contrast with the ways of receiving fiction that have been indulged in by Cavell, Nussbaum, and Eldridge, say. Third, the writing in *Literature and Moral Understanding* is not self-conscious enough. It is too stained by the views that it opposes, in its own effort to arrive at contending abstract theses about the nature of our experience of fiction, where it should instead undertake the labor of philosophical elucidation.