

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

---

Summer 2016

### Review Of "Reckoning With The Imagination: Wittgenstein And The Aesthetics Of Literary Experience" By C. Altieri

Richard Thomas Eldridge  
Swarthmore College, reldrid1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (2016). "Review Of "Reckoning With The Imagination: Wittgenstein And The Aesthetics Of Literary Experience" By C. Altieri". *Journal Of Aesthetics And Art Criticism*. Volume 74, Issue 3. 306-307. DOI: 10.1111/jaac.12297  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/442>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

ALTIERI, CHARLES. Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience. Cornell University Press, 2015, xii + 262 pp., \$79.95 cloth, \$28.95 paper.

Charles Altieri is among a small handful of our most distinguished and insightful readers of English-language modernist poetry, from his 1984 *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* to his 1989 *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* and 2005 *The Art of Modern American Poetry*. His only competitors as a reader of modernist texts are Helen Vendler, Marjorie Perloff, and poet-scholars such as Charles Bernstein and Susan Stewart. At the same time, Altieri has produced a series of philosophically oriented books in which he has reflected on both modernist poetry and his own procedures and commitments as a reader, including *Act and Quality* (1981), *Canons and Consequences* (1990), *Subjective Agency* (1994), and *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003). In both his critical readings and his more theoretical work, Altieri's primary focus has continually been on how subjective agency can productively develop itself both through writing poetry and through reading it. His new book extends and deepens his theoretical reflections, thus forming a kind of capstone to his career.

Given the intellectual fashions of the past forty or so years in literary studies, Altieri's central project of characterizing the productive values both of modernist poetry and of the close reading of it has won him enemies of various kinds. Chief among these are various kinds of instrumentalist reading, either moralizing or reductionist social explanation-seeking, and deconstructionist reading that seeks and finds only absolute and uncontentful singularities of language-in-play. Contemporary criticism in general, Altieri observes, has lost "sight of almost anything connected to imagination and imaginative power, except perhaps its capacity to generate escapist fantasy" (p. 63). In contrast with alternative, imagination-scanting protocols of reading, Altieri's watchwords are attention, focus, sympathy, and appreciation. Or as he puts it

here, “we are not done with the maker” (p. 8), and we would do well in reading to focus on the “distinctive powers of subjects to construct values and live in accord with them” (p. 11) as those powers are put on display in works of literature, preeminently in poetry. A poem “realizes aspects of the self,” and readers should “try to participate in how texts engage our affective lives” (p. 12). Here Altieri’s emphasis on the processual, subjectivity-developing aspect of the literary work and on readerly participation in it enables him to sidestep or recast tired debates about literary cognitivism and literary moralism as well as binary oppositions between purveyed doctrine and textual free play, since imaginative participation in the agency at work in the literary text is foregrounded over single-sentence conclusions. As Martha Nussbaum once put it, adapting a phrase from Henry James, we are as readers to become “participators by a fond attention” (Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 162) in the work of the construction of subjectivity that is done in and through the literary work.

In contrast with Nussbaum, however, Altieri strongly emphasizes the socially situated characters of the labors of both writing and reading. A sense of the display or exemplification of a subject’s self-enactments in the work, drawn from Wittgenstein and Goodman, is balanced with a sense of subject identity as a socially enabled social status, drawn from Hegel. Whatever the importance of a distinct human body in establishing the numerical identity of any human being, and whatever the importance of standing human powers and interests, no one becomes an accomplished discursive subject without taking on, while also potentially revising, a language and a large body of commitments—epistemic, political, ethical, artistic, and so on—that are in social circulation.

Altieri’s distinct modernist spin on this Hegelian thought is then to suggest that we tend as subjects to live too conventionally, palely, and under the sways of social routines that we fail

to embrace fully and with animated interest. Poetic art offers us a route toward re-animation, as its enactments of itineraries of developing interest can intensify and clarify experience and open up routes of fuller cathexis to it. “Most significant works of art promise only to mobilize and thicken experience so that the world becomes a more vital place for habitation, making the self feel itself an adequate locus of responsiveness to what the world can offer” (p. 106). (Here Altieri is close to Richard Eldridge’s account of poetry’s work as clarification and movement from passively suffered to actively engaged feeling in *Literature, Life, and Modernity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2008]).

Altieri’s emphasis on how a work of literary art can mobilize and thicken experience via the reader’s imaginative participation in it enables him to “avoid ethics entirely” (p. 161), no matter whether in its deconstructionist, Levinas-inspired, absolute otherness-embracing form or in the guise of an ethical criticism that seeks propositional moral knowledge, as Altieri charges Alice Cary does. In place of more or less generalization-seeking knowing as accomplished either by the work or by the reader, Altieri stresses *valuing*. Both as enacted and expressed in the literary work and as shared in imaginatively by its reader, valuing is a matter of “how the self can attune to what is at stake in imagined situations” (pp. 180-81) in the interest of being open to “the person the self becomes by virtue of how he or she engages with an object” (p. 181)—either an object of imaginative attention for a literary writer or the work itself for its reader.

In a kind of argumentative coda, Altieri concludes by mounting a case for a criticism of appreciation rather than a criticism of resentment. Here he is close to the recent efforts of Ted Cohen (*Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012]) and Rita Felski (*Uses of Literature* [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008]; *The Limits of Critique* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015]) to challenge a hermeneutics of suspicion.

Appreciation in the sense in which Altieri defends it should not be understood as involving connoisseurship, middlebrow art history light, or the mindless tolerance of cultural difference. Instead it is a name for “how we respond to expressive activities of all kinds” (p. 196) in both art and life and for the valuing we do or can do within attentive, imaginative reading. Valuing can lead to “a self-aware quickening” (p. 199)—Kantian *Belebung*—that it is one of the central powers and offices of art to provide. Imaginative engagement in the literary work’s affordances of possibilities of animation fuses responsiveness to aesthetic-formal, expressive-attitudinal, semantic-representational, and political-historical-cultural features of the work, features which are not properly sharply separable from one another. “The supreme fiction of literary criticism ought to be that by cultivating appreciation it can provide a counterweight to two forms of deadness that pervade contemporary life—our failures to recognize what might be significantly meaningful for us and our refusals to recognize the immense blindnesses caused by our resentments” (p. 196).

Overall, *Reckoning with the Imagination* is addressed in the first instance to literary scholars and their current, even recurrent, methodological plights. Unlike literary scholars, for whom New Criticism, deconstruction, and New Historicism, among others, have been successive and competing hegemonic methods, philosophers of art have been on the whole less inclined to separate artistic forms from artistic meanings, or aesthetic, expressive, semantic, and historical features from one another. Yet Altieri’s work also functions as a powerful reminder to philosophers of just how thoroughly interfused with one another these features are.

Some sentences can be a bit prolix, and there are occasional mistakes in the discussions of philosophers—for example, ascribing to Nelson Goodman the view that “we sort properties, not acts” (p. 139). There is a howler of a typo repeated three times on pp. 202-3. These are,

however, minor annoyances, and it would be unfortunate if either philosophers or literary scholars were significantly put off by them. Altieri's overall description of the powers and offices of literary art (and its criticism) is compelling. Moreover, this case is developed not only by way of general accounts of imagination, expression, display, and valuing, but also by brief close readings of how a number of major poets imagine, express, display, and value in particular works. Chief among these are W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, John Ashbery, and Dodie Bellamy, with briefer appearances by Shakespeare, Blake, W. C. Williams, and Jean Toomer, among others. Altieri's reading of Ashbery's "The Instruction Manual" is a tour de force that puts flesh on the bones of the general view in a way that can be matched by very few, if any, critics or philosophers.

It would require significant, difficult shifts in current habits of both attention and interest on the part of both literary criticism and the philosophy of art for Altieri's *plaidoyer* for appreciation and imaginative engagement to be taken up. Literary scholars would have to abandon substantially an often all too knowing, value-skeptical and politically tendentious stance toward the literary work as mere social historical object. Philosophers would have to wean themselves to some extent from generalization-seeking theorizing about cognitivism and moralisms, and they would have to learn to read works of literature and imaginative criticism as themselves forms of serious figural thinking about human life and values. Both camps, along with cultural life as a whole, would be well served by taking up the supreme fiction that Altieri puts forward.

ELDRIDGE, RICHARD  
Department of Philosophy  
Swarthmore College