

BOOK REVIEW

Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience. *Charles Altieri*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. vi+262.

At the beginning of his latest suggestive and sprawling book, *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience*, Charles Altieri asks a question that will sound familiar to anyone who has ever wondered about the justification of the study of literature: “How can we treat literature as both a distinctive cultural enterprise and one that is arguably central to the quality of social life for everyone, or at least potentially central for enough people that [it] would make a substantial difference in the quality of collective life?” (2). It is tempting to answer questions like this one by making claims about the ways that the study of literature produces knowledge—knowledge that can ultimately be put to some productive use, so as to make a difference in the quality of collective life. And this is, in Altieri’s view, mostly what the profession has tried to do. For at least the past forty years, literary scholars have focused on the information texts provided about social, political, or psychological questions, information that could be fit into theoretical models borrowed from the social (or, more recently, cognitive) sciences in order to produce both knowledge and critique. The trouble with this approach is the contradiction at its heart: it justifies the study of literature by an appeal to theories that either reject, or are agnostic about, the distinctiveness of literature and the literary as such. Deconstruction opposed such an approach and preserved (albeit in a negative mode) the idea of a distinctively literary language, always exceeding regimes of meaning and resistant to paraphrase. And yet deconstruction applied that model of literary language so generally as to undermine the possibility of justification itself. If the avowed cultural materialist

Modern Philology, volume 114, number 3. Published online December 9, 2016
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cannot justify his or her interest in poetry on cultural materialist grounds, Altieri suggests, the avowed deconstructionist cannot justify his or her own criticism on deconstructionist grounds. (Hence the turn, by Jacques Derrida and so many of his readers, toward a concept of the ethical borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas—a turn to something that cannot, and should not, be deconstructed.)

Avoiding both a historicism that would subsume the literary and a deconstruction that would fetishize it, Altieri argues that literary study can be justified—and the distinctiveness of literary experience defended—on the grounds of what literary texts do by means of our imagination. This claim will strike many as old-fashioned, at least if not more so than the idea of the “distinctly literary.” And the book is old-fashioned on its face: Altieri sees himself as reviving, via Wittgenstein, many of the central claims of the German Idealist tradition of Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Hegel. And yet *Reckoning with the Imagination* seeks to put some old ideas to new use, claiming that the imaginative activity involved in appreciating literary texts can generate new perspectives on values, modify sensibilities, and cultivate habits of judgment—all of which link the text, via its appreciators, to the social world with its urgent and pressing problems. Rather than being an escape from, or a denial of, the social world, aesthetic experience allows us to rethink our stance within and toward that world.

The book has seven chapters and a few appendixes. Together they form less of an argument or a narrative than a series of investigations into the ways in which imagination is a central and ineliminable fact of our engagement with literature, and the ways in which various philosophical interlocutors can revitalize our approach to discussing the imagination. Chapter 1 makes the case for why Wittgenstein matters for the theory of literature. It does so by proposing that Wittgenstein’s critique of the theory of knowledge as unnecessarily distorting our understanding of large domains of human action—wondering, for example, whether we can truly “know” that someone else is in pain—can be extended to theories of literature that make positive or negative claims about knowledge. The upshot of this approach is a recognition that the knowledge produced by our study of these texts is insignificant compared to the expressive activities in which close reading of the texts allow us to engage. Chief among these activities is imagining, and chapter 2 provides a phenomenology of the imagination borrowed from Edward Casey, which Altieri then tests against examples from John Ashbery and W. B. Yeats. Chapter 3 picks up the Wittgensteinian thread again and discusses the way in which “display,” as an activity that allows for the transmission of meaning while bypassing epistemic questions, can serve as a model for what literary texts do. Chapter 4 continues this theme with respect to “expression,” drawing not only on Wittgenstein but Hegel, and chapter 5 turns to the related but distinct concept

of “exemplification.” These chapters represent the core of the book, showing Altieri at his most philosophically enthusiastic; readers without a good background in his interlocutors (or without a good background in Altieri) will find these chapters challenging. Chapter 6 turns outward again, engaging the contemporary approach to literary studies most willing to bracket questions of knowledge, namely, the ethical turn. Criticizing work by Derek Attridge and Alice Crary, Altieri offers an alternative account of what it might mean to value a literary text for the experience(s) it offers, rather than for the model of ethical thinking it provides. A related chapter, “Appreciating Appreciation,” closes the book. In it Altieri makes the case that literary appreciation is “foundational for critical study in the arts” (194) and that, rather than a dubious form of ideology, literary appreciation is socially engaged as well as socially redemptive, insofar as it develops a capacity for self-reflection that can combat the resentments that shape bourgeois society. Critics for whom the study of literature is merely an undercard in the larger struggle for social justice will probably find this defense of appreciation disappointing if not infuriating, but the book is not really for them. Rather, its audience consists of those readers for whom literature itself is the main event, readers who are looking for a defense of the distinctiveness of the literary but for whom traditionalist, or neotraditionalist, defenses of the literary ring hollow. The book provides a functionalist, as opposed to a formalist, defense of aesthetic experience.

As such a defense, *Reckoning with the Imagination* is often compelling. It would be more compelling if it were clearer on the sentence level; Altieri’s tendency toward abstraction and his frequent neglect to define his terms—even such a central term to his book as, for example, “imagination”—do present rhetorical problems for even his most sympathetic readers. The footnotes are essential; in them Altieri speaks in refreshingly concrete terms. Beyond the rhetorical difficulties there are two pressing conceptual problems that haunt the book throughout. The first is the question of genre. The book is not heavy on examples, but when they appear they are frequently modern lyric poems, and it could be objected that these texts should not, and cannot, stand in for the category of “literature” or literary experience itself. The kind of aesthetic experience that poetry provides (and the kind of imagining it might entail) might be different than the kind of experience (and the kind of imagining) that other literary genres provide, and this is to say nothing about the problem of texts written in other cultural and linguistic contexts. The other issue, to my mind more pressing, is the flat-footed way in which Altieri treats Wittgenstein’s work. Here the common problem in philosophical studies of literature is reversed: Altieri, himself a partisan of the particular with respect to literature, is largely inattentive to what we might call the particularly aesthetic qualities of Wittgenstein’s writing. On the surface, it is strange

that Altieri should neglect these aesthetic qualities in a book about aesthetic experience. However, the aesthetic aspects of Wittgenstein's writing—a category in which one could include the appeal to nonsense in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), the departure from traditional philosophical form in the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), and the obsessive questioning of an interlocutor across all of the other collections of Wittgenstein's later work—all of these are arguably deployed in the service of a new conception of philosophy as a form of therapy. Altieri would prefer to read Wittgenstein as providing something like a straightforward critique of epistemology, and he comes (somewhat) clean on this issue in a footnote to his first chapter. His decision to relegate the important question of how to read Wittgenstein to the background of his book does raise questions about the reliability of his interpretation of the philosopher's work. But more importantly than the question of whether he gets Wittgenstein right on the whole, his choice blinds him to the way in which a resolutely Wittgensteinian approach to aesthetics might offer a different, and potentially much more radical, solution to the one that Altieri himself offers in his book. Rather than heroically defending aesthetic experience against its detractors and pseudo-sympathizers, which this book certainly does—and which certainly has been done before—a therapeutic approach would address and perhaps relinquish the felt need to defend aesthetic experience in the first place.

V. Joshua Adams
University of Louisville