

1 Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

8 *Philosophy & the Novel*

9 ALAN H. GOLDMAN

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13 Alan Goldman's impressively wide-ranging work already includes important contribu-
14 tions to analytic aesthetics, most notably his (1995) *Aesthetic Value*. In *Philosophy &*
15 *the Novel*, Goldman makes a welcome foray into the philosophy of literature. Com-
16 bining new material with articles previously published in *The Journal of Aesthetics &*
17 *Art Criticism* and *Philosophy and Literature*, the book presents a compact case for the
18 practice commonly known as philosophical criticism (a term Goldman himself doesn't
19 actually use)—i.e., criticism of literary works aimed at explicating the philosophically
20 interesting content they embody.

21 The book is divided into two parts. The first part (Chapters 1-4) develops a
22 theory of literary value and a theory of art interpretation, which together serve to
23 provide theoretical justification for the practice of philosophical criticism. The second
24 part (Chapters 4-8) offers a concrete demonstration of this practice, exploring philo-
25 sophical themes in four novels (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Cider*
26 *House Rules*, and *Nostromo*). It is worth noting that the focus on novels in Part 2 is
27 not dictated by the arguments in Part 1, which would seem to apply to all forms of
28 literature. Indeed, despite its title, the book contains only a few passing comments
29 about what makes novels, as distinct from other literary forms, particularly ripe for
30 philosophical criticism.

31 On Goldman's view, a work's literary value lies in its ability to simultaneously
32 engage our perceptual, imaginative, emotional, and cognitive capacities. This pluralistic
33 view, claims Goldman, has "deeper and more impressive philosophical roots" than
34 the main alternatives, expressivism and formalism, and unlike the latter recognizes the
35 "indissoluble link between grasp of form itself and the exercise of cognitive, imaginative,
36 and emotional capacities" (4). Goldman devotes Chapter 4 to showing how the appeal
37 of mystery novels can be more satisfactorily explained on this view than on others,
which tend to underestimate the genre's diversity in terms of style and quality. There is
evidence throughout the book, but especially in this chapter, of both a real appetite for
literature and a wide diet of it that are all too rare among philosophers.

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2 Dialogue

1 In contrast to those such as Martha Nussbaum who think that literature is cognitively
2 valuable mainly insofar as it can develop and refine various mental skills, Goldman
3 argues that literary works can also embody general propositions about reality. Further,
4 he argues that the process of evaluating the truth or plausibility of these propositions, as
5 well as the “learning that occurs in that process of evaluation, are part of the cognitive
6 engagement that is part of the appreciation of the literary value” of such works (12).
7 According to Goldman, the propositions expressed through literary works can include
8 philosophical theses, both conceptual and empirical. Accepting such theses can be
9 reasonable and hence count as genuine learning provided they cohere sufficiently with
10 knowledge the reader antecedently possesses and are conveyed in a manner indicating
11 that the author is sincere, trustworthy, and knowledgeable about the subject.

12 By enabling us to see literary works as expressions of philosophically interesting
13 theses, philosophical criticism performs what Goldman argues, in Chapter 2, is the
14 proper function of interpretation, namely to facilitate our appreciation of those features
15 of literary works that make them valuable as such. Since incompatible interpretations can
16 do this equally well, this theory implies that they can be equally acceptable—a point
17 in its favour, Goldman thinks, given that incompatible interpretations are countenanced
18 in actual critical practice. And since the author of a work typically intends only one
19 interpretation of it, Goldman argues, the theory further implies that interpretations
20 need not be constrained by authorial intentions. In Chapter 3, Goldman offers support for
21 this theory of interpretation through an extended example, presenting two interpretations
22 of *The Sun Also Rises* that are incompatible with each other—one treating it as an
23 affirmation, the other as a denial, of the possibility of moral development—and yet
24 equally acceptable, he argues, insofar as they enable us to appreciate different, but
25 equally valuable, features of the novel.

26 This, in broad outline, is the argument of Part 1. In Part 2 Goldman proceeds to put
27 the kind of criticism thus argued for into practice. Each of the four chapters in this part
28 focuses on a separate novel and how it can be seen as answering to a contemporary
29 philosophical issue, generally related in every case to the conditions involved in achieving
30 full moral agency. On Goldman’s interpretation, for example, *Pride and Prejudice* tells
31 us what kinds of cognitive-perceptual, emotional, and volitional skills are necessary for
32 mature moral judgment and action, and how these skills typically develop; the *Adventures*
33 *of Huckleberry Finn* tells us that rationality does not require being motivated to act on
34 one’s moral judgments; and *Cider House Rules* tells us that one can be morally obligated
35 to follow a rule even if a particularist approach to the situation might lead to a better
36 outcome. In each of these chapters, the relevant philosophical issues are clearly explained
37 at the outset and the interpretation on offer is dutifully situated in the context of existing
38 treatments of the novel, both literary and philosophical.

39 Those sympathetic to the view that literature can yield propositional learning, but
40 wary of Jerome Stolnitz’s classic objection that literary themes often ring banal when
41 stated explicitly, will appreciate Goldman’s efforts to articulate some of the non-trivial
42 propositions that can be gleaned from novels. Indeed, Goldman’s chapter on *Pride and*
43 *Prejudice* might be seen as a direct rebuttal to Stolnitz’s suggestion that the only thing
44 we learn from the novel is that “stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice sometimes keep
45 attractive men and women apart.”¹ Those skeptical of Goldman’s propositional brand of

46 ¹ “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” p. 196.

1 literary cognitivism (or literary cognitivism *tout court*), however, may find the arguments
 2 offered in Chapter 1 a bit thin. And those hoping to discover in Part 2 a style of
 3 philosophical criticism that, contrary to stereotype, displays sensitivity to the intellectual
 4 context in which literary works are written or resists the “utopian” tendency (as Noël
 5 Carroll once called it in reference to Nussbaum’s work) to see moral truth wherever it
 6 looks in the literary canon, will likely be disappointed. But the more troubling one finds
 7 these features of Goldman’s criticism, the more provocative one will find the theory
 8 of interpretation he develops in Chapters 2 and 3, for this theory suggests that such
 9 features are not always to be regretted. Sensitivity to historical context is important if
 10 the aim is to uncover the author’s actual intentions. But while authorial intentions
 11 constrain the non-interpretive descriptions of a work that any acceptable interpretation
 12 must fit, otherwise ignoring authorial intentions allows critics to interpret a work in
 13 ways that help readers to appreciate it more than if they had to read it the way the author
 14 intended. Likewise, given two interpretations that are equally true to the non-interpretive
 15 facts about a work, the one that ascribes it the more plausible philosophical view will
 16 promote greater appreciation and thus always be the more acceptable, on Goldman’s
 17 theory. Whether Goldman’s defense of this theory is ultimately convincing—a matter
 18 I leave for the reader to decide—this part of the book seems most likely to stimulate
 19 further discussion on the topic.

19 CHARLES REPP *University of Toronto*

22 References

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AUTHOR QUERIES

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