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Review: What is literature, by Arthur Gibson

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**Arthur Gibson** *What is Literature?* Oxford: Peter Lang 2007. Pp. 530. US\$99.95 (paper ISBN-13: 978-3-03910-916-6).

Gibson's exploration of literature in this ambitious work positions itself as a response to Jean-Paul Sartre's series of essays published as *What is Literature?* in 1947. Gibson claims that the nature of literature is not, as Sartre asserts, 'finite and particular' but rather a 'series of infinite qualities' (479). He explains that literature opens up meaning continually and in surprising ways. The concept of surprise is fundamental to Gibson's contention that literature is 'counter-intuitive'. Thus the main thesis of the book is contained in Gibson's assertion that 'great literature directs attention to new ways of seeing' (19). This statement could be just as usefully applied to Gibson's own book. In it he proposes a myriad of positions from which to consider the infinite and surprising nature of literature.

Gibson considers his conceptualization of literature as 'counter-intuitive' in relation to established definitions, including Aristotle's discussion of literature as mimetic. This Gibson challenges and modifies, claiming that '[c]reative literature deforms imitation of the world to achieve what we come to recognise as a new representation of the world's identity' (55). He expands upon this statement by explaining, 'imitation is not the mere copying superficial likeness. It is a creative conjunction of identities' (95). In these opening sections Gibson applies a descriptive, rather than an evaluative, answer to the question what literature is. He signals, however, that he is well aware that literary value is often conferred by commercial success, popular taste and scholarly interest.

The necessity to counter these forms of literary evaluation leads Gibson to a discussion of objective methods of evaluation that could be usefully applied to literature. He draws upon the shared qualitative elements in scientific method, forms of mathematical enquiry and literature. He contends that 'there are qualitative realms within science that display similarity to qualitative features in literature' (167). Key to this argument is the concept of qualitative singularities within scientific enquiry and mathematics. These singularities require researchers to consider creative approaches outside accepted methodologies. This discussion raises many interesting issues relating to human creativity, a shared element of all intellectual inquiry. However, while in scientific and mathematical analysis a qualitative singularity can be a problem to be solved, thus eliciting a creative response, it is often simply ignored as insignificant. In literature, according to Gibson, it is by contrast the qualitative singularity which creates the 'surprise' that reveals through 'counter-intuition . . . the fresh structure that comprises the new' (194). It is this 'new' that appears to be integral to Gibson's definition of literature. The problem with this argument resides in the fundamental difference in the value of qualitative singularities in science and mathematics as opposed to literature.

In Part 2 Gibson considers the relationship between literature and historic tradition. He maintains it is those texts that in some way distort, reinvent, challenge or engage in an unusual manner with literary tradition that can be considered literary. Within this discussion Gibson also touches upon authorial identity and its relationship to the literary persona. He engages with the topic of authorial intention, though he concedes that 'literary narrative and people are complex entities and the relations between the two are vastly intricate' (374). In Part 3 Gibson considers again the relationship between

science and literature and the importance of 'creative singularities' (415). He employs a metaphor drawn from cosmological theory to discuss creative qualities in literature. He extends this metaphor by explaining that '[a] new piece of literature has a mass of multiple relations to the literary past prior to it, rather like the relation of an exploding star to its surrounding space' (415).

Part 4 returns to the relationship between biography and the literary text by considering 'book death' and 'book abortion' (439). Gibson discusses the many social forces that contribute to the demise of a book either after it is written, or even before it can be written or at least completed. These include publishers or modes of production available at any given time. He also contends that conferring anonymity upon an author can have a deleterious effect on the text itself. He points to examples of editorial intervention and finally, in an extended discussion of Emily Brontë's alleged lost works, family interference. It is in this last section that problems inherent throughout this book become most apparent. There is a tendency to over-generalize as well as to make unsubstantiated claims and judgments concerning the personal lives of individuals. Most outrageously, Gibson asserts that one must reasonably assume Emily Brontë's completed second novel is in her grave, 'It was a Christmas present for Emily in death: Charlotte placed the manuscript (s) in Emily's coffin' (475). This claim is followed by several questionable suppositions intended to support this version of events. Indeed, Part 4 contributes very little to defining literature and obscures the more valuable aspects of this evolving discussion.

Gibson sets himself a daunting task in this book. He successfully inserts useful conceptualizations into the critical discussion concerning the description and evaluation of literary texts. Unfortunately, this discussion is too often interrupted by long asides that do little to illustrate and develop his ideas. Examples are drawn from a vast swathe of literary history, as well as multiple literary traditions in many cultures. Gibson also shows extensive awareness of critical and cultural theory as well as philosophy. However, key ideas are often obscured by the very breadth and quantity of exemplary material. There is also a tendency to imprecision and generalization that diminishes the value of this material. For example, in discussing 'the Socratic fallacy' he contends, '[w]e may understand that Shakespeare is the greatest English playwright, without being able to define the point' (132). The flippancy of this example does little to seriously engage with or even exemplify the topic. The use of fewer and more considered examples would have allowed for a more successful development of the book's main contentions. It would also have benefited from a more tightly focused and cleaner organizational structure. Gibson's book is a montage of incredible breadth; unfortunately its very richness interferes with the book's ability to communicate important critical concepts.

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