THE END OF LITERARY THEORY

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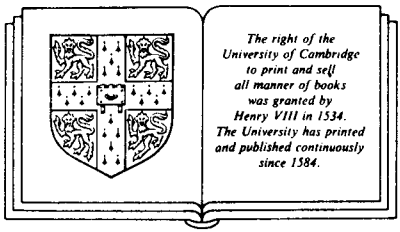

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ONE

The question 'What is literature?' is the starting-point of literary aesthetics. The question is not a request for information about what texts are literary works. It is asked by those who know literature and know the literary canon. Nor does the question merely ask for a definition of literature. The motivation for asking and the interest in possible answers can only be understood against a cultural background where literature figures as an important cultural value. What is asked for is an account of the characteristic features and functions of literature. It is expected that in explaining these, the account should also explain why it is worthwhile to single out certain texts as literary works. It must display those features which define and justify that interest which members of the culture take in its literature. This is the setting which gives the question its point and it should not be forgotten when an attempt is made to answer it.

Two different types of answer to this question are possible. In their traditional form these answers have one feature in common. They are atomistic. They answer the question 'What is literature?' with reference to the single literary work. The concept of literature is taken to cover a number of texts with some common property or properties. And these properties constitute their aesthetic nature and thus their aesthetic worth. The two types of answer, however, differ sharply in that one is reductive and the other non-reductive. To characterize this difference it is useful to introduce a distinction between a *textual feature* and an *aesthetic feature*. A textual feature is a feature of style, content, or structure. These are features possessed by all texts. All texts have phonological, syntactic, semantic and a minimum of rhetorical features. All texts have a content which can be described in various ways. And all texts structure their content in some way. Imprecise and vague as it is, this notion of textual feature will serve well enough as a contrast to the notion of an aesthetic feature. For aesthetic features constitute a text a literary work of art, and the question 'What is literature?' concerns the nature of a literary aesthetic feature.

A reductive answer to the question 'What is literature?' makes an attempt to determine what textual features are necessary and sufficient for classifying a text as a literary work. Traditionally, these features have been identified with reference to their relationship to human emotion (emotive theories: a literary work expresses, evokes, or defines emotions) or to 'reality' or 'the world' (theories of *mimesis*: a literary work mirrors reality, is a true representation of general nature, etc.). Recently, rhetorical theories have claimed to be able to identify the 'literarity' of a text without referring to anything outside the text. Semantic and structuralist theories insist upon the autonomy of the text and attempt to show that a literary work possesses characteristic features of style and structure which can be recognized as characteristic without reference to either the world or human emotion.

A non-reductive answer to the question 'What is literature?', on the other hand, would deny that those features which make a text a literary work of art (aesthetic features) can be defined as sets of textual features. It would deny, what is implied by reductive theories, that the notion of aesthetic feature is logically superfluous. Consequently, a non-reductive theory has to give an account of literary aesthetic features making it clear in what sense, since they are not to be defined as bundles of textual features, they can be said to be properties of literary works. While non-reductive theories have played an important part in general aesthetics, there has been little enthusiasm in literary aesthetics for any sort of non-reductive answer to the question 'What is literature?' Emotive theories and theories of *mimesis* have dominated literary aesthetics since Aristotle, and, together with rhetorical theories, dominate it today. There is good reason for this. The recognition of words and sentences, the raw material of literary works, requires construal and the exercise of the understanding in quite another way than does recognition of colours, lines, shapes, musical notes, harmonies, and musical themes. Construing the words and sentences of a text one determines their meaning and purpose. The textual features of style, content, and structure are then determined at the same time. Superficially, it seems quite plausible to see the appreciation of visual art and music as requiring the exercise of a particular kind of sensibility or taste which enables one to recognize aesthetic features as supervening on the perceptual qualities of the work. It is less plausible to see literary appreciation as involving the recognition of features supervening on the construed features of style, content, and structure. For it seems that appreciation of and discourse about literary works of art are appreciation of and discourse about style, content, and structure. Style,

content, and structure are the subjects of literary criticism, and it is difficult to see what else it can be about.

TWO

It is, nevertheless, possible to make a case for a non-reductive analysis of literary aesthetic features. And it is possible to show that, rather than being a curiosity in the museum of literary theories, such an analysis is in tune with some important trends in modern philosophy and offers a more plausible and sophisticated account of literary aesthetic features than reductive theories. As a first step in this account I shall outline a theory which I shall call the *supervenience-theory*. Several well-known philosophers have presented accounts of aesthetic features and aesthetic terms which come close to this theory, though they do not always agree with each other; some of them might take issue with the following sketch.[2] The supervenience-theory accounts for aesthetic features by construing them as supervenient on textual features. An aesthetic feature, the theory says, is identified by a reader, in a literary work, through an aesthetic judgement as what one may call a *constellation* of textual features. A constellation of textual features constitutes an aesthetic feature of a particular work. It is not identified with reference to 'the world' or to human emotion, nor does it stand out as a constellation identifiable independently without exercise of aesthetic judgement. Outside the literary work in which a constellation is identified, the textual features constituting it cannot be recognized as a constellation. Nor does it exist as a constellation in a particular literary work for just any reader, but only for those who are able and willing to exercise aesthetic judgement. The constellation of textual features exists only as the object of an aesthetic judgement. These textual features deserve to be referred to as a 'constellation' rather than as a mere 'collection' because the aesthetic judgement confers on them, taken together, a significance or a purposive coherence.

An example. Here is Shakespeare's sonnet 129:

> The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
> Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
> Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait

On purpose laid to make the taker mad, — 8
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof; and prov'd, a very woe;
Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream. 12
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

The sensitive reader will have noticed that the poem displays a symmetrical pattern of words with focus in the repetition of 'mad' at the end of line 8, beginning of line 9. 'Had' in line 6 balances 'Had' in line 10, 'extreme' in line 4 balances 'extreme' in line 10, 'Enjoy'd' in line 5 balances 'a joy' in line 12, and, perhaps, the antimetabole in line 2 balances the antimetabole in line 13. This pattern is a textual feature in the sense that the words pointed to are actually there in the text in positions which make it not unreasonable to say that they are placed symmetrically on each side of 'mad/Mad' (though one may be in doubt about the position of the two occurrences of 'extreme'). It is also a textual feature in the stronger sense that it is an example of a conventional rhetorical device often used by Petrarch to mark the *volta* of his sonnets.[3] But it becomes an aesthetic feature only for the reader who succeeds in assigning the pattern a function in this particular poem. Knowledge that symmetrical patterns were used to emphasize the *volta* of petrarchan sonnets may ease the reader's identification of this particular pattern in 129 as a textual feature. It may spur him to search for a significance for the pattern in *this* sonnet. But the knowledge forms no part of the aesthetic judgement through which significance is conferred on this pattern in this poem. And it is *only* through the exercise of aesthetic judgement that the reader can determine the nature of this aesthetic feature, if such it is. In my own judgement this pattern is constituted by terms which define the rise, climax, and ebb of an emotional reaction of disgust. This emotional reaction accompanies the speaker's reflections on the experience of lust, its satisfaction, and the emotional consequences of this satisfaction. I shall leave it to the reader to exercise his own aesthetic judgement in exploring this suggestion. In an illustration of the supervenience-theory it is sufficient to note that the pattern is identified as an aesthetic feature through the reader's judgement concerning its function in the poem: he assigns it a purposive coherence. Its identity as an aesthetic feature is dependent upon an aesthetic judgement being made with regard to *this* poem about the connection between the different words in the pattern in their different positions.

THREE

According to the supervenience-theory, an aesthetic feature is irreducible in the sense that it is a *unique* constellation of textual features which can be described as a coherent pattern or *gestalt*, contributing, in the particular work of art, towards the overall artistic design or vision. This uniqueness is, so to speak, part of the logical make up of the concept of an aesthetic feature. 'There are no non-aesthetic features which serve in *any* circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms,' says Frank Sibley,[4] and Strawson makes the same point more strongly. 'There can be no general descriptive criteria for aesthetic assessment,' he says.[5] And Strawson finds that this lack of general descriptive criteria makes the very notion of an aesthetic *property* problematic:

> there are no aesthetic merit-conferring *properties*, with non-evaluative names. When you draw attention to some feature on account of which terms of aesthetic evaluation may be bestowed, you draw attention, not to a property which different individual works of art may share, but to a part or aspect of an individual work of art.[6]

This problem, if a problem it is, goes deeper than Strawson seems to admit in this paragraph. For if there are no general descriptive criteria for aesthetic assessment, then it is not only the status of aesthetic features which is problematic, but also the nature of the aesthetic judgement itself. For how is it then possible to identify a collection of textual features as features 'on account of which terms of aesthetic evaluation may be bestowed'?

The explanation offered by the supervenience-theory of how aesthetic judgements are possible and meaningful builds on a general philosophical point made much of by those working in the Wittgensteinian tradition: there are many types of judgement to which it would be absurd to deny the epithet 'rational', but which are supported by arguments with structures other than, and with criteria of validity different from, those of the deductive/inductive arguments. These different *patterns of support* define different *types of judgement*, and differences in pattern of support constitute logical or grammatical differences between judgements.[7] So the fact that there are no general descriptive criteria for the application of aesthetic terms does not mean that aesthetic judgements are arbitrary or impossible to support. There is, the supervenience-theory claims, a characteristic pattern of support with its own peculiar logic which defines aesthetic judgement as a type.

This pattern of support has two distinctive features. When an aesthetic judgement is made, there is an appeal to aesthetic sensibility:

> It is essential to making an aesthetic judgement that at some point we be prepared to say in its support: don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? The best critic will know the best points. Because if you do not see *something*, without explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss.[8]

To recognize what aesthetic judgements are all about, one has to possess at least the rudiments of aesthetic sensibility. Just like taste it can be cultivated and trained, and, as one develops aesthetic sensibility, one comes to see and appreciate what other aesthetically sensitive people see and appreciate. The second feature distinguishing the pattern of support characteristic of aesthetic judgement is what one might call its *directive* character. Aesthetic argument produces conviction by directing the addressee's perception and the interpretation of what he perceives. The goal of an aesthetic argument is to make the addressee see what the critic sees, to make him share the critic's aesthetic appreciation: '. . . we can say', says Arnold Isenberg, 'that it is a function of criticism to bring about communication at the level of the senses; that is, to induce a sameness of vision, of experienced content.'[9] Aesthetic argument is made up of a series of strategies to open up the work to the reader, to make him see a collection of textual features as a constellation of textual features constituting an aesthetic feature.

The proponents of the supervenience-theory tend to give the impression that the directive aspect of aesthetic argument and the appeal to aesthetic sensibility are equal partners in defining aesthetic judgement. There are, says Stanley Cavell, 'ways [of argument] that anyone who knows about such things will know how to pursue'.[10] And Frank Sibley gives a list of critical procedures employing such patterns of support as we conventionally accept as aesthetic argument.[11] The implication is that the directive aspect of the pattern of support can be identified without reference to aesthetic sensibility, thus constituting an independent element of aesthetic judgement. But this is not the case. According to the supervenience-theory, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for saying about somebody that he has identified an aesthetic feature that he is able to produce a successful directive argument in support of it, thus bringing us around to his way of 'seeing' a set of textual features in a literary work. But this argument does not *constitute* the identification. The argument does not give meaning and content to the aesthetic perception. Rather, it is the other way around:

> the critic's *meaning* is 'filled in', 'rounded out', or 'completed' by the act of perception, which is performed not to judge the truth of his description but in a certain sense to *understand* it.[12]

If the logical relationship between the recognition of an aesthetic feature and the directive argument is such that the argument in no way defines the content of the recognition, then there are no constraints on the pattern of support which may be employed. No conventions and concepts defining a structure for the argument and criteria of validity can be specified. You travel any way you like as long as you get there. The appeal to aesthetic sensibility must thus be seen as logically prior to any directive argument, and the only criterion of validity for a directive argument is success in bringing about agreement in aesthetic perception.

FOUR

There is a conflict, then, in the supervenience-theory between the felt need for a characterization of the directive argument involving no reference to aesthetic sensibility and the insistence upon the basic role of aesthetic sensibility which, in principle, prohibits such an independent characterization. Such a characterization is nowhere attempted by the proponents of the theory while the central role of aesthetic sensibility is always acknowledged. The need for assuming the existence of aesthetic sensibility arises in the supervenience-theory because it wants to avoid reducing aesthetic features to textual features. It does this by postulating that the single reader possesses an aesthetic sensibility enabling him to recognize the aesthetic features of the work. The aesthetic sensibility is conceived with reference to the relationship between the single reader and the single work. The reader responds with his aesthetic sensibility when he is confronted with a particular literary work. So this notion of aesthetic sensibility is bound up with an atomistic view of literature.

There are strong practical and theoretical reasons for insisting that aesthetic judgement is defined, at least in part, by ways of argument with their own structure, standards and criteria of validity which can be characterized without reference to aesthetic sensibility. The practical reasons are glaringly obvious if one wants to view the supervenience-theory as a general aesthetic theory applicable also to literature. For literary aesthetic argument inter-relates a number of concepts describing the textual features of a literary work in a *critical statement* and such

statements *constitute* literary aesthetic judgement. So in literary aesthetic judgement the aesthetic argument usurps the place of aesthetic sensibility. The recognition in Shakespeare's sonnet 129 of the symmetrical pattern of words with focus in 'mad/Mad', as an aesthetic feature, takes place through the description of the function or significance of the pattern in the poem: 'It defines the rise, climax, and the ebb of an emotional reaction of disgust which accompanies the speaker's reflections on the nature of lust, its satisfaction, and the emotional consequences of this satisfaction.' The further support of this interpretative hypothesis will constitute a further articulation of the aesthetic feature which this interpreter sees. The argument is here constitutive of the recognition and articulation of the aesthetic feature. And this is a general point about literary aesthetic judgements: the imaginative reconstruction of the literary work, by help of a set of general concepts enabling the reader to refer to and inter-relate the textual features of the work, constitutes his understanding and appreciation of the text as a literary work of art. Thus, in literary aesthetic argument, the aesthetic sensibility is pushed into the background. It is certainly true that some people are naturally more sensitive than others to the finer nuances of literary creation. But this sensibility is defined by their ability to construct a conceptual network which illuminates the work they speak about, not by guiding perception, but through ascribing significance to patterns of textual features. Every feature the reader 'sees' in a literary work is capable of this articulation in concepts, and if the description of aesthetic features can never be complete, this is because the reader's view of a work is always capable of development.

The theoretical reason for insisting on the independence of directive argument from aesthetic sensibility is as strong as the practical reasons. The central insight of the supervenience-theory is that while aesthetic features cannot be *defined* as a set of textual features, they are nevertheless recognized as a set of textual features in the particular literary work. The theory holds out the promise of a characterization of the peculiar nature of this recognition which makes it an aesthetic judgement. This characterization, it is claimed, will also justify the description of an aesthetic judgement as rational in spite of the fact that the judgement is not based on general descriptive criteria. However, if it is impossible to give an independent characterization of the logic of the directive argument, if the only characteristic feature of directive argument is that it is successful in producing agreement in aesthetic perception, then this promise remains unfulfilled. For then the

aesthetic judgement must be understood simply as the exercise of aesthetic sensibility, guided or unguided. And it will then be meaningless to talk about a 'pattern' of support or aesthetic argument. To have explanatory power the supervenience-theory must admit the directive aspect of the pattern of support to be characterized by its own peculiar structure, standards of argument, and criteria of validity. But if this is admitted, then, as the example from Shakespeare's sonnet also illustrates, there is really no room for aesthetic sensibility in the definition of aesthetic judgement. For one then accepts that directive arguments are judged by other standards than success in bringing about agreement in aesthetic perception. And if there is disagreement on the level of aesthetic perception it must be settled by argument. Which means that the notion of agreement itself must ultimately be understood with reference to the evaluation of different aesthetic arguments.

The problem for the supervenience-theory is that its atomistic view of literature makes a general characterization of aesthetic argument impossible and so makes an assumption that aesthetic sensibility is the basis of aesthetic judgement unavoidable. If one takes as the point of departure for the analysis of aesthetic judgement the single reader's appreciation of the single work, and if one denies the possibility of analysing it as the application of general descriptive criteria, then nothing further can be said about the reader's aesthetic judgement than that, in making it, he is exercising his aesthetic sensibility. In themselves, instances of particular people exercising aesthetic judgement in connection with single works of art do not yield to analysis in general terms. Proponents of the supervenience-theory try to make this lack of generality and the pre-eminence of aesthetic sensibility in their analyses a virtue, by stressing that it is the essence of aesthetic experience that it is a *personal* experience of value:

> If we say that the *hope* of agreement motivates our engaging in these various patterns of support, then we must also say, what I take Kant to have seen, that even were agreement in fact to emerge, our judgements, so far as aesthetic, would remain as essentially subjective, in his sense, as they ever were. Otherwise, art and the criticism of art would not have their special importance nor elicit their own forms of distrust and of gratitude.[13]

However, if basing the explanation of aesthetic judgement on the relationship of the single reader to the particular work makes a general

account of the logic of aesthetic argument impossible, then the focus of the supervenience-theory will have to be changed. Otherwise we shall soon be back to considering reductive theories.

FIVE

Consider now a phenomenon completely different from a literary work: a transaction between two people which one may call a purchase. A purchase involves a transfer of goods (property, services, shares, foreign currencies, etc.) from one person to another in return for a transfer of money the other way. A purchase is different from theft, borrowing, bartering, accepting a prize, receiving a gift, or the restitution of an object. The difference consists in the fact that a purchase involves a payment in money for the goods received. Now, a payment in money has no characteristic qualities which can be seen, heard or smelt. A payment of ten pounds in notes and/or coins can have a number of different physical shapes. Then again it need not be paid in cash. One may pay by cheque, by credit-card, or giro, which all involve different physical objects, pieces of paper, bits of plastic, inky stamps and different procedures. One can even pay by computer transfer (soon there will be a terminal outside every bank and in a few years in every shop), which involves no physical objects whatsoever. So money is not defined by physical appearance or structure. Its distinctive features are defined by its function as a means of exchange inherently without value, but providing a measure of the comparative value of goods, and by a background of concepts and conventions embodied in an agreement how this function is to be served. This agreement defines what a payment is and how it is measured. It both determines what actual physical forms a transfer of money can take and regulates the transfer. Such an agreement may be, as it has been, continually modified. It has been extended from covering gold and silver coins to covering notes, to cheques, to credit-cards, to computer transfer. Without this background agreement money would not exist, just as credit-cards could only be seen as plastic oblongs (if something like it had existed) until the agreement was modified to define and assign a use to them.

An economic system based on the circulation of money is a social practice or institution defined by a normative structure of concepts and conventions. The conventions which make up this normative structure not only regulate social behaviour but also create the possibility for identifying, and thus for engaging in, the behaviour which they

regulate.[14] These *constitutive* conventions specify the characteristics of and label certain types of behaviour, objects, and events, and assign a function to these facts in relation to some purpose which the practice defines, thus constituting them institutional facts. The logical status of the constitutive conventions can be highlighted by comparing them with *summary* or *regulative* rules. These regulate behaviour which can be recognized and described without reference to these conventions. 'Never shake hands with your gloves on' would be such a convention. Handshakes and gloves can be recognized and described without any knowledge of this convention. An institution or practice is explained by pointing out the function which it serves or the purpose it has, by formulating the constitutive conventions and displaying the logical interrelationships between practice concepts themselves and between practice concepts and the descriptions of the brute facts which constitute the institutional behaviour, objects and events. The function or purpose of the institution is not necessarily identifiable independently of the practice. It may have been formulated and developed together with it. An economic system based on the circulation of money has the function that it increases the level of economic activity. And this economic activity cannot itself be described without referring to transactions involving money.

It may be reasonably suggested that literature is a social institution of the same kind as an economic system, defined by a normative structure which makes possible a literary practice. And that to give an account of literary aesthetic judgement, with reference to individual situations in which it is exercised, is like trying to give an account of money and its use with reference only to individual transactions without mentioning the framework of concepts and conventions which makes the transaction possible. Literature is obviously a social practice in the minimal sense that it involves a group of people among whom literary works are produced and read. The present suggestion is that it is a social practice in a stricter sense; i.e. a practice whose *existence depends* both on a background of concepts and conventions which create the possibility of identifying literary works and provide a framework for appreciation, and on people actually applying these concepts and conventions in their approach to literary works. If literature is such an institution then aesthetic judgement must be understood as defined by the practice and apart from the practice aesthetic judgements are impossible. And a literary work must then be seen as being offered to an audience by an author with the intention that it should be understood with reference to a shared background of concepts and conventions which must be

employed to determine its aesthetic features. And a reader must be conceived of as a person who approaches the work with a set of expectations defined in terms of these concepts and conventions. Somebody who did not share this *institutional background* would not be able to identify aesthetic features in it because he did not know the concepts and conventions which define these features. And just as it is quite unnecessary to postulate that somebody who knows what a pound will buy has a monetary sensibility, it is unnecessary to postulate an aesthetic sensibility to explain how it is possible for people to identify aesthetic features. If literature is an institution defined by a normative structure, aesthetic features are no more subjective than judgements identifying sums of money.

SIX

If literature is conceived as a social practice rather than as a collection of texts, then literary aesthetics must change its focus away from the relationship between the individual mind and the individual work to the social practice of which both the reader and the work are elements. An explanation of aesthetic judgement, aesthetic features, and aesthetic value must then be sought by attempting a description of the logical relationships between the concepts of literary practice and a formulation of the conventions which govern the practice and make the identification of aesthetic features possible. This explanation represents an internal viewpoint. It can only be given by somebody who shares in the practice and a full understanding of the explanation implies that one would be able to engage in the practice. For an explanation of the practice is really an articulation of the normative structure which defines it. Indeed, the very request for an explanation will involve practice concepts, and is, most likely, motivated by an urge to clarify a pattern of behaviour on which the culture confers special importance or which is construed as being of importance for the culture. The question 'What is literature?', as was pointed out in the first paragraph of this essay, is of the type which one should expect to be asked about a practice by the practitioners. It concerns a phenomenon we already know how to identify and how to approach, but about which we can formulate no general insights, nor can we justify the interest we take in it.

Furthermore, an explanation of aesthetic judgement in institutional terms is non-empirical. A reader is able to offer reasons why certain literary aesthetic judgements are better than others; reasons, that is, why an interpretation of an aspect or the whole of a work is

unacceptable or inferior to another interpretation. For example, one may argue that it is wrong to see, in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, a slow erosion of Noddy Boffin's amiable qualities as he is being corrupted by wealth,[15] because Boffin never sees himself as the possessor of wealth but only as the custodian of the wealth of others. This reason can be supported by further reasons. One may point to actual events and passages which show Boffin's attitude to his wealth: he does not make public Harmon's last will bequeathing him the Harmon fortune unconditionally, and immediately upon coming into possession of the fortune he offers Bella Wilfer, John Harmon's intended bride, a star role in the new Boffin household and he starts searching for an orphan who can take John Harmon's place. Still further support for these interpretative remarks could consist in pointing to Boffin acting the miser to bring out the gold in Bella. He does this for the young John Harmon just as he sifted the dust for old Harmon and turned that into gold. The institutional approach to literature would construe this type of argument as relying on certain conventions for what are illuminating literary judgements. These conventions must be shared by a reader for him not only to be able to evaluate literary judgements but to be able to understand them. If one does not share these conventions, the whole point of the reconstructive exercise which a literary judgement involves will pass one by. Consequently, the formulation of these conventions and the analysis of the concepts involved can be based on the theorist's own knowledge of the practice. In so far as he is unsure of his grasp of literary judgement, he can study other critics, inquire what judgements are well known and much respected, try to see why they are much respected, to learn what sort of commonsense considerations are used to support an argument, and so on. But his theory does not rest upon an empirical inquiry into what norms readers use as basis for their judgements concerning literary works. He trains himself as a reader and his theoretical venture consists in formulating the conventions which define and structure his possibilities of response. The institutional approach to literature thus rests on an assumption of a fundmental agreement concerning what literature is and what literary judgements are. The task of literary aesthetics is to display the nature of this agreement.

SEVEN

There is an objection against construing literature as a social institution, which addresses itself to the assumption that there is a

fundamental agreement concerning literature and literary judgements. It runs as follows. There is, in fact, no agreement on how to understand and evaluate any particular work. Not only are there endless critical disputes on famous questions of interpretation like the delay of Hamlet or the motivation of Lear, but any two critical interpretations of a work are in competition. It is the nature of critical debate that critics suggest their own and criticize other interpretations. This objection has two weaknesses. It overlooks the implications of the fact that there is agreement concerning the literary canon. There will at any time be a number of demarcation disputes concerning whether or not a text is a literary work, but this is a discussion which only makes sense if there is agreement about the existence of a canon. This agreement does not merely concern the fact that such and such texts should be classified as literary works. It is an agreement assigning these texts a cultural value. These texts are grouped together because they repay a special type of attention. This is the justification for distinguishing certain texts as literary works. It gives the concept of literature its point. An explanation of this agreement will have to offer an account of the particular type of attention which literary works require and of the implicit assumption that a literary work is aimed at creating some sort of cultural value, as well as an account of what makes a text a suitable object of this kind of attention. A reductive explanation of this agreement would be unattractive because it would try to show that the agreement was based on the application of general descriptive criteria. It would have nothing to say about the special attention that literary works are accorded, nor about the value-judgement which constitutes part of the agreement concerning the literary canon.[16] Alternatively, one can argue along the lines of the supervenience-theory that the agreement rests on the exercise of aesthetic sensibility coupled with the employment of directive argument. But the supervenience-theory fails to give an account of either aesthetic sensibility or directive argument and, as was argued above, thus fails to explain how one identifies aesthetic features. In contrast to the reductive theories and the supervenience-theory, an institutional theory would aim at specifying the concepts and conventions which define the special attention texts, construed as literary works, are accorded. In doing this, it would also clarify the nature of the value-judgement involved in the agreement on the literary canon and specify how the reader, in interpretation, identifies such features as make the text a literary work and thus aesthetically valuable. So the type of agreement which, in fact, exists

concerning the literary canon seems to require explanation in institutional terms.

The objection that there is no agreement in questions of understanding and evaluation of particular works also makes the mistake of assuming that *such* agreement is necessary for an institutional theory to be possible. It is not. The fact that critical disagreement and competition between arguments concerning interpretation and evaluation is in the nature of critical practice does not mean that it is impossible to distinguish between good and bad arguments and to give reasons why some arguments are better than others. All the institutional theory requires to get off the ground is an agreement on what is good and what is bad argument, an agreement on which literary judgements are worth preserving and which are not. And such an agreement is certainly in evidence in literary practice. For there exists, as a matter of fact, not only a canon of literature, but also a canon of criticism. It is possible to talk about 'The great critics of Shakespeare', and there is not much disagreement about who they are. And this criticism is kept in print, in cheap popular editions, just like the literary works themselves. This critical canon embodies standards for literary judgement. Some of these standards will be those relevant also to other intellectual exercises, such as clarity, consistency, coherence. But one important criterion must be labelled something like profoundity or illumination.[17] Philip Collins, in a recent article in *The Times Literary Supplement*,[18] points out that the prison in Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, now considered by all its readers to be one of its central symbols, had not been mentioned in the critical literature before Edmund Wilson gave his lectures on 'Dickens: the Two Scrooges' in 1939 (later published in *The Wound and the Bow*). Wilson establishes the prison as the central symbol by making an imaginative reconstruction which consists in identifying prison analogies and references to imprisonment everywhere in the book. The result is a view of *Little Dorrit* as a highly unified and powerful novel. And the recognition of the prison as one of the symbols around which the novel is constructed with the consequent identification of a pervasive pattern of analogies and references to prisons was the basis for the revaluation of *Little Dorrit* as one of Dickens' masterpieces. Wilson's essay is coherent and clear, which it needs to be successfully to establish the pervasiveness of the idea of imprisonment and its function as an organizing principle in the novel. But it is the imaginative leap of seeing the prison as a central symbol and the idea of imprisonment as being expressed in a number of the

novel's textual features which makes it great criticism. It is the paradigm of an illuminating judgement. It is important that it is realized that the conventions which the institutional view of literature assumes to be the constitutive conventions of the institution and which underlie our recognition of Wilson's interpretation as illuminating, are *not standards of criticism*. The concept of criticism embraces all sorts of discourse about literary works. This discourse is made possible by judgements of interpretation and evaluation which constitute the reader's appreciation of a work, but much criticism is concerned with matters beyond appreciation. Only in so far as criticism is relevant to appreciation is it possible to see the conventions of the institution as defining and regulating criticism. Criticism can be judged as illuminating in so far as it contains or inspires illuminating judgements, but the purpose of criticism is not necessarily to promote aesthetic appreciation.

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There is thus no reason to dismiss the institutional approach without further consideration. And there are reasons to believe that literature does yield to explanation in institutional terms. First, the reader's response to a literary work seems to be correctly described as an *imaginative reconstruction* of its literary aesthetic features. The supervenience-theory seems to be correct in saying that to identify an aesthetic feature an aesthetic judgement is required. And this imaginative reconstruction has, as a matter of fact, a certain logical structure. Secondly, literary aesthetic judgements are formulated in a vocabulary with its own criteria of application and a hierarchical structure. This vocabulary is open. It is impossible to give a list of its terms. This is not merely because technical terms can be added to the vocabulary as the need arises. There is, indeed, a class of terms referring exclusively to textual features of all kinds and this part of the vocabulary is technical but open ended. It includes terms of rhetoric such as 'diction', 'metaphor', 'rhyme', 'rhythm', 'verse', and terms referring to aspects of content such as 'scene', 'character', 'plot', and to these terms can be added whatever technical terms may be required. But the vocabulary of literary aesthetic argument is open in a more radical way than this. For its terms are not technical terms, but terms which have an established use in other spheres of life. One describes Hamlet, prince of Denmark, using such terms as one would use to describe a real human being. One describes the conditions of the royal Danish court in the same terms as