

Raising Lazarus? The challenge of resurrecting Literary Humanism?

What is Fiction For? - Literary Humanism Restored by Bernard Harrison (*LHR*, hereafter)
Reviewed by Dr. Heward Wilkinson

Professor Bernard Harrison's new book is substantial, deeply absorbing, patient, good-naturedly very pleasant to engage with, philosophically grounded, demanding that one wrestle intensively with it. It has the ambitious aim of reactivating and revalidating Literary Humanism, in both the *pre*-Post-Modernist and *pre*-Positivist sense. This would be illustrated by such a diverse, older-school, and certainly non-unanimous, group of authors and critics as: G Wilson Knight, Ivor Winters, FR Leavis, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Raymond Williams, Cleanth Brooks, William K Wimsatt, and Northrop Frye. So powerful, today, are the Positivist and Post-Modernist forces in the literary field, that this would seem to be a daunting task. And Bernard Harrison has something endearingly and deeply old school, and gracious, about him, which, of course, intensifies the challenge he faces, in an immensely *tradition-depleted present*. Has he achieved it? My response is, perforce, condensed and oversimplified.

Harrison's strategy reaches out beyond the literary ambivalence about philosophy. In philosophy it is indeed anchored squarely, but in a philosophy, that of the later Wittgenstein, which he believes is deeply congruent with literary understanding. He vigorously seizes hold of the polarity between two broad stances. On the one hand, there are those stances, he believes, which uphold a literalist, positivist, or Fregean 'truth conditional', view of *mimesis*, understood as reality-representation, in which literature at best merely replicates, in a fictional frame, the factual insights of psychology, social science, or nihilistic atheist philosophy, - for otherwise it would be mere fairy tale, fantasy and illusion. And, on the other hand, there is what he conceives as the anti-mimetic, but hermetically cut off, understanding, locked within a Saussurean or Derridean circle of words, and without access to actuality, of Post-Modernism and Deconstruction, and their fellow travellers. He equates this polarity or contrast with the dualistic Cartesian antithesis of material and psychic realities, albeit with a modern linguistic turn. And so he envisages himself squarely as articulating a *third* position, in terms of Wittgenstein's appeal, in *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* hereafter) §241, to *congruence* conditions, as opposed to *truth* conditions, developing Frege's position in this unique way:

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” It is what human beings *say* that is true or false; and they agree in *the language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions, but in form of life.’ (*PI*, §241)

This obviously freely presupposes a (tacitly Platonic?) appeal to *types of situations*, which enables him to escape the either/or of the paradigms of 'factual truth/fictional illusion' versus that of 'caught within the headlights of the endless verbal circle which never engages with

actuality'. And thus, next, he is able to support the philosophical appeal to Wittgenstein, through two substantial chapters, with a literary appeal to the centrality of FR Leavis's use of the concepts of 'the human world', the 'third realm', 'life', and 'creativity', in *The Living Principle and Thought, Words, and Creativity*. He argues this is a vision which is fully congruent with its being grounded in Wittgenstein's recognition of 'forms of life', or the full 'surroundings' or context (*PI*, §584), - enactive practices, not cognitivist interpretations (*LHR*, pp. 165-6), - in which human meaning is rooted.

There is no doubt in my own mind that *this dimension* of Wittgenstein's thought is, to very a substantial extent, powerfully qualified to fulfil the role Harrison envisages for it, and that it is congruent with a proper understanding of Leavis's paradigm. Wittgenstein's depth and felicity, of understanding the Leavisian concept of unparaphrasable enactment, is epitomised in the following:

'We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.) In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)' (*PI*, §531)

Harrison carries forward this recognition with some very subtle criticism of writers who even have been met with strong reservations by Leavis himself, supplementing Leavis, but on the basis of Leavisian principles. These include revaluations of Virginia Woolf, Sterne, and Swift (and there is rich commentary also, especially, on Dickens, Appenfeld, Orwell, and Anatole France). His reflections on what he considers a Wittgensteinian kind of *enactive embodiment* of human communication, as realised by Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, are especially compelling. They serve as his first, and pivotal, illustration of his theme. So, thus far, I believe he definitely makes his case. It is a remarkable and courageous achievement.

Showing my own hand, my residual reservations about this major work, which therefore are creative arguments with it, embodying the Leavisian 'Yes, but...', arise from two elements: first, a sense that he has gone a bit too far with his own antithesis, and, second, that, consequently, he oversimplifies his own position, does not actually entirely do it justice. And therefore he also misses elements in certain stances he reduces to one of his polarities, lest his position becomes too complicated. A certain familiar Johnsonian or Enlightenment element of British Commonsense, found in Austin, Strawson, and even somewhat in Wittgenstein and Leavis themselves, preventing too radical a pursuit of complexities and abysses (though, c.f., comments on Derrida and Nietzsche, *LHR*, 533), seems not to have been entirely expelled.

Thus, he displays an intriguing ambivalence about Derrida, whom, in the later sections of the book, he treats far more respectfully than any other Post-Modern author he considers, dismissing the usual misinterpretation of 'there is no outside-text' ['*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'] (*LHR*, 34-5), and yet still in the end assimilates to the 'caught within the headlights of the endless verbal circle which never engages with actuality' paradigm. One may supplement and amplify Derrida's allusions to Rousseau, Mamma, and Therese, the flesh and bone creatures, - concerning the 'real life' of whom Derrida says (*Of Grammatology*, p. 159), 'there has never been anything but writing', - by remembering that Proust calls the narrator of *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* 'Marcel', clearly alluding to the *authorial identity* in so doing, yet doing so in a way totally caught up in the fictional world he is creating. Is James Boswell's '*Dr Johnson*' - or the '*Boswell*' himself of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, for that matter - a 'real person', or a literary creation? Derrida's point is, of course, that this is a false antithesis, something Harrison takes for granted when he is giving us his own account of the indissoluble concept-world coalescence posited in Wittgenstein's analysis of the praxis of measurement, and praxis in general. (So Derrida is once more pushed to the margin, where, mostly, - of course, - he lives.) Another to suffer the same fate at his hands, someone who is a decisive possessor of profound clarity of understanding of this character of literature, is Cleanth Brooks, whose postulate of the live unity of works of art Harrison decries as extreme, or perhaps metaphysical (*LHR*, 296-8). Yet Brooks' analysis of the enactive-dramatic, and unparaphrasable, character of poetry and literary works, is nearly as clear and decisive as that of Leavis himself

(*Well Wrought Urn*, 204-5

<http://oldsite.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/ayliu/unlocked/brooks-cleanth/heresy-of-paraphrase.pdf>)

We come here to the core of my conjecture about what has happened in this. It is that, in virtue of a certain, very familiar, residual empiricist, or analytic commonsense, element in Harrison's position, he actually does not quite fully grasp hold of Leavis's, or Brooks', 'enactment' insight. (In the light of this, Derrida's entire oeuvre is one gigantic, - no doubt, to be sure, overly gigantic! - enactment.) And nor, therefore, does he quite notice the unresolved 'naturalistic' realism, or objectivism, which, arguably, whilst recognising on-going dispute about such matters, continues to characterise both his own, and Wittgenstein's, position

'Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, and playing..' (*PI*, §25)

So his own position maintains itself as residually dualistic, by contrast (*LHR*, 154).

If I am right, and if he had, then this geography, this landscape, would, once again, have suffered a pretty comprehensive earthquake, difficult to come to terms with, which there is no space to consider now. But, then, it takes huge courage and tenacity to tackle this landscape at all, and Harrison's achievement in this book is monumental, despite my 'personal view' niggles.

We owe him much gratitude for this major work.