Faith and Reason Honors Program

Senior Thesis

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Thesis Title: Literary Analysis: Contrasting Tradition and Modernism

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Year: 2015
The field of literature is an excellent example of how traditional and modern philosophies differ when applied to other disciplines. Philosophical views greatly impact one’s approach to literature, and modern philosophy, which tends to deny objective truth, causes people to read literature as if it is impossible to discern the meaning of a work, or as if good literature is purely a matter of subjective preference. A more traditional approach to literature, however, recognizes objective truth and acknowledges literature’s ability to capture an element of that truth.

Contemporary approaches to literature represent almost exclusively the former school of thought, utilizing various critical theories that are based on post-modern philosophy, which is problematic for interpreting literature. If the philosophical foundation upon which we approach literature denies the existence of absolute truth, then it is impossible to find that truth in stories. However, those who adhere to a traditional approach to philosophy understand that truth and goodness proceed from something that exists objectively. These objective things exist, not just conceptually, but concretely, for we discover what is good by looking at what exists, and such things, through their very being, are true to the beholder.\(^1\) Additionally, true things, as far as they appeal to our sensitive or intellectual appetites, are good. To determine whether a particular work of literature is good, there must be a way to evaluate the work according to an objective standard, which we can discover in light of the purpose of literature. Furthermore, we can discover truth in literature, especially if we ascribe to the tenets of traditional philosophy. Founding literary analysis in the ideas of Aristotle, Aquinas, and even Heidegger, enables us to recognize truth and goodness in literature as it as it reflects some aspect of reality and appeals to our appetitive nature.

**Literature as Art**

\(^1\) “…the man who wishes to realize the good does not look upon his own act but upon the truth of real objects,” Joseph Pieper, *Living the Truth.* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1989.) 113.
First, we must ask what literature is, and examine it as such. Literature is art, so in order to understand literature, we ought to understand art in general. Martin Heidegger puts forth a very helpful analysis of art and its origin, which in many respects aligns with traditional philosophy. Heidegger has a view of “things” that he applies to the “thing-ly” nature of art; according to his idea, each thing has both matter (hule) and form (morphe).\(^2\) So, the “thing,” is “enmattered” form. He says this of art, no less than of things in nature or artifacts. Based on this idea, he concludes, “The nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work. But until now art presumably has had to do with the beautiful and beauty, and not with truth.”\(^3\) The first part of this statement reflects Augustine’s metaphysical assertion, “Truth is that which manifests what is.”\(^4\) The connection may not be immediately clear, but Augustine roots truth in being, in what exists. As being appeals to the intellect, it is true. Something real cannot be false, and so Pieper explains, “Truth is a mode of being, a mode that ‘pertains to every being as such’ and therefore embraces all categories and classes of being, ‘transcending’ them.”\(^5\) Everything that exists is true to the intellect, for as Aquinas says, “…since the true is in the intellect in so far as it is conformed to the object understood, so that also the thing understood is said to be true in so far as it has some relation to the intellect.”\(^6\) An existent thing, when known by a human, becomes formally present in the human intellect, and in this relation to the intellect it is true. So, Heidegger states that art reveals the truth in things, for it has a “thing-ly” aspect, which is twofold because the art itself is an extant thing, while it also represents the existence of something else, and it depicts this existence to

\(^3\) Ibid. 36.
the intellect of the human beholder. In showing the extant nature of a thing, art reveals truth to the intellect of the beholder.

This idea contradicts the dichotomy between truth, which seems proper to logic, and beauty, which seems proper to art. Without dividing truth and beauty, we can see that both exist within art. In opposition to this dichotomy, Heidegger suggests, “But perhaps the proposition that art is truth setting itself to work intends to revive the fortunately obsolete view that art is an imitation and depiction of reality?”  

Beauty is not the only thing proper to art, for art is by nature representative, and what it represents is grounded in reality. Reality is true, and since art represents reality, it represents what is true. For example, when one paints a portrait, that image is an imitation of a real person (who is true, that is, exists or has existed). Even if one represents something imaginary, such as a unicorn, that unicorn is based upon a conglomeration of images that do correspond to reality: horses and horns. From there, we can examine Heidegger’s statement that, “The reproduction of what exists requires, to be sure, agreement with the actual being, adaptation to it; the Middle Ages called it adaequatio; Aristotle already spoke of homoiosis.”  

Without troubling ourselves with the Latin and Greek, we can recognize that Heidegger’s reference to these terms roots his ideas in ancient, philosophical traditions, as opposed to modern or post-modern thought. More importantly, he emphasizes the characteristic of art as something that corresponds to reality because it reproduces, and agrees with, what actually exists in the world. We can go farther to assert that art is a representation of a thing’s essence, that which makes it distinctly what it is. In this way, art depicts reality not only in a superficial way, but in its very depths.

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7Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought. 36.
8 Ibid. 36.
Art, then, is a form of *unconcealedness* to those willing to see it. Art reveals what is concealed in reality, the mysterious depths of being that are often inscrutable through a strictly logical, intellectual approach. Using the example of a Van Gogh painting, Heidegger asserts that truth occurs in the work of art, and he differentiates this artistic truth from correct portrayal. Van Gogh’s painting, which depicts a peasant woman’s shoes, is art, not because it reveals what the shoes *look* like, but because it is a “revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes,” showing what they really are, as their use is revealed through their appearance.⁹ Heidegger concludes, "*Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness.*"¹⁰ The beauty occurs in art when it uncovers truth in things outside itself.

Literature, as one type of art, likewise uncovers truth in reality. As a result, there is objectivity in literature, since like other art, it corresponds to things whose existence is *true*. Through storytelling, for instance, literature can offer an explanation of human nature or behavior; in another case, poetry, through imagery, can express an emotion or phenomenon better than any narrative description. In both cases, the literature is rooted in something real, consequently, something true. Literary analysis, therefore, is not purely subjective because the literature reveals something that is objectively true.

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⁹ Ibid. 56.
¹⁰ Ibid. 56.
subjectivism. The subjective element of literature manifests in the impact it has on the individual reader, or the nuances of each story that may speak more to one individual than another. That is, if a work contains many central themes (which a well-developed piece will), then one reader may connect on a deeper level to one theme than another, and thus always relate the work with that theme, while a different reader may relate it with another. Also, literature is an aesthetic good, and as such, certain forms of it will appeal to some individuals more than others. How many people have missed the message of a poem, simply because it presented itself in the form of poetry? The same goes for individual authors; if a reader cannot appreciate stream of consciousness, he is not likely to benefit much from reading Faulkner. However, focusing solely upon the subjective element of literature, or any art, presents manifold problems. Heidegger asserts, “Modern subjectivism, to be sure, immediately misinterprets creation, taking it as the self-sovereign subject’s performance of genius.” An approach to literature that is purely subjective commits the foundational mistake of considering the piece outside of the immediate context that produced it. Although the work can autonomously assume a meaning unintended by its author, it is faulty to remove the work entirely from the author and cultural background that produced it. However, if modern thinkers deny the existence of any objective reality (as many do), they conclude that there is no objective meaning within the work and, consequently, everyone may draw whatever meaning they please from the work.

In addition, such an approach presupposes that subjectivism is exclusive from objectivism. Subjectivism without objectivism denies the possibility of truth in things, for according to this view of subjectivism, truth, if it exists at all, is only present in the mind of the beholder. If truth is only present in the mind, then there cannot be truth in art, a truth that the mind perceives in an

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11 Ibid., 76.
objectively real thing. This contradicts Heidegger’s idea of art. On the contrary, the proper subjective moments of literature, as mentioned earlier, allow for objectivity as well, for in these moments the work is objectively the same to all, but it uniquely impacts an individual person, whose experience of the work and reaction to it is subjective. Therefore, while there is a critical subjective aspect of literature, we must not dwell on it exclusively, but instead acknowledge the presence of objectivity in literature, in order to evaluate the nature of literature and the standard for judging literature as good or bad.

In addition, the need for an objective approach to literature flows from a particular meaning of what is good. Traditionally, the good is a subjective thing in which value is determined from one person to the next; it is not a matter of taste or personal preference. Furthermore, we can see the good in alignment and truth more or less easily, depending on the medium through which it is conveyed. In the case of art, it is easier to see the good as something aesthetic, whereas in a journalism article, it would be easier to see the good aligned with truth than with something beautiful, for the article presumably reports some event that really happened. However, as Heidegger suggests, (preceded in this by Aquinas), truth, beauty, and goodness go hand-in-hand. Good art should be not only beautiful, but should bring us in touch also with some intangible aspect of reality, revealing truth about human nature and existence. Art is representational and expressive, so it represents and expresses *something*, which connects it to truth. As we saw with Heidegger, art by nature has some component of both truth and beauty, and it is necessarily related to being. In order to determine whether art is good or not, we must consider it in light of being, for “to be good is to do justice to objective being.”¹² Furthermore, if part of art’s function is to reflect the truth of things, then good art is that which does this well; by analogy, a pen is supposed to

write, and a good pen is one which does so well. Thus, we must consider literature, as an art form, in relation to both truth and beauty.

In accord with this conception of good art, literature has the advantage, among all art forms, of being overtly verbal, and consequently, being able to verbally communicate the nature of reality. Good literature is necessarily a thing of both truth and beauty, for, “It is the art form which uses words. Journalism can be literature if it is also art, scholarly writing can be literature.” A good book is in part one that accurately portrays some aspect of existence. It could be complete fiction, but if it is well-written readers will be able to relate to it. One common critique of a story, for example, is that its characters just weren’t believable. We cannot relate to it unless it subliminally tells us something about ourselves. However, it must have an aesthetic appeal as well; a book that reflects human experience truthfully, but is written with the syntax and diction of a five-year-old, probably would not be great literature (unless it were specifically told through the lens of a five-year-old, in which case the syntax and diction would function to realistically depict the narrator’s experience of reality—leading to truth). By and large, such a book would not even be able to reflect human experience well, since the message only comes across through the medium of words, which therefore must be carefully and thoughtfully composed. As a result, another characteristic of good literature is the element of beauty present within it.

Given the essentiality of a work’s message in determining its goodness, another important point for consideration arises: many view literature as open to interpretation, and if the good in literature is related to the message conveyed, how can it be evaluated if its message changes depending on the reader? This reverts to the properly subjective moment of literature, alluded to

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earlier; it is possible that one work could have many meanings, which will appeal differently from one individual to the next. For those cases in which *contradictory* interpretations of a work are available, we must establish an objective measure for interpreting literature. That way, we can judge it as good based on a standard beyond the opinion of a subjective beholder. This idea is countercultural, as well as contrary to the vast majority of literary analysis in modernity, for language and subjects, such as literature, which depend upon language, appear to be relative. We see such reasoning in Saussurian principles, such as the following:

> ...in the fact that since the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between words and worldly things is ‘open to criticism’ there must be a sense in which our very concepts themselves, along with the sounds which we use to signify them, can be seen as inherently arbitrary rather than as determined in their form by any ‘natural’ or extra-linguistically-given relationship to reality.\(^\text{14}\)

Such theories, by suggesting that the connection between concepts within the mind and reality without is arbitrary, contribute to a relativistic approach to literature. They arise in part based on a rejection of traditional philosophy, specifically metaphysics. Fortunately, we can argue against such a rejection:

> Later Saussurian (or “post-Saussurian”) theorists have sometimes argued as though any attempt to frame questions about the relationship between conceptual language and a dimension of reality which is exterior to language must be swept aside as evidence of our continued enslavement to outdated metaphysical or ontological notions. And yet no convincing argument as to why such metaphysical or ontological notions might be outdated (or as to which of them either are or are not outdated) has ever been put forward. The result has been the creation of a metaphysical or ontological void (or perhaps the seeming legitimation of a metaphysical or ontological void which existed at the heart of our culture already) in which Saussurian theory can guiltlessly disport itself, but in which we are also deprived of any conceptual basis for getting nearer to an understanding of—or (which is where any understanding would have to begin from) even for taking an interest in—the nature of truth.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ibid. 8-9.
If it is not necessary to split linguistic signification from reality, then it seems that there are objectively correct or incorrect ways to interpret language and, by extension, literature as it is based on language, even when alternate readings of one literary work are available. It is possible to judge interpretations as correct or incorrect, beyond making a judgment according to the matter supplied within the text.

*Judging Interpretations: the Importance of Authorial Background and Intent*

One way to evaluate interpretations of a work is by considering authorial intent. We can often judge this by considering how the author's life, background, and personal beliefs shape his work. These factors ought to shape our perception of his work. Once more, this assertion is contrary to most modern trends of literary criticism, which advocate separation of a work of literature from the author, in order to judge it on its own. This is a mistaken refusal to recognize that everything in existence, from human beings to art, is from an "other" and therefore has a derivative existence; true, it can assume a new significance never intended by the author, analogous to a child attaining heights that its parents never foresaw, but the work is still integrally molded by its creator, just as that child will always be fundamentally shaped by the way its parents raised it. Literature comes into existence through writers, inspired by something beyond themselves, writers whose lives, experiences, personal likes and dislikes, beliefs, and intentions all shape their work. If we take authors out of the picture, we limit our own ability to understand the literature in its fullness; we fail to consider its proximate cause, the author, and instead emphasize the work as a fully independent entity, or things that may constitute a remote cause, such as the cultural context (or divine inspiration) from which it arises.
Moving from the supposition, then, that knowledge of the author is influential in understanding the work, we can facilitate literary analysis. Some authors conveniently provide an explanation of their own work to clarify their intentions. Though one may object that the author sometimes chooses not to offer an explanation of their work, such as when they end it ambiguously and leave the reader to guess who marries whom, for instance, it appears that in this case, it is still the writer's intention to let readers figure it out—for better or worse. More importantly, the work can offer an accurate depiction of human nature, despite ambiguity about plot-points. The choice to leave questions open to the reader is itself a commentary on the possibilities of imagination, for when the author does not offer a direct commentary about an interpretation of the work, we can still consider the author's background to formulate their most likely intentions and interpret the work accordingly. So, even ambiguous work can convey a definitive message about the human being and reality.

One example, in which it is crucial to evaluate the work in light of its author, is Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. This modern novel falls subject to both Christian and anti-Christian interpretations. The two are contradictory, for clearly the novel cannot be both for and against Christianity. Yet there is textual evidence that can support either view. One might say that there is *more* evidence for one interpretation over the other, but ultimately, there are two things to consider. There is, first of all, the question of what is objectively true and how this truth might shine through the work, and second of all, the meaning that the author intended to communicate through the work, understood in light of the author's background. Since the focus of this paper is not directly theology or metaphysics, we will not argue the first question, but we can explore Evelyn Waugh's past to address the second. Knowledge of his life reveals that he underwent a phase of adolescent "experimentation." He was known to party and engage in promiscuity, habits
that to some extent lasted his lifetime. However, as he matured he experienced a reversion to the Catholic faith that he was raised with, and he was rationally, if not in practice, a staunch believer. In fact, one biographer verifies Waugh's emotional need for religion, saying, “Waugh admitted as much when he confessed that he found life ‘unintelligible and unendurable without God.’”

Endurance of the modern world, caricatured so successfully in his novels, was made easier from the sanctuary of the Church.” Is it likely, given his staunch advocacy of Catholicism in his personal life, that he would compose an anti-Christian or anti-Catholic book? On the contrary, there is tremendous evidence that the book is autobiographical and depicts characters transforming from the immoral youths that Waugh associated with in his own lifetime, to the effect that the characters eventually find faith and consolation within the Church. His intentions, as can be inferred from his personal beliefs and life, were to uphold the Catholic faith. This attention to the author’s background and intention gives the edge to a Christian interpretation of *Brideshead*. Thus, even when the text is ambiguous and open to seemingly contradictory interpretations, it is possible to determine some meaning of the text with relative certainty, based on knowledge of the author. When faced with conflicting analyses of a text, it can be very useful to resolve the conflict by studying the life of the author.

At this point, one could argue that Waugh was psychologically conditioned to uphold Christianity because he grew up within the moral confines of the Church. According to this reasoning, the novel not only reflects the oppression of the Church within its plot, but insofar as the novel is autobiographical, it reflects the oppression upon Waugh himself, of which he was unaware, being confined to the parameters of Catholic ideology. Such is the method of psychological critical theory in literature. At this point, we must defer to the first consideration.

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listed in the previous paragraph: that interpretations of literature can be judged based upon their correspondence to objective truth. At this point, the literary critic must evaluate Catholic theology to determine if it really is oppressive or if it reflects reality. If, after such theological investigation, it appears that the Church is in fact supportive, not oppressive, then such an investigation could discredit these psychological approaches to the work at hand.

Aside from the assistance found in considering the author when trying to understand the meaning of a work, there is another benefit to bearing the author in mind when evaluating literature. That is because the origin of something shapes it; for example, the origins of people, whether familial or geographical, shape them. Consider how a person is molded by the place where he grew up and the people who raised him, and even once a person becomes an adult, his background still exerts significant influence over him. Literature, likewise, does not just magically appear in the world as something to be considered independently of its origins. It, like people, comes from another, out of a particular context. We, as readers, should consider all of this, since it is essential in shaping the work. Thus, it is fallacious to completely separate the author from the work, an error that occurs regularly in modern literary criticism, just as it would be fallacious to get to know people without reference to the places or communities of their origins.

*Derrida, Literary Criticism, and Subjectivism*

Contrary to the above methods of evaluating literature, critical theory generally removes literature from the context of its author, seeking to evaluate the text itself and divide it from meaning or context. This contradicts traditional approaches to literature, and indeed, to the world. While there are many varieties of critical theory, two of the most foundational ones in the field of
literature are structuralism and deconstruction. The latter, begun by philosopher Jacques Derrida, largely arises in response to the former. Both theories have caveats, but Derrida develops deconstruction partially as a method to correct the flaws of structuralism. An oversimplified understanding of Derrida’s ideas, or an understanding carried to an extreme, can suggest relativism. Particularly in the realm of literary criticism, scholars seem to apply such versions of deconstruction, which result in a purely subjectivist approach to literature. This becomes clear through a thorough analysis of deconstruction and structuralism, as we will see below.

To begin with the positive aspects of deconstruction, we must evaluate how Derrida corrects some of the problems of structuralism. Structuralism, to summarize, is an approach to literature that evaluates the structure of the piece without considering its meaning. It views the structure of a literary work as if it is a skeleton, and just as flesh impedes one from seeing the skeleton, so too one cannot see the structure of a literary work when it is concealed under layers of meaning, which conceal the structure like flesh conceals the skeleton. Structuralism therefore seeks to neutralize, and even remove, meaning in order to better perceive the structure of the work. Derrida critiques this approach, for he disagrees with structuralism’s endeavor to free a text from its meaning in order to better understand the text. The structuralist assumption is that, “the relief and design of structures appears more clearly when content, which is the living energy of meaning, is neutralized.” However, Derrida recognizes that by neutralizing the meaning, structuralism undermines the text as a whole. A structure without meaning is like a skeleton without flesh; the former is literature no more than the latter is a person. It threatens the very foundations of the text.

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17 “The structuralist solicitude and solicitation give themselves only the illusion of technical liberty when they become methodical. In truth, they reproduce, in the register of method, a solicitude and solicitation of Being, a historico-metaphysical threatening of foundations,” Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference. Webdelpaisor.ula..Webdelpaisor.ula.ve/humanidades/anderzon/materias/materiales/Writing_and_Difference.pdf. 5.
18 Ibid, 4.
In addition, the structuralist approach views absence as a source of inspiration. That is, absence of meaning in the text is a form of liberation. However, from a traditional perspective, inspiration proceeds from the fullness of being; one is inspired by extant things, not by nothingness. Based on a structuralist approach, however, the perfect book is a “book about nothing,” since it prioritizes pure structure without consideration of meaning.\(^1\) Thus, structuralism commits the error of viewing a part of literature, the structure, as the whole.

Derrida, on the other hand, recognizes the integrality of meaning to a work and that it is erroneous to analyze structure exclusively. Reminiscent of Aristotelian causality, Derrida comments that structuralism is impracticable because one cannot have a structure apart from the matter being structured. Even a skeleton, for example, is not pure structure, for it consists of bones, without which there would be no structure.\(^2\) We cannot even conceptually imagine a structure by itself, without it being made of something. Furthermore, Derrida suggests an element of Platonism and Aristotelianism when he speaks of the “end” of a structure. We understand what a thing is in light of what it is for, and so with literature, we understand it with an eye to what it is for, its purpose. We cannot comprehend the structure of a work by itself, without reference to something like the purpose of the work, which transcends the mere structure.

Deconstruction, then, seeks a foundation for meaning. It recognizes, correctly, that the meaning of a work might be multifaceted and multilayered; for example, a reader analyzes a work, discovering one meaning, and then analyzes this first meaning, discovering a second. This can continue infinitely, giving rise to fresh meanings each time. These resultant meanings sometimes contradict each other, but then an evaluation of the contradiction can generate a new meaning.

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\(^1\) Ibid, 7.

\(^2\) “Structuralism lives within and on the difference between its promise and its practice. Whether biology, linguistics, or literature is in question, how can an organized totality be perceived without reference to its end, or without presuming to know its end, at least?” Ibid, 30.
Such an approach views the work as something dynamic, a currently happening event, in which the creative process does not end once the work is placed on paper, but rather occurs continuously. For this reason, Caputo argues that Derrida is conservative, “For he sees deconstruction as a way to keep the event of tradition going, to keep it on the move, so that it can be continually translated into new events, continually exposed to a certain revolution in a self-perpetuating auto-revelation.” Deconstruction is a method of making the old, new. Something traditional is an ever-evolving event, belonging not merely to the past, or even the present, but currently happening and giving rise to new meanings. Therefore, deconstruction also focuses on what is to come, for, “Deconstructive analysis deprives the present of its prestige and exposes it to something tout autre, ‘wholly other,’ beyond what is foreseeable from the present, beyond the horizon of the ‘same.’”

This is beneficial, since the application of deconstruction to art, and specifically literature, recognizes not only the importance of meaning, but also the dynamism of the work that can assume so many meanings in great depth.

Also, deconstruction fights against common ideologies and, in literature, seeks to listen to voices besides those commonly represented. This empowers one to interpret a piece in ways not dictated by prevalent worldviews, which is eminently desirable if one lives in a culture that is flawed and does not promote a completely truthful worldview. Caputo explains further,

For deconstruction is not—we will repeat this again and again—a destruction or demolition, but a way of releasing and responding, of listening and opening up, of being responsible not only to the dominant voices of the great masters, but also to other voices that speak more gently, more discreetly, more mildly in the texts of dead white European males and in quite a few other texts, too.

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22 Ibid, 42.
23 Ibid, 57.
Deconstruction encourages literary scholars to acknowledge ideological biases, and attempt to evaluate the work independently from these, drawing more attention to underrepresented voices.

This can be beneficial in many ways; however,

> In order to understand how deconstruction reveals the hidden work of ideology in our daily experience of ourselves and our world, we must first understand deconstruction’s view of language because, according to Derrida, language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them.  

Here, the foundation of Derrida’s ideological questioning becomes problematic. While he encourages enlightened, critical thinking, he does so on the basis of a problematic view of language, and ultimately. Nonetheless, insofar as Derrida encourages freedom from ideology, his idea of deconstruction is very insightful. It ultimately becomes a platform for many other critical theories, including feminist theory, Marxist theory, and LBGQ theory. Whether or not one values the development of these theories, deconstruction encourages critical analysis of commonly accepted worldviews.

While many of these characteristics of deconstruction are positive, there are problems with Derrida’s ideas. In certain respects, Derrida deconstructs his own convictions like Descartes does in his *Meditation I*. Derrida seeks a foundation for meaning, but his foundation is even less certain than Descartes’ *cogito*, “I think therefore I am,” for he seeks a foundation in “a divisible limit between myself and myself as an other…” In mathematics, a limit is an intangible series of points, and if this is similar to Derrida’s limit, then his foundation for knowledge and meaning seems indeterminate. Just as we can never quite land upon a point on a line, but only come near it, Derrida will never quite reach the foundation for meaning. Further, Derrida divides himself, so that


even the statement “I think” is unstable because the “I” is fragmented. Thus, his method of thought is even more uncertain than Descartes, for he cannot even begin from the grounding of a stable “I.”

An additional problem with Derrida’s mode of thinking is that he prioritizes appearance over essence. Thus, what a thing appears to be is more important than what it actually is. In this respect, Derrida resists Plato, whom he emulated in other regards. “In classical terms,” Caputo states, “Derrida is deeply resistant to ‘essentialism,’ the notion that there are ideal meanings (‘presence’) that somehow or another antedate the play of traces to which the play must conform itself (must represent”). According to this idea, Derrida would prioritize the appearance of a pool being three feet deep, over the reality that the pool is ten feet deep. This is mainly a failure to recognize the truth in things, for by prioritizing appearance over essence, Derrida prioritizes the concept that develops in the mind of a subject over the truth that corresponds to something’s existence (which explains how some people use deconstruction to justify a subjectivist approach to literature). The obvious problem with this theory is that appearance does not always correspond with reality; the pool may seem three feet deep to the person who cannot swim, but that person is still going to drown upon jumping in. The supposition that appearance prevails over essence leads generally to a denial of objective reality, reducing reality to our concepts, which proceed from appearance that may not correspond with the true nature of the thing in question.

In addition, although Derrida is critical of structuralism, he does not correct all of its flaws. In fact, the Saussurean theory of language upheld in structuralism becomes more intense in deconstruction. This theory begins with the vision that language is arbitrary, but that there is no meaning prior to language. Caputo explicates:

> Rather than thinking of language in the classical way, as a set of exterior signs of already constituted interior thoughts (another defining feature of ‘logocentrism’), Derrida, following Saussure and modern linguistics, thinks of users of language invoking coded, that is, repeatable, marks or traces.

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that build up or constitute from within certain unities of meaning as ‘effects’ of the code. These traces are not inherently meaningful in themselves but ‘arbitrary’ and conventional.  

One may ask how this is problematic, at first glance; after all, words are arbitrarily assigned to mean certain things. The problem, however, results from the idea that meaning does not precede language. If there is truth in things, meaning that our intellectual powers develop concepts based on reality and thus truth as it exists in the mind corresponds to reality, then the words we assign to things will communicate this truth, but if our concepts do not refer to anything objectively existent, then there is no source of meaning for language except the concepts that we construct in our minds. That is,

No one ever gets privileged access to the Secret that sits smiling behind all language and interpretation waiting for us to knock; we are all in the same textual boat together, forced to do the best we can with such signs and traces as we can piece together, working out of one worldwide-web site or another. It is not that texts and languages have no ‘referents’ or ‘objectivity’ but that the referent and objectivity are not what they pass themselves off to be, a pure transcendental signified.  

While this view of language does not remove all objectivity from a work, it grounds the objectivity in something so nebulous that it is extremely difficult to ascertain, which begins a slippery-slope to the denial of all objectivity of meaning. In other words, there is something real, the “referent,” signified in language, but the same word could have a limitless number of referents, according to Derrida. This is based not only on the recognition that the same word can have multiple unrelated definitions, but that the context of the word, the way in which it is said, such as sarcastically versus seriously, can alter the meaning of the word. The meaning of language, therefore, is undecidable for Derrida.

Modern linguistics infiltrates Derrida’s approach to literature. Based on this platform, he develops the idea that “il n’y a pas de hors-text,” “there is nothing outside the text,” which means,  

27 Ibid, 100.
28 Ibid, 80.
“there is no reference without difference, that is, without recourse to the differential systems—be they literary or mathematical—we have at our disposal.”

29 We cannot determine the meaning of a text except through a certain lens, a lens that is often formed by culture, socio-politico factors, and historical context. Therefore, the meaning of the text is dependent upon these factors.

Derrida also refuses to believe that the text arises from one identifiable source. The author, for him, is not critical in understanding the text, and the text is born from such a wide context that its source cannot be pinpointed. Derrida seems to exaggerate the truth of this, coming to view the work as an orphan whose source is so broad that it is completely unidentifiable. Caputo explains, “The origin of the text is more and more withdrawn, the author more and more ancient (‘dead’), the text more deeply interwoven in other texts, so that there is no easily identified and assured origin in this geneology, no clearly identified father of the text, which ends up being a bit of a bastard or an orphan.”

30 This complete focus on the breadth of cultural, social, and even literary contributions to the formation of a single text, eventually makes it even harder to determine the meaning of the text. Indeed, these are all remote causes of the text, but if one recognizes these exclusively, without acknowledging the author as a proximate cause, one will cease to enrich their understanding of the text with this background information, but rather make it impossible to understand the text through an overwhelming, limitless amount of background material. Approached by excluding the proximate cause, the meaning of a text becomes undecidable.

Literary criticism, proceeding from Derrida’s philosophy, often presupposes relativism. Where Derrida makes it difficult to find meaning in text, many advocates of critical theory make meaning almost wholly subjective. Where Derrida treats meaning as undecidable, critical theory will sometimes go so far as to make it completely relative. Again, this begins with the idea that

29 Ibid, 80.
there is no meaning prior to language, and that language is arbitrary and equivocal, and therefore meaning is as well. Accordingly, when we try to ground an idea in reality, we are simply grounding it in another idea, or concept, and “Given that each grounding subject—Plato’s Forms, Descartes’ cogito, structuralism’s innate structures of human consciousness, and so on—is itself a human concept and therefore a product of human language, how can it be outside the ambiguities of language?”31 The implication of this is that the world is constructed by language, an idea that refuses to acknowledge that our concepts come from reality or arise by perceiving the truth in things. The world is rather comprised of our concepts, which have in turn arisen from other concepts, and all of these are formed by language, which is arbitrary. This has real-world implications:

For deconstruction, if language is the ground of being, then the world is infinite text, that is, an infinite chain of signifiers always in play. Because human beings are constituted by language, they, too, are texts. In other words, deconstruction’s theory of language has implications for subjectivity, for what it means to be a human being.32

This is an enhancement of some problems that arise with structuralism. Structuralism adopts Saussure’s linguistic theories to conclude that language refers to concepts, but as mentioned before, Derrida does not correct all of structuralism’s flaws; in this respect, he “takes that idea a big step further by claiming that language is nonreferential because it refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things but only to the play of signifiers of which language itself consists.”33 As a result, the meaning of language is utterly undecidable and all speech is equivocal to an extreme. For any given word, or “signifier,” there is an infinite amount of “signifieds,” or things that it could mean, making it impossible to discover meaning with any certainty in language.

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31 Tyson, Critical Theory Today. 256.
32 Ibid, 257.
33 Ibid, 252.
By conceiving of language as both non-referential and the foundation of all being, deconstructive critical theory leads to subjectivism and a fragmentary, unstable view of reality.

When applied to literature, deconstruction can give rise to a more dynamic understanding of the text, but without rooting the text in a proximate cause, it literally “bastardizes” the text, treating it as an orphan and reducing its meaning to subjectivity. At times, in reaching beyond the dominant ideology of a work, deconstruction must disregard the author or proximate cause, for, “To find that ideological framework and understand its limitations, a deconstructive critic looks for meanings in the text that conflict with its main theme, focusing on self-contradictions of which the text seems unaware.”34 One prevalent ideology would likely be found in the intention of the author, in which case the application of deconstruction would purposefully seek contradictions to the author’s beliefs within his own work. Deconstruction’s intention is divisive and fragmentary, not unitive. In generating a multiplicity of interpretations of a work, many of which are contradictory of each other, deconstruction renders it impossible to actually decide the meaning of a work of literature.

Contrary to Subjectivism: Intelligibility of Things and Human Cognition

We can avoid many of the problems of deconstruction by recognizing that meaning can precede language, and that this meaning is intelligible. If language corresponds to something extant and objectively real, then we need not deconstruct it endlessly until there is no foundation

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34 Ibid, 260.
According to traditional metaphysics, the mind is naturally ordered towards knowing things that exist, and to know an object is to possess its form in your mind. So, as Aquinas says, “The truth of enunciations is no other than the truth of the intellect. For an enunciation resides in the intellect, and in speech. Now according as it is in the intellect it has truth of itself; but according as it is in speech, it is called enunciable truth, according as it signifies some truth of the intellect, not on account of any truth residing in the enunciation, as though in a subject.” 35 It seems that the concepts we develop in our mind correspond to real things, then, and that the language we use to express these concepts is not wholly “non-referential.”

Everything that exists is capable of being known by humans, meaning that we can grasp it, at least in part. Similarly, color is ordered toward an eye, just as an eye is ordered toward sight. Pieper explains, “All that exists, because it exists, is ordered toward a knowing mind, even toward the finite human mind. This means: not only is the eye sun-related, the sun as well is eye-related; all that has being is mind-related in its most intrinsic core.” 36 Everything that exists, ultimately, can impress its form upon the human mind, just as light can impress its form upon the eye; the light exists regardless of the eye, but it is only seen when it impresses upon the eye. Similarly, everything that exists has the capacity of being known. This understanding differs from both subjectivism and modern objectivism. Subjectivism overemphasizes the concept contained within the mind, while minimizing the real thing corresponding to that concept. Modern objectivism, if we take it to an extreme, leads us to consider things as purely self-contained, so that there is no bridge between things and the human mind, which contradicts intelligibility. This untraditional approach, according to Joseph Pieper’s description, proposes that the mind causes subject-object relatedness. To a traditional philosopher, though, a thing or object reveals its essence through its

35 Aquinas, ST.I.16.7.resp.
36 Pieper, Living the Truth. 59.
existence, and this essence is intelligible, so the revelation results in knowledge. As opposed to a Kantian guarantee of transcendental truth, which appeals to the presence of common categories shared by each mind, the traditional philosopher would say, “the concept of transcendental truth affirms the relatedness of every being to the *inner core* of another being, the knowing mind…”

Because all that exists is true and intelligible, humans can perceive and understand things, grasping their essences in part. If our language springs from concepts that correctly correspond to real things in the world, then it *is* referential and the meaning of language is not completely indeterminable. Literature, likewise, can have a determinate meaning, since the language forming it corresponds to reality in a way less distant than Derrida and his followers would suppose.

A more traditional approach, furthermore, does not undermine the benefits of deconstruction’s liberation from cultural or ideological confines. Based on the idea that knowing entails the containment of the form of another thing, Pieper explains, “A being’s ability to know, therefore, is its ability to transcend its own delimitations, the ability to step out of its own identity and to have ‘also the form of the other being,’ which means to *be* the other being.”

This enables us, to a certain extent, to go beyond the limits of what ideologies have instilled in us, so that in knowing a thing’s essence, we perceive the truth of its existence, not just a culturally-reinforced concept of it. Knowledge, by bringing us in touch with something that really and objectively exists, and consequently is true, allows us to think critically in a way that surpasses ideological or cultural conditioning.

In addition, the existence of divergent opinions or interpretations of something does not mean that it is unknowable. Such an idea appears in many debates; regarding religion, for instance, some people conclude that there is no theological truth because no one can agree on it, and a

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37 Ibid, 77.
38 Ibid, 37.
similar view seems to proceed from deconstruction: since so many meanings, even contradictory ones, arise from a work, its meaning is undefinable and ultimately, not objective. This does not account for human error, for, “Our perception can be true or false; the things themselves, however, are only and always true, never false.”

With more complex things in particular, including theology and literature, it is more difficult for the human understanding to grasp what is at hand. This is often a defect on the part of the knower, not on the object; sometimes this difficulty flows from the infinite complexity of the thing in question, for such things may be beyond the scope of human knowing. Such incomplete knowability attests to the limitations of our understanding, not an imperfection in what we seek to understand. It also suggests the difficulty in two realities conforming to each other, for, “The nature of knowledge lies in this relationship of essential identity and existential difference. The attempt to clarify completely this relation of the two equally real situations, the attainment of reality and the separateness of consciousness, necessarily leads us to the limits of knowledge.”

When we know a thing, our mind begins to contain its form, but the disparity between what exists external to the mind and the mind itself leads to possibility that we may not fully understand it. Applied to literature, this limitation of knowledge explains why we often cannot grasp the complexities of a work, and consequently why we do not encompass in our mind the entirety of a work’s signification, complete with all its nuances and various themes, but rather land upon a single idea or interpretation of the work and treat it as the whole of the work’s meaning. Instead, by properly considering the nature of human knowing, and the existence of literature as something that comes into being by means of human work, we can recognize that a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations proceeding from one work reflects, on one hand, the complexity of literature, and on the other, our limited ability to grasp its fullness.

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39 Ibid, 30.
40 Ibid, 131-2.
When we evaluate literature, we must consider other factors as well as the meaning intended by the author. Literature is a union of form and content, and the combination of the two express meaning. This is comparable to Aristotle's concept of hylomorphism, according to which every object is a union of form and matter; for example, one never experiences the form of a chair by itself, but rather the form is made apparent through the matter of a physical chair, which communicates something about the chair that is intelligible to the human intellect. Meanwhile, the form of the chair structures its matter in such a way that it functions as a chair. Similarly, with literature one never experiences the form of a work by itself, divested of content. While the structure of a poem, for example, can influence the meaning of the poem (by drawing attention to certain words according to their placement on the page, for one thing) that form only exists through its content, words that materially comprise it. Returning to the chair example, the physical reality of the chair is only experienced because it is structured by the form of the chair, and likewise, the content of a work of literature becomes present through its form.

This applies to prose as much as poetry. Revisiting the case of Brideshead Revisited, we observe that the impact of the work is in part determined by the fact that it is a first-person narrative. We experience first-hand of the speaker's conversion because the whole story appears through his eyes and his voice. We do not need to be "told" that he undergoes a spiritual change because it is evident in his narration. The other characters, however, must "tell" us of their conversion, or we must be informed by the narrator because we are not experiencing the story through them, but rather observing them from a farther distance. In this way, the form of the work
as a first-person narration influences its content and meaning. It would be erroneous, however, to evaluate literature as purely form or structure, as modern structuralists do. Without the content, or the message of the work as influenced by the intentions of the author, the form is empty. A first-person narration without a story is, in fact, not a narration. For this reason, I contend that literature is hylomorphic, a union of form, which in this case signifies literary structure, and matter, which is the actual content of the work.

Good literature, then, is best presented when both form and matter are suitable to conveying truth. While it is a tenet of traditional metaphysics that all things that exist are good insofar as they exist, we can also evaluate a particular thing in light of its function, which is the focus of the next section. However, for the sake of evaluating matter and form, let us examine the qualities necessary for each of them. It seems that the content of the story must present a good message; not necessarily good in the touchy-feely, uplifting, or preachy way, but good insofar as it brings readers in touch with some aspect of the reality of human existence, such as the truth that each man will someday die or that we are made for love. This would make it materially good, for “what” it expresses or consists of is good.

Literature cannot really be good, though, if the form is poor-quality, no matter how good the content may be. In general, something is good insofar as it appeals to the human appetite in some way. According to Aquinas, “As good has the nature of what is desirable, so truth is related to knowledge,” indicating that a thing is good in relation to appetite, in this case, intellectual appetite, and true in relation to knowledge.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, the work must be well-written; the style of the author, which partially dictates the form of the work, must be in alignment with beauty, for it must be aesthetically appealing on some level if it is to communicate a message effectively. Regarding

\textsuperscript{41} Aquinas, \textit{ST}.I.16.3.
the way a work is written, “The sensuous nature of art is involved here, the fact that it is concerned with visual and auditory sensations and bodily sensations. If nothing sensuous is present no art is present.”42 (Note, this also shows the importance of the author in determining the work, since the author is responsible for the form, style, visual or auditory appeal, etc. of the literary work, as well as the content.) On the other hand, literature that has good form, meaning that it is well-written with good style, but communicates a false message through the content of its story or emotions conveyed, is not good. Only that literature which has both quality material and form can be really good.

*The Purpose of Literature*

One may ask why these are the criteria for good literature, namely, that it should communicate truth and do so well. Looking at the Aristotelian concept of *teleology*, we see that the goodness of something is determined by its end, that which gives it purpose (this end is the *telos*). In other words, once we understand the purpose of literature, we can evaluate how well a given work serves that purpose. A good work of literature is one that serves its end well. Immediately, literature should convey reality, that is, existence. From a theological perspective, since all existence derives from God, literature becomes indirectly theological by enabling a consideration of the source of all Being. It is theological as it brings readers in touch with something transcendent, an aspect of reality that is not explained adequately in purely rational discourse. This does not mean that the content must be religious, or overtly moralistic; simply, if the work brings readers in touch with transcendence, it is serving a theological purpose because in that which is

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transcendent, we come closest to God. If the content of a work of literature is true, and the work as art has an element of beauty that helps bring people in touch with that truth by appealing to sensual and intellectual appetites, then the work is good. The author has a great responsibility in producing literature, for he is both an artist and writer, and, "The artist’s duty is to art, to truth-telling in his own medium, the writer’s duty is to produce the best literary work of which he is capable, and he must find out how this can be done." Given its purpose, we can infer that literature as described above, which is hylomorphic, a junction of good matter and good form, serves a theological end by communicating transcendence.

Therefore, good literature is not purely subjective. It is not purely a matter of taste, nor is it necessarily open to interpretation. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is good regardless of whether an individual likes it; as a work, its worth stands independently from the way everyone receives it, and its goodness will be evinced if people whose will and taste have been conformed to some objective standard for beauty, rooted in the truth of being, can appreciate it. It is not necessarily a "good read," nor is it completely open to interpretation. One person’s failure to recognize something good in a work of literature may signify that goodness is not represented, but it may also signify a defect on the part of the person reading it. It may also signify that the good of a particular work is simply not well-suited to a recipient; thus, we would not read *Hamlet* to children, for the work and its recipient would not be oriented to each other, in which case one must present a form of literature that is suited to the recipient. Also, literature that is simply well-written is not good in the fullest sense; we may be able to appreciate its form, but it will not qualify as really good if, for example, the content is false, or it serves some evil purpose.

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If literature is directed at truth, then what exactly distinguishes it from other disciplines that have similar ends? Many other fields do this without as many difficulties of interpretation that literature presents. Is there something, then, that literature alone can offer, giving it some unique advantage? As mentioned above, good literature communicates truth, and does so well, but is not philosophy able to do so better? Philosophy presents fewer problems of interpretation (emphasis on "fewer"), for it contains explicit arguments that, while often confusing and difficult to follow, reveal exactly what their author thinks once properly understood. Literature, on the other hand, often offers a message with much greater ambiguity. There are several distinctions between literature and philosophy, for though both seek to expose truth, literature does so by describing and telling a story, while philosophy prioritizes argumentation; literature is often accessible to a greater range of people who can understand through stories, but are not trained to think philosophically; literature, especially poetry, touches upon things that transcend human experience and the confines of our knowing, which do not fit within the parameters of a philosophical argument. Nonetheless, literature can serve a similar purpose as philosophy, and the two are fit for comparison, for "…though they are so different, philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities. They are cognitive activities, explanations."44 Literature can enrich readers, promoting wisdom, which is the object of philosophy as well. This enrichment is didactic and has ethical implications, for, "Storytelling, because of its narrative structure, is an aid to moral

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44 Ibid, 11.
epistemology and so moral development.” By telling a story, literature can show truth without being demonstrative, like philosophy. In so doing, it can make strong moral points, and “...a moral sensibility may emerge from a text even though no explicit invocations of moral rules or ideals, nor explicit final judgments of moral culpability are made by the narrator and that even more, the novel portrays a moral sensibility emerging in the telling of the story.” It can insert an idea, subliminally, into the reader's thoughts, so that the reader sees the conclusion of an argument without the argument ever being explicated, or without the reader even realizing there was an argument. Literature exposes what philosophy explains, what theology tells, what music glorifies, and what painting draws. It can illustrate the realization of intangible goods, inexplicable truths, and beautiful sublimity in stories of ordinary life or poems of typical human emotion. It does so in a form that is more accessible and pleasurable to the beholder; a Tolstoy novella is by and large more comprehensible and enjoyable than a syllogism, and so it affects a larger audience. It serves a specifically moral goal by promoting empathy, for, “Through telling and listening to stories, we learn to make subtle and not so subtle shifts in point of view, and these shifts are crucial to developing the sense of self and others so necessary to moral agency.” While already stated that the goodness of literature is not dependent on its reception, its reception illustrates its practical application and thus contributes to one nuance of literature’s ability to serve a greater good. This moral role of literature applies to poetry, as well as prose, though the latter is a more common form of storytelling; in the words of Martin Heidegger, “To be a poet in a destitute time means: to

46 Ibid., 122.
47 Ibid., 119.
attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.”

48 The unique value of good literature is that it reveals the element of divinity within the realm of aesthetic pleasure.

Another question at hand is whether a bad person can create good literature. A bad writer may be able, out of sheer luck, to write well, but can a person of morally reprehensible character produce a good work? Let us see by virtue of an analogy: suppose an American tourist in Paris asks a local for directions. The local, out of bitter resentment for the tourism industry and an avowed contempt for Americans, intentionally gives the tourist faulty directions. The tourist, following the faulty directions, ends up in the middle of nowhere, but is so awestruck by the natural beauty of this place that he is extremely grateful to have been sent in the seemingly wrong direction. The local, while having bad intentions, accidentally brought into effect something good. These types of things happen regularly; good comes of evil situations and designs. In literature, this can also be the case. The author can intend to communicate something false and evil, but inadvertently produce a beneficial effect on readers. That being the case, the bad author ought not receive credit for the good effect. In fact, the author ought to be judged according to his intentions, regardless of whether they were actualized.

At this point, one might object that this contradicts the earlier statement that authorial intention is instrumental in determining our interpretation of literature. One of the unique characteristics of literature, as with all art, is that it can assume significance unforeseen by the author, and towards which the author’s intentions might have been neutral. While an atheist might not write something that directly uncovers the existence of God, the atheist might very easily write a piece that exemplifies the strength of the human spirit, the beauty of creation, or the fortitude

48 Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, 92.
built by suffering injustice. Hypothetically, the atheist could compose a work with all of these themes, without immediately contradicting his disbelief in God, but the work as an independent unit could strengthen the faith of a reader, for by treating of these things it might indirectly reveal some aspect of God's existence. This would not contradict the author's intention, but it would assume a meaning unforeseen and unintended. While the intention of the author is instrumental in determining the correct interpretation of a work, the work of literature can assume a new significance independent from the author. Furthermore, this significance does not exist because some reader discovers it based on a purely subjective interpretation; rather, the significance is latent within the work itself and that to which it points, without regard to author or audience. For this reason, "No matter what the novelist depicts and whatever judgments the narrator makes, engaging in the practice of storytelling contributes to the development of the moral agency of both the teller and the reader or listener." Writing a work or telling a story can help the author perceive the very truth with which he deals, and so literature is able to mold both author and audience in light of the truth it uncovers.

Literature, therefore, has an objective meaning bookended by the subjective understandings of both author and audience. On one level, its meaning exists in the intention imposed by the author, as well as the interpretation imposed by the audience. However, the importance of both of these must be tempered by an understanding of the significance of the work as an independent entity and its meaning in an objective sense. We may use the intention of the author to influence our interpretation, but the implications of that interpretation may carry a meaning independent from the understanding of any person. That meaning, insofar as it is representative of the truth and

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goodness of reality, indicates how well the literature is serving its teleological purpose. Contrary to deconstruction's relativistic approach to meaning, a more traditional mode of thought allows us to root the meaning of literature in objective reality. As an art form, literature exists inseparable from either truth or beauty, for beauty occurs when the work depicts reality, and reality is necessarily true insofar as it exists and appeals to the intellect of the beholder. Good literature, as a result, is beautiful and true as it uncovers at least a portion of existence and, in so doing, didactically edifies its readers while filling them with wonder for the depths of each thing's essence and the glory of creation.
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