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Literary Appreciation in the Framework of Positivism

(Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 14/1 (2020), 76–93.

Some literary scholars assume that appreciation, if it is to take a central position in literary studies, must be defined as a complement to value-neutral understanding. It is often claimed that positivists are unable to do justice to literary value since their engagement with works of literature is restricted to historical inquiry. They can only do the preparatory work for the proper goal of literary interpretation, i.e. aesthetic appreciation. On this basis, a distinction is introduced between historical scholarship and criticism. The former is supposedly concerned with factual questions, while the latter is concerned with aesthetic qualities. I argue that this picture of literary studies is fundamentally misguided. My central thesis is that positivists, though committed to value-neutrality, can nonetheless recognise the qualities that make a work of literature effective or rewarding. Literary appreciation is a form of understanding that involves evaluative terms. But if these terms are duly relativised to the interests of the historical agents, they can be used to articulate empirically testable statements about the work in question.

In the first section, I set out some principles to define a positivist philosophy of the humanities. I use the term ‘positivism’ to designate an approach exemplified by Otto Neurath, who systematically opposes the reification of meanings and values in the humanities. While some scholars in the analytical tradition call into question positivism by invoking Wittgenstein, I will suggest that his later philosophy is for the most part compatible with Neurath’s mindset. The following sections attempt to spell out a positivist account of literary appreciation. I develop this account by examining the philosophy of criticism proposed by Stein Haugom Olsen and Peter Lamarque, the most prominent advocates of the idea that appreciation goes beyond mere understanding. In discussing their misappropriation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, it will become apparent that they tend to idealise literary practice and its rules. Their description of the institution of literature mixes factual questions with personal value judgements. Positivists, by contrast, seek to distinguish factual matters from subjective judgements and to limit the study of literature as far as possible to the former. They advise critics to approach works of literature in the spirit of scientific inquiry. This does not mean, however, that there is no place for emotional experience and evaluative behaviour in the framework of positivism. To account for these aspects of literary scholarship, a theory of historical empathy is needed that clarifies the function of evaluative expressions in the explanation of literature. I will argue that value terms are used not solely or primarily to articulate what makes the work under consideration pleasurable for the scholar who uses them; their principal function is to indicate what makes a work satisfying from the perspective of the writer or from the perspectives of the groups the author seeks to impress. Empathy is exhibited in the willingness to use evaluative language to make sense of the writer’s behaviour, regardless of whether one finds the work personally rewarding or not.
References


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