Casting Off: A Theoretical Introduction

There is no progress, no development, no history of art except a history of writers, institutions, and techniques.
—René Wellek

The Uncertain Shore: Chinese Literary History

Let me begin with a foundational story. In 960 the general Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (d. 976) deposed the young emperor of the Later Zhou—one of the small states that maintained local order after the collapse of the great but long-moribund Tang dynasty—and gradually reunited most of former Tang domain into the new Song dynasty.

Partly to prevent his own children from meeting the Later Zhou emperor’s fate, Zhao established a policy of “weakening the military and strengthening the civil bureaucracy.” In order to staff the bureaucracy that would run the far-flung new empire, however, he quickly had to recruit competent men committed to the success of the dynasty. This was a problem. The earlier Tang model had been to draw upon the sons of the aristocratic lineages of the medieval great clans, who understood that it was both their duty and in their interest to serve. Unfortunately, large-scale socioeconomic and demographic shifts had broken the great clans, so Zhao had to find a new source of personnel. The Tang had used a system of examinations to confirm the suitability of young men seeking access to official positions. The early Song emperors greatly expanded this examination system and, in casting their net widely, created a stratum of scholars-officials who primarily—if imperfectly—attained their positions through genuine merit.
In the early Song, the government availed itself of the new technology of wood-block printing to distribute broadly the canonical texts that were the basis of the examinations to schools throughout the empire. Participation in the exams expanded rapidly and remained open to families outside the circles of power. Literacy, learning, and culture flourished. With a stable and responsive government, the society prospered. As large cities developed, a monetarized economy expanded into the surrounding rural areas that provided the materials for the ever more vibrant urban centers.

However, the story does not end there: while the populace enjoyed decades of peace, problems grew both at home and abroad. The Song dynasty from its beginning committed itself to buying peace on the northern border in order to avoid the need for a large standing army, but this policy put a strain on fiscal resources. Debates within the government about how to raise the required funds grew increasingly fierce because the question of how to intervene in the economy forced the scholar-official stratum to confront basic questions about the nature of the state. Although policy throughout the Song had been guided by interpreting the Confucian classics and canonical histories, the literati discovered that these texts did not speak with a single voice, and that indeed they could be cited to support mutually contradictory positions. With faith in fundamental intellectual and moral unity collapsing, factions became increasingly strident and brutal. In the midst of this partisan strife, the northern Jurchen state of Jin discovered exactly how hollow Song dynasty strength had become, attacked, and in 1126 conquered the north of China. The reigning emperor as well as the heir apparent was captured and taken north. Those who fled south rallied around another son who was installed as the emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–62), first ruler of the Southern Song dynasty.

Is this history of the rise and fall of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) a specifically Chinese history? What does it mean to be a Chinese history? The central actors (emperors, generals, officials), the large-scale transformations that frame the story (urbanization, monetarization, and demographic shifts), the cultural components (canon-formation, literacy, the rise of print), and the arc of action (unification, prosperity, internal strife, and collapse) all are familiar
to Western readers, and yet they derive from traditional Chinese historiography. Certainly there are elements of the story that do not translate well. What it means to be a *di* 帝, an emperor, for example, draws on religious, cultural, and institutional systems that have no direct counterpart in the West. Approximation to broad categories inevitably brings loss, and one confronts the conundrum: to the extent that something may be uniquely Chinese, it by definition will be hermeneutically opaque to the contemporary Western reader. Yet how could a *uniquely* Chinese system of meaning arise? A long history with little contact with the West surely guarantees deep differences between the cultures, but is there fundamental incommensurability?

The question of radical otherness is of no small moment. Indeed the larger political events of our time have compelled scholars to see that the seemingly theoretical question of whether cultures are by nature closed and mutually incommunicable has ethical and political dimensions that require carefully considered and clear answers, even if nuanced by historical complexities. ¹ Scholars of literature and culture have come to acknowledge the value of some form of minimal humanistic universalism to navigate our intercultural

---

¹. The *fatwa* announced against Salman Rushdie as well as the writings that provoked it in particular seems to have challenged scholars. Was Rushdie wrong in the first place, and if the *fatwa* was wrong as a response, on what basis except some idea of universal human rights could one reject it as a deeply felt judgment by a culture not one’s own? One of the best recent discussions of theoretical issues in cross-cultural judgments that I have found is Satya P. Mohanty’s “Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics” (*New Literary History* 32 (2001): 803–33). He argues:

I propose that many of our deepest evaluative concepts, whether ethical ones or aesthetic, refer not only to the cultures and social contexts in which they were produced but also, as it were, “outward”: they refer both to genuine properties of human nature and to what we know about our social and political possibilities. (814)

Reflecting on the problem of all perspective necessarily being historically shaped, Mohanty concludes:

Since our deeper ethical and aesthetic concepts are necessarily theory-laden, ideological, and culturally inflected, the realist can argue that the best form of inquiry into the nature of value, aesthetic or ethical, will need to be comparative and cross-cultural. (828–29)
encounters: if one postulates that systems of meaning are not radically other, then, in the end, they must be accessible through adequate effort. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, argues,

[W]e are not only separated by cultural differences; we are also united by a common human identity, and it is this which renders possible communication, dialogue, and in the final analysis, the comprehension of Otherness—it is possible precisely because Otherness is never radical.²

Yet the minimal “human identity” that makes communication possible here is a formal, critical postulate—a challenge to our understanding—rather than a reassurance that we can continue as we are because we already know what it is to be “human.”³ Whatever will prove to be the appropriate level of abstraction through which to set out the correspondences between different cultural systems, we can expect that it will be at a level of description of significantly higher order than that available to us now. As Mario J. Valdés ruefully notes,

[W]e ought to have known that categories and concepts are intellectual abstractions used heuristically and cannot be drawn from one literature to describe the articulations of another. The case is made against falsification of non-western European literatures into imperfect imitations or colorful primitives.⁴

---


3. Indeed, as Mohanty makes very clear in “Can Our Values Be Objective,” we can be fairly sure that the concepts to be used in approaching other literary and aesthetic traditions will not be those we have at present:

[S]ince it is overwhelmingly likely that the dominant views about literary and aesthetic value in most American universities (to take one example) are for the most part informed by mainly the Western traditions, discussion of the objectivity of value will tend to be ethnocentric and ideological even with the best of intentions. One way out of this problem, if you take the realist view seriously, is to make every such course on aesthetic value into one where the primary emphasis is comparative and cross-cultural. (829)

The “Chinese” in “Chinese literary history” presents an urgent problem because it is not a hopeless task that therefore can be ignored. The two thousand years of Chinese literature stand as an open and accessible challenge to the adequacy of our understanding of literary history. Stephen Greenblatt, reflecting on the history of “literature,” argues:

[T]he proper history of literature must not only be cross-disciplinary—with poetic inventions taking their place in relation to all other forms of discourse—but also cross-cultural; there is nothing to be gained by staying within one’s own national boundaries because a culture’s fitness for a particular discursive practice can only be grasped by setting it against another’s.5

We cannot begin to claim to understand literary history without accounting for the Chinese tradition (among others), but to attempt to understand the history of Chinese literature requires a casting off, a shedding of certainties and reflex habits of interpretation. This negative gesture, however, is merely a preparatory ascesis. We also need to engage the particularities of the Chinese traditions. As Patrick Hogan with perhaps intentionally deadpan blandness suggests:

[T]he study of universals and the study of cultural and historical particularity are mutually necessary. Like laws of nature, cultural universals are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances (see Nguû 1993:26). Thus, to isolate and test universal patterns, we often require a good deal of cultural and historical knowledge.6

6. Patrick Colm Hogan, “Literary Universals,” Poetics Today 18, no. 2 (Summer 1997), p. 226. Herbert Grabes seconds the view that any hope of getting earlier systems of meaning right—within the very real limits of our historical otherness—will take a lot of work:

What follows from this regarding the construction of past meanings from the mere arrangements of signifiers in the documents that are left to us is that we will have to read a lot of these documents—at least as many from each of the various domains of discourse that the law of diminishing returns takes effect. Without this, it will be utterly impossible to make out the recurrent patterns of collocations, combinations and oppositions that alone allow us to make half-way probable guesses about the then dominant relations between signifiers that determine their meaning. There is no way around quantity if we want to arrive at a fairly reliable notion of what meanings, consensual assumptions
Hogan’s project for literary universals, however, leaves nothing unchanged: it is not enough simply to make room for Chinese conceptual terms in a form of broad-minded theoretical catholicity, because traditional Chinese theories of the literary are as shaped by their specific histories as are their Western counterparts. They, too, must be respected, reflected upon, understood through engagement with the texts, and then seen as particular instances of more universal patterns of aesthetic experience. This is a challenging, disorienting project.

and contentious issues, and contending, dominant or marginalized hierarchies of values were like at any given time—all the more so if we are to have access to the diversity of common culture and to counter the myth of its uniformity.


7. “Grand narratives,” and especially grand narratives of national literatures, are rightly viewed with caution. Gerald Gillespie, for example, warns not only that Western categories are inadequate in the face of non-Western traditions, but that—East or West—totalized “traditions” in general elide greater particularities of time and place:

Prior to more recent cultural convergences, great non-European literary worlds generated their own habits, preferences, and views that over many centuries conditioned the formation of distinct literary conglomerates with important effects lasting down to the present. Not only do our Western categories not match up with or apply to other major literary systems, but there are big gaps in every major grand tradition, so that we cannot properly evaluate works born in specific territories without studying their distinct values.


8. The dangers, at least at the procedural level, are well understood and formidable. Quentin Skinner, for example, underscores the problem of unarticulated expectations that can misdirect inquiry:

We must classify in order to understand, and we can only classify the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. The perpetual danger, in our attempts to enlarge our historical understanding, is thus that our expectations about what someone must be saying or doing will themselves determine that we understand the agent to be doing something which he would not—or even could not—himself have accepted as an account of what he was doing.
At Sea

As a literary scholar, I find the categories of political history that frame my brief account of the Northern Song dynasty to be more or less adequate because they direct attention to the problem of how to organize and legitimate coercive force (the army, the state’s policing power) used in the extraction and social distribution of resources, a basic aspect of human experience that is the domain of the political. Political history, that is, is not about its surface manifestation in the minute particulars of political life, but about the evolution of solutions to a specific domain of “permanent problems” in human organization.9 With the withering away of the state unlikely anytime

Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in History and Theory 8.1 (1969), p. 6. The very idea of literary or any other cultural universals also raises the threat of premature conclusions leading to ideologically motivated essentialization. Giles Gunn cites Mohanty in arguing that, even in the face of such danger, we have little choice but to proceed:

This leads Mohanty back in the direction of Kant in the belief that the only way that we can secure the lessons that aesthetics, among other disciplines, teaches us about cultural diversity is by grounding them in a limited kind of moral or humanistic universalism. Yet such a move is not without its difficulties. The problem is not that such a moral universal inevitably leads to an idealization of Enlightenment reason or freedom—to my mind, Mohanty successfully shows that it does not, and, in any case, belief in the dignity of reason and an autonomous human agent capable of a measure of free choice is not, as Amartya Sen has recently demonstrated with great eloquence, either an invention of French Enlightenment or a Western bias (Sen, 33–40)—but rather that it raises a specter of one of the more invidious forms of essentialism, one where the definition of humanity in all its inconceivable variety is reduced to a set of shared and sharable traits.

Gunn, “The Pragmatics of the Aesthetic,” in Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne, Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age (Oxford, 2002), p. 74. Despite the danger, Gunn, who is interested in the ethical role of the aesthetic, concludes:

It is also difficult to believe that any theory of aesthetics or ethics grounded on something very much less general, or, at any rate, less widespread than this kind of humanism can provide a sufficiently convincing explanation either for how aesthetics can render diversity educative or for how consciousness can thereby be altered. (75)

9. For more on “permanent problems,” see the discussion below.
soon, coercive force will always be part of the state, and the justifi-
cation and control of force are issues that every generation must con-
front and renegotiate. There are, on the whole, only a handful of
basic plot lines here. The power to control coercion can come from
birthright, for example, or from divine intervention, or from sheer
force, or through ownership of the resources to be extracted and
distributed, through a social contract, or through some other form of
evolved consensus. That is, social organization defines actors who
participate in the structuring of power, and the possibilities for the
organizing of coercive force change as new groups emerge. This is a
slow process, and even with new actors, key parts of the plot line
(resources and coercive force) cannot change simply because the
fundamental issues do not. It is something of a tautology to argue,
then, that political history, like all special histories, is about some-
thing that remains constant throughout historical change: change
becomes intelligible only if we have categories to compare former
and later states of affairs. That events are emplotted as part of a story
line within political history is, I think, simply a necessary aspect of
the process of generalization needed to make the intellectual project
work. The further fact that events are multivalent, parts of many
simultaneous emergent patterns, is not so much a problem as constit-
tutive of historical understanding. Maurice Mandelbaum writes:

[A] special historian is not dealing with materials which have no con-
nections with other aspects of societal life. Consequently, he will
often have to draw upon a wide variety of facts in order to account for
the changes which occurred in that strand of human activity whose
course he seeks to follow.11

The question is what events of a period and what plot lines best cap-
ture the “strand of human activity” that one seeks to trace. Political
history, from this perspective, has complementary internal and

10. What constitutes a resource to be controlled of course can change as
technologies develop. Similarly, coercive force can take less obvious forms as mech-
anisms for social control grow more sophisticated. However, the categories, in
contrast to their specific content, continue to define the domain of the political.
History of Philosophy,” History and Theory, vol. 5, suppl. 5: The Historiography of
the History of Philosophy (1965), p. 47.
external aspects that are concomitants of the polyvocal nature of events and of the embeddedness of fundamental political issues in larger social processes. On the one hand, the story of the internal transformation of political institutions creates a focus on the particular details of the structuring and legitimating coercive force that allow political history to be distinguished as a special history in the first place. On the other, treating political institutions in isolation from other modes of organization within the society inevitably conceals the deeper dynamics that drive political change.

The question is whether literary history, as a special history, is different. René Wellek, in “The Fall of Literary History,” suggests in a backhanded way that literary history does indeed follow the same logic as all the other special histories. He laments:

I discovered, by experience, that there is no evolution in the history of critical argument, that the history of criticism is rather a series of debates on recurrent topics, on “essentially contested concepts,” on permanent problems in the sense that they are with us even today. Possibly, a similar conclusion is required for the history of poetry itself. “Art,” said Schopenhauer, “has always reached its goals.” Croce and Ker are right. There is no progress, no development, no history of art except a history of writers, institutions, and techniques. This is, at least for me, the end of an illusion, the fall of literary history.\footnote{12

Does literary history refer to a specific domain of permanent problems in human experience that is analogous to the central issues that inform political, social, and intellectual history? For many scholars following in the wake of deconstruction and postmodern theory, the “literary” is an empty term of dubious value that does not refer to any quality inhering in texts and at best points instead to social practices. Pierre Bourdieu’s account of the field of cultural production in nineteenth-century France undeniably shows the power of an essentially sociological model in which specifically aesthetic issues have no place except to mark out positions in a social system of literary production. “High literature” as a form of cultural capital that circulates in a cultural economy most certainly is part of the story of

literature. Is it, however, a central story? The social history of literature essentially makes Bentham’s argument that from the perspective of social utility, poetry and pushpins have little to distinguish them: fancy language develops as a more highly valued form out of plain language just as fancy clothing evolves out of plain clothing. Both help mark social distinctions, and if the literary pleases the ear as fine clothing pleases the eye, so much the better, but neither is of much lasting importance. Such arguments have been made throughout the centuries in China as well as in the West, so they cannot simply be waved away. Nonetheless, I believe they are wrong: they do not adequately account for the empirical record of human experience. Yet the burden of proof quite reasonably falls on those who want to argue that a deeper logic shapes the surface transformations of literary forms and genres. The question, then, is whether “the literary” is a quality of the human engagement with the world that in turn participates in the larger processes of human experience. The literary can have a history only if it points to a domain of permanent human problems.

Let me suggest a deceptively simple formulation: the literary is the aesthetic organizing of language. However, now we have three opaque terms rather than one. Each of these terms—“aesthetic,” “organize,” and “language”—has been the subject of intense debate over the past half century. The aesthetic, for example, largely has been framed within Kant’s account of the beautiful as having “purposiveness without a purpose.”13 This quality entails disinterestedness and provides justification for describing the aesthetic dimension as “for itself.” These concepts in turn have been attacked and defended in a variety of reformulations throughout the last fifty years. The problem of organization is part of this debate because, as Kant further explains, “[T]here can be a purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will.”14 The doubled vision that Kant demands creates confusion and contention. Is a refusal to posit an organizing will—as a corollary to the disinterestedness of art—merely a form of delusion

or bad faith? If we are to think of art as organized by a will, whose will is it: the artist’s, the viewer’s, the art object’s, or something else? The problems surrounding language are separate from the aesthetic, although they inevitably intersect. The central problem in language is how to account for reference—that which anchors words to the world—and meaning, an exceedingly elusive term. The current debates have grown out of the structuralist shift in the early twentieth century when Ferdinand de Saussure explained both phonological and semantic features of words as deriving from a system of differences within the structures of which they are a part. This structuralist account provided an elegant solution to a host of difficulties with earlier approaches but then generated its own set of problems. First, the set of differences through which language structured meaning are neither neutral nor inevitable: instead, they give form to hierarchies of power within a society. Second, difference itself is a troublesome concept since comparison relies on underlying common features: the radically different are incommensurable and fall outside of any systemic structure. Thus all three terms—the aesthetic, organizing, and language—are deeply embedded in active debates, but I shall offer my own approach to each, not in the hope of ending those debates but of at least clarifying my position in order to set out what I believe to be a useful way of thinking about the literary and literary history.

“Organizing,” the middle term in defining the literary, is perhaps the easiest to deal with. After Roland Barthes’ privileging of a “writerly” over a “readerly” approach to reading, theorists have distinguished between writings (and oral compositions) as texts and as works. Mark Bevir usefully defines a “work”:

If we want to know about an intentional meaning or an abstraction based on intentional meanings, we will consider an utterance as a work, that is, a set of words written, or spoken, or understood in a particular way on a particular occasion.15

A text, in contrast, is not constrained by any shadows of intentionality since the intentions and historical contingencies behind the creation of the text now are absent from the sequence of signifiers.

that remains: readers are free to explore whatever patterns of connection they find interesting in the play of signifiers.

Literary experience is about works, texts encountered in a particular manner at a particular time. It is important, however, that Bevir’s formulation of work neatly encompasses the organizing efforts of both the author and the reader. Who it is (author or reader) who finds aesthetic coherence in a text is, I think, not particularly important; but it is useful provisionally to deem “literary” any text, for example, that an author believes to have aesthetic organization even when no one else does. Those texts that—from the available evidence—were composed with no glimmer of aesthetic intention but in which readers discover aesthetic order, as well as those in which author and audience have entirely different views about the nature of the aesthetic experience embodied in the text, also should be included. Since conditions change, some texts that at one time were esteemed for their aesthetic qualities are no longer compelling: they too are part of the long history of human literary experience. In sum, the “organizing” of the “aesthetic organizing of language” should be broadly conceived: as long as some linguistic utterance is a work that is (or has been) the object of aesthetic experience, it is part of literary history.

The obvious next question, then, is how a linguistic utterance can be the object of aesthetic experience. Unfortunately, language itself proves to be a problem: if we cannot develop a compelling account of meaning in language, then the aesthetic organization of language will be but a play of shadows. Yet the defense of meaning in language has not fared well in the last thirty years. The assaults on meaning have taken many forms and are perhaps well known. As noted, however, the story usually begins with Saussure’s argument that spoken or written words as signifiers gain their ability to signify at all by being in a system of such signifiers, all of which differ from one another and attain meaning through their differences as set out by the structure of mutual differentiation. Subsequently, poststructuralists took up various aspects of this account to point to deep problems in assumptions about meaning. First, for example, the system of differentiations that define the possibilities for meaning is neither random nor innocent. Instead, it reflects the distribution of power in a culture. Secondly, the signifiers—words—are easily grasped, but where are the signified meanings? Texts present words, not
meanings. Moreover, words have their place in the linguistic structure only through their repeatability, so how can words—signifiers unbound from objects in the world—actually present meanings that apply to particular and unique events and objects? They cannot. Meaning derived from reference to the world retreats and finally vanishes. In its place critics propose various forms of social construction, the idea that the system of mutual differentiations that determine meaning is a collective social enterprise that encompasses language, the self, and all the institutions of the culture. Social constructionism has been a pervasive model throughout the humanities as well as some of the social sciences. In examining the development of anthropology, Adam Kuper sees a confluence of poststructuralist paradigms and cultural determinist strains in the anthropological tradition itself. The result is a self-enclosed world of human meanings:

The assumption remains that people live in a world of symbols. Actors are driven and history is shaped by (perhaps unconscious) ideas. Mainstream American cultural anthropology, in short, is still in the grip of pervasive idealism.

Idealism has been in the ascendant more widely in recent decades, together with its handmaiden, relativism. Each culture was founded on unique premises. Generalization was impossible, comparison extremely problematic.16

Recently scholars have begun to be increasingly critical of social constructive perspectives precisely for the reason Kuper suggests: such formulations in fact are one more version of idealism, the view that our ideas are adequate to and reflect what is. For example, one critic complains that:

The consequence of prioritizing language inevitably entails a form of linguistic idealism in the interpretation of history—e.g. Edward Said’s claim...that texts are just as important as, say, military force for understanding the history of Empire. If you believe that, you will believe anything; I don’t think it would make much sense to the dispossessed peasants of colonial invasion and occupation.17

Over the last twenty years in particular, theorists increasingly have argued that although we can find no certainty in our contact with the world, we still must include the very problematics of our encounter in our accounts of experiences. Nicolae Babuts, for example, centers on the problem of reference and on the need to formulate an account to explain everyday lived experience:

In our times those who believe that language questions and reflects itself often have grave ontological doubts about its referential power and about the viability of a mimetic theory of art. Structuralists, post-structuralist semioticians, and deconstructive critics strengthened, or tried to strengthen, these doubts. And they concentrated their assault at two traditional ramparts they considered vulnerable: the text’s origins and its referential links to the world.

I argue that a contact with some aspect of the real is vital. The creative impulse originates in a mnemonic economy that, having reached critical mass, is ready to aim for a new degree of productivity. Sustained by previous readings—the link with tradition and language—and by the wealth of perceptions, words, associations, and feelings coming from everyday experience, this economy bears no resemblance to a void.

Babuts, like others who seek a formulation that restores the encounter with the world as part of the story of language and experience, proposes a “cognitive turn” in thinking about language. Cognitive scientists seek empirically to delineate the factors involved in how people process perceptions as parts of higher cognitive systems (like attention, memory, consciousness, etc.). Cognitive neuroscience turns its particular focus to the biological structures and processes that underlie what we think of as perception and cognition. Language in this context is just one more aspect of how the brain sorts out, encodes, processes, stores, and recalls what is significant in experience. The relations of language to the world of environmental inputs are a given, even if those relations are highly mediated. Babuts finds that cognitive models have grown in sophistication both in terms of the models themselves and in terms of the limits to the claims that are made about the models. He argues—with no small irony for humanists—that cognitive science is more flexible than literary theory:

In the cognitive light, formalist theories, though not necessarily wrong, are incomplete because of the crippling limitations they impose on language and individual interpretations.
Babuts moreover stresses that the “cognitive turn” does not require the naively realist assumption that the perceived world is the world “as it is”:

In the cognitive perspective the “referent” undergoes a radical fission, becoming things-in-themselves (in their material aloofness) and things in their perceptually coded identity. Imagine that the “referent” has two faces, like a coin. On the reverse, things remain forever alien to the mind that cannot open itself to absorb the world; on the obverse, things assume a tractable symbolic form and allow memory to grasp them. The events of what we call the past were inaugurated not in their material identity but in their symbolic (coded) form.18

The cognitive model, then, preserves much of what theorists in the humanities have stressed about the constructedness of linguistic signifiers and acknowledges the epistemological constraints in the human condition, but it recasts both bounding conditions through its concern to glean what can be learned about the systematic features of phenomenal experience. Much can be learned and has been learned. As a result, the empirical research of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists has produced ways of approaching language that increasingly have informed thinking about how it works in everyday human experience, and scholars in the humanities have begun to appreciate the power of paradigms that, in their subtlety, offer biologically based but not mechanistic approaches to meaning.19 Neat poststructuralist and Lacanian notions have given way to a sense


19. The past decade, for example, has witnessed the growth of the field of “cognitive cultural studies” that synthesizes the critical contextualizing analyses of cultural studies with approaches taken from cognitive science. It focuses in particular on mainstream topics like “theory of mind” and on Lakoff and Johnson’s writings about the embodied origins of metaphorical language. For an overview, see Lisa Zunshine, ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Also see the often ambivalent essays in the special issue *The Literary Mind* of REAL: *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 24 (2008), edited by Jürgen Schlaeger and Gesa Stedman. This volume also draws almost exclusively on cognitivist rather than connectionist neuroscientific models for meaning in language.
that much processing of meaning occurs below the surface, beyond access by self-reflection, and that the closed self-referentiality of much literary theory is simply not the fact of the matter: language as a biological process in the brain just does not behave that way.

Horst Ruthrof, building on the growing awareness of cognitive models, makes a compelling case for rethinking meaning in language. His work demonstrates the usefulness of contemporary neuroscience in resolving long-standing problems in literary theory. Ruthrof strongly argues for “corporeal semantics,” i.e., that meaning in language is not to be found at the level of the signifier but in the brain’s mappings of corporeal experience that stand at the end of the signifying chain articulated through language:

What I am saying is that language as a set of linguistic expressions does not mean at all. There is no meaning in language, no meaning in the dictionary. Language in this sense is as arbitrary as any set of symbolic signs.20

This is a simple, elegant, and radical recasting of contemporary literary theory. For Ruthrof, the usual arguments about the emptiness of the mirror world of signifiers are true, but theorists in the humanities prematurely come to rest in the purity of self-enclosed meaninglessness. Theorists in the humanities have kept the empirical sciences at bay and preserved the integrity of their own discipline. They have retained the centrality and self-transparency of consciousness, which situating language within larger processes of meaning fundamentally threatens. Ruthrof argues that it is time to move on.

We need a very different story. If language is empty, it is so in an altogether different sense. Language is empty, it remains without meaning, if it is not associated with its Other, the nonverbal. If we had not learned from earliest childhood, perhaps to some extent even prenatally, how to associate linguistic sounds with nonverbal materials, we would have no meaning. The question is in what form this Other of language functions in the process of the activation of empty linguistic schemata.21

From Ruthrof’s perspective, corporeality is at the same time like a Kantian transcendental condition for experience—in that we cannot know the reality of either the world or body through which we encounter the world—and a heuristic schema that provides a rich source for empirical investigation:

Coherence phobia and the elimination of the signified are the result of our forgetting the somatic ground of language, an amnesia that prevents us from addressing the relationship language has with our culturally overdetermined perceptual and emotional semiotic systems. In this sense, in natural language use, we are dealing with neither formal, nor positivist, nor merely neurobiological signifiers, but with existential signifiers and their synaesthetic signifieds. The fact that we live in a body cannot be eliminated by syntactic substitutional chains. We can play chess, even with English, but this particular language game is fundamentally different from using a natural language, for it lacks the epistemic foundation of human cognition: our all-pervasive corporeality. […] Instead of subjecting Heidegger’s ontological conviction that “Being speaks through language; everywhere and always” to the critique of difference, as does Derrida, we could say more modestly “the way we touch the world speaks through every language; everywhere and always.” Neither metaphysics, nor its “overcoming,” but our corporeality remains the hidden ground of interpretation.  

The mediation of corporeality offers a powerful approach to language. It restores the problem of reference, both as proximate reference (i.e., referents presented through the systems of human perceptual, cognitive, and affective mappings) and as the unreachable but postulated objects in the world. Stressing corporeal semantics does not solve the problem of reference, and indeed it proclaims that at the ontological or noumenal level we cannot know the world or justify our use of language. At the same time, however, it allows

23. People who prefer a modular approach to language in the brain can quibble that the brain’s particular strategies for processing language contribute their own formal constraints that mediate the activation of the perceptual and cognitive maps comprising the nonverbal substratum of meaning. The brain’s structures for language processing, however, present just one more layer in the empirical articulation of the manner in which corporeality shapes meaning: they complicate but do not change the basic story at either the empirical or the transcendental level.
scholars in the humanities to integrate their own approaches with empirical research in neurobiology and cognitive science. Although the details are beyond the scope of this book, I believe that contemporary connectionist models in particular will prove congenial to humanists. We can learn the ways in which the brain encodes experience, structures memory, creates the self, and presents these for conscious and linguistic access; as we learn more, these findings surely will have a powerful impact on how we understand literary experience.

The twofold nature (empirical and transcendental) of embodied language also allows us to see the ambivalence of meaning as no longer the self-enclosed property of language but as a direct result of language’s larger systemic relationships. Meaning in language is outside the linguistic domain: this pointing elsewhere, as an aspect of phenomenal experience, is a promise of meaning that is subject to exploration and participates in creating empirical knowledge of the phenomenal realm. In pointing to a world outside the possibility of human contact, however, it marks the limit to phenomenal experience as such. The problem, then, is in two complementary parts: first, how do we reconcile the emptiness of linguistic signifiers as such with the lived experience of linguistic meaning? Second, how do we continue to affirm the adequacy of language and of linguistically presented meaning in the face of their constant failure to correspond to their putative reference in the world? To see the implications of these ever-recurring rifts, we need to turn at last to the third component of literary experience, to the aesthetic.

The Art of Judgment: Plotting a Course through the Phenomenal

Aesthetic experience has been a suspect category in much modern theory. However, it has in recent scholarship encountered renewed interest, particularly in the Kantian form that escapes a narrow concern for the beautiful. Kant’s account—which is central to my own approach—focuses on the general problem of how we discern categories of meaning within the particularity of experience. Because his account of the aesthetic differs from stereotypical versions and
requires a significant shift in thinking, I present Kant’s arguments in some detail.24

Kant’s most important discussion of the aesthetic is in the *Critique of Judgment*, the last of the three major treatises that set out his critical (or transcendental) philosophy.25 The *Critique of Judgment* returns to unresolved issues in the first two works, the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant confronts in particular the problem that the *a priori* principles he discovers to ground the possibility of cognition in general address the formal constraints on all possible experience but do not deal with how we make sense of experience in its particularity. He notes:

For it is quite conceivable that, regardless of all the uniformity of natural things in terms of universal laws, without which the form of an empirical cognition in general would not occur at all, the specific differences in the empirical laws of nature, along with their effects, might still be so great that it would be impossible for our understanding to discover in nature an order it could grasp—i.e., impossible to divide nature’s products into genera and species, so as to use the principles by which we explain and understand one product in order to explain and grasp another as well, thereby making coherent experience out of material that is so full of confusion.26

Kant defines the act of seeing a particular object or event as grounded in a more universal concept—the act that is central to our making sense of the world—as a judgment. He identifies two major types of judgments:

24. For an excellent recent study that explores what I believe are Kant’s central concerns in the *Critique of Judgment* from a perspective at the intersection of comparative literature and philosophy, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Gasché presents Kant’s arguments and examines their implications at a level of detail I cannot hope to match here. From within the tradition of analytic philosophy, Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) offers an excellent discussion of the *Critique of Judgment* that focuses extensively on the same epistemological issues surrounding judgment that Gasché and I stress.

25. As Kant (*Critique of Judgment*, p. 20) explains, “A transcendental principle is one by which we think the universal *a priori* condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition in general.”

26. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 25. This passage comes from the second, published Introduction, but the first is worth consulting as well. For the analogous argument in the First Introduction, see p. 392.
Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is determinative (even though [in its role] as transcendental judgment it states a priori conditions that must be met for subsumption under that universal to be possible). But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely reflective.27

Aesthetic judgments are a particular type of reflective judgment:

When pleasure is connected with mere apprehension (apprehensio) of the form of an object of intuition, and we do not refer the apprehension to a concept so as to give rise to a determinate cognition, then we refer the presentation not to the object but solely to the subject; and the pleasure cannot express anything other than the object’s being commensurate with the cognitive powers that are, and insofar as they are, brought into play when we judge reflectively, and hence [expresses] merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object. For this apprehension of forms by the imagination could never occur if reflective judgment did not compare them, even if unintentionally, at least with its ability [in general] to refer intuitions to concepts. Now if in this comparison, a given representation unintentionally brings the imagination (the power of a priori intuitions) into harmony with understanding (the power of concepts), and this harmony arouses a feeling of pleasure, then the object must thereupon be regarded as purposeful for the reflective power of judgment. A judgment of this sort is an aesthetic judgment about the object’s purposiveness; it is not based on any concept we have of the object, nor does it provide such a concept.28

Aesthetic judgment is a difficult concept. It is an intuition of order about a particular object, yet it does not give us information about that object. Instead, it allows us to reflect that the disparate elements we perceive as forming the thing are the sorts of elements that, given human sensibilities, we judge to comprise a unified entity, even if we do not derive any conclusions about what that object is. Although such judgments are part of our daily experience, it is crucial to

27. Kant, Critique of Judgment, pp. 18–19.
28. Kant, Critique of Judgment, pp. 29–30. Kant’s use of the term “aesthetic” here derives from the Greek term aisthesis, which refers to sense perception as a category, rather than to a particular concern for the beautiful. See, for example, Grabes, “Ethics, Aesthetics, and Alterity,” p. 14.
understand that they are a peculiar way to approach the world and are not logically necessary. A counterexample may help: in Buddhist thought, all objects come into being and disperse again through participation in a vast cycle of cause and effect. Objects—including humans—have no essential being. If one examines the constituent atoms that make up a horse or an apple, for example, there simply is no fundamental horseness or appleness in the nitrogen, oxygen, carbon, and so on that gather to take on these forms. Thus Buddhist meditative practice encourages viewing the flow of perceptions as empty of actual objects worthy of individuated attention. A world without aesthetic judgments would appear much like this Buddhist ideal of an unshaped flow of sensory impressions.

A few other terms need clarification. “Purposiveness” is especially foreign. It refers (more or less) to there being a reason why an object exists (its purpose) and to the way in which its appearance accords with the existence of that purpose. Hence a judgment of purposiveness without knowledge of the purpose would be a judgment that the appearance of the object surely matches whatever might be the reason for the object’s existence. Kant concludes that the fundamental assumption required to ground judgments of the coherence of any particular object is a belief in principle that we can make sense of the totality of all that appears before us:

Now insofar as the concept of an object also contains the basis for the object’s actuality, the concept is called the thing’s purpose, and the thing’s harmony with that character of things which is possible through purposes is called the purposiveness of its form. Accordingly, judgment’s principle concerning the form that things in nature have in terms of empirical laws in general is the purposiveness of nature in its diversity. In other words, through this concept we present nature as if an understanding contained the basis of the unity of what is diverse in nature’s empirical laws.29

Kant stresses that the purposiveness of nature (the conformity of its appearance with the idea of there being a reason for its existence) is a transcendental principle—a principle required to ground the possibility of judgments in general—that does not actually guarantee or assume anything about what “nature” really is:

29. Kant, Critique of Judgment, p. 20.
Now this transcendental concept of the purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor a concept of freedom, since it attributes nothing whatsoever to the object (nature), but [through] this transcendental concept [we] only think of the one and only way in which we must proceed when reflecting on objects of nature with the aim of having thoroughly coherent experience.\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, p. 23. The paragraph concludes with an observation relevant to the above comments on the circumscribed claims possible for biology as an empirical science: “This is also why we rejoice (actually we are relieved of a need) when, just as if it were a lucky chance favoring our aim, we do find such systematic unity among merely empirical laws, even though we necessarily had to assume that there is such a unity even though we had no insight into this unity and cannot prove it” (pp. 23–24).}

Kant further stresses the centrality of aesthetic judgments in particular. As judgments that these particular data of experience are held together—at least for the human manner of approaching the world—by a higher order concept despite the absence of such a concept, aesthetic judgments are at the very root of our capacity to make sense of the empirical realm:

In a critique of judgment, the part that deals with aesthetic judgment belongs to it essentially. For this power alone contains a principle that judgment lays completely a priori at the basis of its reflection on nature: the principle of a formal purposiveness of nature, in terms of its particular (empirical laws), for our cognitive power, without which principle the understanding could not find its way about in nature.\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, pp. 33–34.}

Although Kant presents the formal purposiveness of nature in its totality as a transcendental principle, it surely would not be viable if empirical research designed to articulate the concepts whose existence in principle is affirmed in aesthetic judgments constantly led nowhere, if nature as we experienced it proved itself random. Why our experience of nature is not random is not clear, and whether nature “in itself” is random is unknowable, but the aesthetic always puts our ability to encounter the world to the test. It is an always-open door, even if we never quite see through to the other side.
If the aesthetic for Kant relies on the principle of the formal purposiveness of nature, where does the human fit in? How can there even be meaningful aesthetic judgments about art, which as a human artifact is outside the domain of the natural? That is, how can the human partake of the transcendental principle that grounds aesthetic judgments in nature? Kant’s elegant answer begins with the proposition that we treat art as if it were the product of nature:

In [dealing with] a product of fine art we must become conscious that it is art rather than nature, and yet the purposiveness of its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature. It is this feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers, a play that yet must also be purposive, which underlies that pleasure which alone is universally communicable although not based on concepts. Nature, we say, is beautiful [schön] if it looks like art; and art can be called fine [schön] only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.32

In order to explain this doubled status of fine art—its appearance as both artifact and natural—Kant invokes the concept of genius, which he defines as “the innate mental predisposition (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art.”33 However, since aesthetic judgments provide no determinate categories and because the actual character of nature remains unknown, the operations of genius as well as the rules that it provides partake of the same radical epistemological constraints. Still, works of genius, like aesthetic judgments of objects in nature, must be open to productive empirical examination after the fact:

(1) Genius is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other; hence the foremost property of genius must be originality. (2) Since nonsense too can be original, the products of genius must also be models, i.e., they must be exemplary; hence, though they themselves do not arise through imitation, still they must serve others for this, i.e., as a standard or rule by which to judge. (3) Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is

33. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 174. (Emphasis in the original.)
rather as *nature* that it gives the rule. . . .

Genius, then, is an extraordinary if inscrutable talent by which the human can come to partake of the coherent particularity that we grant to objects in nature, and the objects produced by genius follow the same deep rules that underlie coherence in nature.

**Crosscurrents: Kant Made Modern, or Dialectical Aesthetics**

Kant’s use of “nature” perhaps has a slightly quaint Enlightenment ring to it, but his approach to art has proven highly adaptable to theorizing in more anxious and distrustful times. Theodor Adorno in particular built upon the dialectical implications of Kant’s model for aesthetic judgment as a whole and especially upon the doubled vision in Kant’s observation, for example, that “art can be called fine only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.” Adorno approached artworks as irresolvably dialectical: the work’s appearance of a self-sufficient unity outside the claims of historical necessity (even in its negative mode of a coherent presentation of unity refused) was only semblance, but that semblance pointed to real human possibilities that were not yet (and could not be) realized in the work but must be honored in their real utopian denial of the claims of present categories of understanding and being:

Semblance, which heralds the ineffable, does not literally make artworks epiphanies, however difficult it may be for genuine aesthetic experience not to trust that the absolute is present in authentic

34. The omitted text reads: “That is why if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power [Gewalt] to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, and to communicate [his procedure] to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products. (Indeed, that is presumably why the word genius is derived from [Latin] genius, [which means] the guardian and guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth, and to whose inspiration [Eingebung] those original ideas are due.)” The similarity here to the standard Chinese example of Wheelwright Bian is obvious.

artworks. It inheres in the grandeur of art to awaken this trust. That whereby art becomes the unfolding of truth is at the same time its cardinal sin, from which it cannot absolve itself. Art drags this sin along with it because it acts as if absolution had been bestowed on it.

The Kantian categories linger in the background. “Semblance” preserves Kant’s insistence that aesthetic judgments do not give us objective knowledge. The “ineffable” speaks to the formal purposiveness of nature that is without conceptual content. The same dialectic of the materially formed (with all the determinate categories it drags in tow) conjoined with the appearance of a unity that is simply other than the empirically given and seemingly binding categories reappears throughout Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. Neither aspect of the artwork can be free of the other:

Through the completion of the work, by setting unformed nature at a distance, the natural element returns as what has yet to be formed, as the nonarticulated. When artworks are viewed under the closest scrutiny, the most objectivated paintings metamorphose into a swarming mass and texts splinter into words. As soon as one imagines having a firm grasp on the details of an artwork, it dissolves into the indeterminate and undifferentiated, so mediated is it. This is the manifestation of aesthetic semblance in the structure of artworks. Under micrological study, the particular—the artwork’s vital element—is volatilized; its concretion vanishes. The process, which in each work takes objective shape, is opposed to its fixation as something to point to, and dissolves back from whence it came. Artworks themselves destroy the claim to objectivation that they raise. This is a measure of the profundity with which illusion suffuses artworks, even the non-representational ones.

Art, for Adorno, offered a complex resistance to the conceptual order of the culture, but not just as the self-sufficiency of intuited form. As with Kant, intuition of the nonconceptual order that hovers over artworks was but one moment in experience: the intuited order remained susceptible to after-the-fact empirical examination from which substantive knowledge could arise.

Whereas the norm of intuitability accentuates the opposition of art to discursive thinking, it suppresses nonconceptual mediation, suppresses the nonsensuous in the sensuous structure, which by constituting the structure already fractures it and puts it beyond the intuitability in which it appears. The norm of intuitability, which denies what is implicitly categorial in artworks, reifies intuitability
itself as opaque and impenetrable, makes it in terms of its pure form into a copy of the petrified world, always alert for anything that might disturb the harmony the work purportedly reflects. In actuality, the concretion of artworks, in the apparition that ripples disconcertingly through them, goes far beyond the intuitability that is habitually held up against the universality of the concept and that stands in accord with the ever-same.

In a similar manner Adorno objected to the Romantic appropriation of the idea of genius in which art was gutted both of its doubled character (Kant’s “art can be called fine only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature”) and of its nomothetic moment (i.e., Kant’s “nature, through genius, prescribes the rule not to science but to art”):

Genius is purported to be the individual whose spontaneity coincides with the action of the absolute spirit. This is correct insofar as the individuation of artworks, mediated by spontaneity, is that in them by which they are objectivated. Yet the concept of genius is false because works are not creations and humans are not creators. This defines the untruth of any genius aesthetics that suppresses the element of finite making, the τεχνη in artworks, in favor of their absolute originality, virtually their natura naturans; it thus spawns the ideology of the organic and unconscious artwork, which flows into the murky current of irrationalism.

For Adorno, the work-like character presented a material particularity that was in dialectical tension with its appearance of nonconceptual, self-sufficient unity. This materiality returned art to history, but history inhered not only in the techniques through which the work was created but also in the play of categories through which the artwork attained its appearance of unity and its status as art:

The artwork is a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the other, it is the relation itself that is a process of becoming. Whatever may in the artwork be called totality is not a structure that integrates the sum of its parts. Even objectified the work remains a developing process by virtue of the propensities active in it. Conversely, the parts are not something given, as which analysis almost inevitably mistakes them: Rather, they are centers of energy that strain toward the whole on the basis of a necessity that they equally perform. The vortex of this dialectic ultimately consumes the concept of meaning, When according to
history’s verdict the unity of process and result no longer succeeds; when, above all, the individual elements refuse to mold themselves to the ever latently preconceived totality, the gaping divergence tears meaning apart. If the artwork is nothing fixed and definitive in itself, but something in motion, then its immanent temporality is communicated to its part and whole in such a fashion that their relation develops in time and that they are capable of canceling this relation. If artworks are alive in history by virtue of their own processual character, they are also able to perish in it.36

Aesthetic experience became historical, then, through the myriad contingencies—both in thinking and seeing—that informed the artists’ and audiences’ intuitions about nonconceptual coherence. With this thought, we at last can return to the sorts of permanent problems in human experience that might ground literary history.

*Tracing the Domain of Literary History*

Words spoken or written may start out as signs, but they arrive as signifiers. They are marks, not things, even though in their physical presence they ineluctably are things as well. We believe—indeed experience teaches us—that they tell us about the world. Yet, as Horst Ruthrof stresses through the example of Helen Keller’s awakening to language, this ability to mean remains remarkable.37 Connecting language to the world requires a leap of the imagination, an intuition of coherence outside of what is given in the medium itself, an aesthetic intuition that is part of our human makeup.

Exploring the manner in which the marks that are the substrate of language come to mean and—equally importantly—negotiating the role of this coming-into-meaning are the domain of the literary in human social experience. In shaping meaning, literary experience (whether spoken or written) has a two fold problem. First it must demonstrate that words can indeed extend the reach of human

---


37. Ruthrof, *The Body in Language*. Ruthrof reflects on Helen Keller’s account throughout the book, but pages 63–64 discuss perhaps the most famous incident of “water” and the pump.
meaning. Second, however, it must confront the complexities of aesthetic experience as such: it must deal with the way aesthetic judgments destabilize given meanings through their specifically non conceptual nature, and it must deal with the pressure for aesthetically given meaning to stand outside of—indeed independent of—other structures of meaning. The literary, as a form of aesthetic experience, draws on implicit commitments to a transcendental order (the framing structure for Adorno’s “ever latently preconceived totality”): it has no choice but, by its very nature, reaches beyond itself to the intellectual order of its moment. In this engagement, the literary is deeply time-bound and functions against a backdrop of structures of order that shift. Every aesthetically organized text drags with it a system of beliefs that makes its intuitions of categories compelling. It is possible for a poem written in one system to live powerfully within another, but the nature of the aesthetic experience—the work of intuiting coherence—alters with the shifting background.

The literary lives in tension with intellectual culture. The literary denies the epistemological certainty of the order that it aesthetically affirms. An intellectual order that leaves no room for the simultaneous denial and affirmation of the aesthetic cuts itself off from the roots of epistemological growth and must wither or change. Yet the intellectual order—if it does not spiral into obscurantism—must seek its authority outside of the merely aesthetic, even as it accommodates the aesthetic within its own explanatory structures. The literary, therefore, is where the relationships between modes of meaning are negotiated and conventionalized. Literary history is in part an internal history of strategies to formalize aesthetic experience in language, a history of tropes and genres. It also is another form of internal history: a history of those who produced and those who received texts deemed to be literary and of the manner in which those texts circulated in the society. Yet in any culture what gives life to the literary as such, and what drives literary history, is the constant reshaping of the relationship between literary and other forms of textual practice that determines the role of aesthetic experience in its dialectic with the culture’s ever-changing symbolic ordering of power and authority.