

## A RESPONSE TO CHARLES ALTIERI

BY ROBERT B. PIPPIN

I AM VERY GRATEFUL to Charles Altieri for his attentive reading of and thoughtful critique of *Philosophy by Other Means: The Arts in Philosophy and Philosophy in the Arts*.<sup>1</sup> Let me proceed immediately to his main and quite important criticism of the approach defended there. It is this: “My one huge problem with Pippin’s perspective is that I cannot accept his insistence that the distinctive form of thinking elicited by works of art is best treated as a mode of knowledge.” And he offers a contrasting perspective: “Instead I propose that art should matter to society primarily as the achievement of constructed, specific, individual experiences that embody resonance and authority. Then we can claim that their capacities to engage audiences in particular imaginative situations dramatically stage responses to the historical conditions on which Pippin dwells.” This is a densely stated alternative, and I am not sure I fully understand it or why stating it this way thereby shows why art “should matter to society” (art may do this, but why is that important?), but I have much to say by way of clarification before getting to the alternative.

First, I meant the title to be as dialectical and so as paradoxical as it sounds. If the means are “other,” then we have left philosophy altogether; if the other means are still philosophical, then they can’t count as “other.” By dialectical I mean simply the avoidance of such dualisms, while not collapsing distinctions through some sort of resolute reductionism. The idea is to avoid two terrible examples of philosophical approaches to the arts that putatively avoid such dualisms: either provocative or illustrative. The former sees literature especially as embodying issues like moral dilemmas that can be understood to pose, to provoke, philosophical

questions that traditional philosophy should then take up and discuss on its own. (Examples are the way Samuel Beckett's plays, or Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, are sometimes taught.) The latter, the illustrative, sees literature, again paradigmatically, as providing something like the flesh and blood of abstract philosophical issues, instantiating and illustrating a particular philosophical approach, like moral sentimentalism. (Charles Dickens is often cited.)

These are surely examples of what Altieri cites as, and quite rightly rejects, as "appropriating those [aesthetic] experiences for philosophical explanation." I want to reject such "appropriationism" too. In my first chapter, on philosophical criticism of the arts, the idea I defended was that attention to the philosophical value of literature (I will stay with this art form for a while) is attention to literature as a form of reflective thinking itself, in no need of appropriation by philosophy—even though, I claim, there can be a form of philosophical criticism. The point of such criticism is to illuminate that dimension of the work itself, something philosophically significant that the work can do but traditional philosophy cannot.

This is couched within several qualifications. Such attentiveness can be valuable, but not for just *any* work of great literature. Some literature is great without being concerned with any aesthetic modality of "thinking." One can surely admire Samuel Richardson or Anthony Trollope or William Makepeace Thackeray and admit that their value stems from other qualities in the prose, plotting, and psychologically astute portrayal of characters. And for many other reasons, any of the arts can be said to be valuable even if a case can also be made for their bearing on philosophy.

And finally, the concept of "philosophical knowledge" is quite complicated. Surely some philosophers, like G. W. F. Hegel, believe in such a thing, but I don't. As Altieri rightly points out, no Absolute exists. What interests me is the relevance of Hegel's claim that a sensible and affective modality of collective self-knowledge can be embodied in many great works. But the collective self-knowledge embodied in fiction is not like discursive or analytic or even speculative knowledge. I see no strict distinction between the object of interrogation and the interrogation itself. That is, the "self" in question (e.g., who have we become?) is what it is by virtue of its own self-interpretation. Self-knowledge in that sense is self-constituting.

Put another way that is relevant to this discussion, self-knowledge is interpretive and thereby self-constituting, not discursive; and while

better or worse interpretations can apply, no independent “fact of the matter” settles the question of interpretive credibility. This means that the bearing of literature on philosophy should not be seen as a contribution to philosophy as traditionally understood, as the discursive analysis or synthetic amplification of concepts, but as bearing on the hermeneutical task of philosophy in contexts like self-knowledge. Hegel pioneered such efforts in his account of Sophocles, Denis Diderot, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the hermeneutical approach shows up in Friedrich Nietzsche’s account of Greek tragic poetry and Martin Heidegger’s reflections on Friedrich Hölderlin and Rainer Maria Rilke, but it remains an underappreciated element of philosophy.

Making the case for the bearing of literature on philosophy also requires a reconceptualizing of philosophy itself. That would be the way to address the paradoxical dimension of “philosophy” by other means. Philosophy so conceived would not be recognized as philosophy by Aristotle or René Descartes or Baruch Spinoza or Immanuel Kant or Bertrand Russell or Wilfrid Sellars. So, when Altieri notes approvingly, “Hegel’s care to stage how significant art has very different ways of being in the world from the things ordinary philosophy can deal with discursively,” I completely agree and would emphasize “ordinary” and “discursively.” The same with Hegel on “articulating conditions of particular concrete sensuous experience that often call for participation and contemplation rather than efforts to characterize the work’s contributions to wisdom.” I agree again and would emphasize various dimensions of the complex notion of “contemplation” as a modality of interpretive insight, disclosive rather than propositional. So, I don’t recognize myself in any charge that I am attending to the arts for the purpose of seeking “any kind of abstract effort at explanation.” The whole idea is to avoid abstraction by looking for another kind of generality, and the issue of any sort of “explanation” is not part of the hermeneutic task.

A brief note on abstraction: since Plato, there have been two models for achieving a level of generality in thought. One is the progressive subtraction of particularity in a search for commonality. The other is to look for as-close-to-perfect-as-possible individual representatives of some virtue or vice or skill or trait. Trying to find some notion of “human nature” that we all could be said to share would be an example of the former. Pointing to Michael Jordan and claiming, “Now *that* is a basketball player!” and thereby what all basketball players imperfectly embody, is something like the latter, and resonates in views like Max Weber’s on

ideal types or Ludwig Wittgenstein's on perspicuous representations. I hoped I had been clear that philosophical criticism is looking for the latter type of generality, not a hunt for "abstract" explanations.

Altieri begins to introduce his alternative, one in which art produces "concrete experiences often intensely opposed to interpretive generalizations of all sorts" by discussing Hegel's denial of the complete autonomy of artworks. Here Altieri wants to introduce a different "constructivist ideal of autonomy . . . central to modernist art and writing. It is based on the concrete power of the work to have an objectivity produced by how it offers experience as a composed process." I don't understand the appeal to "objectivity" in this counterideal, or why it is produced by the experience (presumably captured by the work and which the reader is invited to share) as a "composed process." Everything in any artwork is the result of a composed process. And does he mean merely that a modernist work, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, say, simply has an objective mode of being in the world; that is, it really exists? He appears to mean much more, as at the end of the paragraph when he returns to the notion of experience, he mentions "how impersonal or transpersonal experience can take on reality." But then how is this an instance of "concrete experiences often intensely opposed to interpretive generalizations of all sorts"? Presumably a critic's ability to make the case that the experience is impersonal or transpersonal (not merely the expression of a particular subjectivity) amounts to a kind of interpretive generality, of the paradigmatic sort mentioned above.

So, I fully agree that philosophical criticism should resist subsumption into "explanatory concepts," and don't think I am finessing the question of what criticism would look like in its resistance to such subsumption. For example, Altieri appears to agree with my claim that Maisie in Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* exhibits a struggle for self-knowledge that implicitly rejects introspectionist and even individualist models, and I assume he would therefore agree that this represents something philosophically significant. The work does not do this after the fashion of Thomas Mann novels, where characters discuss and debate philosophical positions. It shows us what self-knowledge looks like, what barriers to it exist, and what its absence looks like; criticism's task is to show us how it does this and why the presentation is so credible. Altieri's objection here is not really an objection to that but an amplification: that Maisie is nevertheless tragically doomed "to a life where her multiple virtues are not likely to be realized."

I fully agree, but I see no demonstration in his summaries of this chapter (or any of the other chapters) of any of the subsumption worries he raises. I think I too am showing (more in my book on Henry James than in this one chapter<sup>2</sup>) that “each novel calls upon the reader’s strength to contemplate [that word again] without self-delusion what requires a blend of compassion and *cold understanding* not available in any conceptual structure” (emphasis added). Now concepts are obviously involved in any critical articulation of anything, certainly in any form of “cold understanding” that we in turn want to understand. A prediscursive moment of illumination or disclosure may well occur in the experience of an artwork that a critic can then articulate, inevitably employing concepts that look to account for the general significance of the illumination, but the insight is what drives the search for articulation, not any desire to offer “explanatory concepts.” Likewise, I see nothing in his summaries of what I say about Marcel Proust or Michael Fried that substantiates the more general charge he makes in the latter part of his essay. On the contrary.

But in general, Altieri is right to worry about philosophy’s (admittedly) imperialist tendencies, and I probably should have said more about what philosophical criticism is and is not. Criticism is above all an act of communication, and when writing about the philosophical dimensions of a work, I am not trying to communicate a set of propositional commitments implicit in the work. What I want to communicate is my experience of the work, an experience such that the work demands a philosophical attentiveness inseparable from the words, images, plot twists, conflicts, and decisions faced by the characters. One does so in the hope that the critical reader finds the way that experience is put resonating with her own experience, perhaps never before formulated as such.<sup>3</sup> This effort can be complicated because, apart from lyric poetry, identifying anything like an authorial voice in a work is no easy matter. But the idea is that each work has a certain reflective form, to speak loosely, an embodied conception of itself; its point in depicting an aspect of the world this way rather than that. The experience of that formal telos can reveal, as its philosophical illumination, aspects of the world we might have thought were “like this” that we now find in experiencing the work quite a bit more complicated and so rather “like that.”<sup>4</sup>

Altieri does charge that I do not attend sufficiently to the “sensuality of Proustian attention” or the “specific needs and desires that motivate Proustian abstraction.” On the former, compare the discussion of what I call “the sensuality and ‘materiality’ of memory” (*POM*, p. 186) or

the discussion of the role of music, Vinteuil's sonata in particular, as a mode of self-knowledge, especially as introducing the idea of the self as much more a material "accent" or "unmistakable voice" (p. 196) rather than any underlying substance. On the latter, compare: "The jealousy is all a function of a general state of unknowingness about the other, a great anxiety, even anguish, that one can never really know who the other is, whether the other's self-presentations and declarations of affection are trustworthy, what one's status in the eyes of the other really is" (p. 203). I posit several other explorations of this "anguish" in the chapter: see also the citations from Proust on p. 205; the account of Swann's motivated self-deceit about Odette and what impels it (pp. 207–8); and the exploration of Leo Bersani's insight that one form of jealousy in Proust is actually motivated "jealousy of oneself," and why that should be (pp. 210–14).

On J. M. Coetzee, the only thing cited to confirm the general criticisms I have been exploring is that I do not focus "enough on the problems of the link between adequate expression and the needs for self-knowledge that haunt *Elizabeth Costello*" because I do "not go into issues of tone that pervade her hopeless persistence." My focus in that chapter was the question: why does the whole collection of "fictions" end with a postscript that consists of a short citation from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's famous *Chandos Brief* (which some would claim heralds the advent of modernism in literature) and then a fictional letter written by Lady Elizabeth Chandos to Francis Bacon, which ends "Drowning, we write out of our separate lives. Save us." About this, I say the following:

To begin to understand this instance of such literary inhabitation, we need to remember the basic elements of the Chandos letter, noting as we go where aspects call Costello to mind. The following *associations, echoes, resonances*, all suggest that the book itself, and the writer Elizabeth Costello, still must write in *the shadow of a crisis*, one that threatens to make the writing of poetry and fiction pointless, or at least in need of some sort of distinctive justification. (*POM*, p. 243; emphasis added)

My attempt then is to trace this air of crisis throughout the book, as if the desperate tone of the Chandos letter and, even more so, Lady Chandos's supplement, backshadow everything we have read, until, in "At the Gate," Elizabeth is called on to justify the writing life and so literature itself, doubts about which have pervaded the character of all her lectures.

Before dealing with his last topic, intention, I want to consider Altieri's concern that I have not done enough in proposing and then trying to illustrate a notion of philosophical criticism that attends to "what is most sharply distinctive about a given individual work, especially those that give intriguing twists to these general frameworks." (I note again that I do not find anywhere in the treatment of the chapters themselves any demonstration of where this neglect occurs, but it is an important consideration that deserves a hearing on its own.)

Some of this is again tied to what I find misleading, that I am pursuing "cognitive ideals," but much of it emerges by contrast with his alternative, which he calls "indicative criticism." Here is what he says its goals are: "This criticism tries to point out, sometimes in elaborate detail, how the work composes a specific intricate and moving experience by weaving together concerns for tone and structure as well as attention to character, scenic detail, and evocative diction." It is unclear to me, from this programmatic statement alone, why this should be inconsistent with, much less opposed in principle to, philosophical criticism.

I can see no reason why attention to such specific aesthetic properties could not be an indispensable element in a philosophically attentive reading. If we want to understand, to use a crude analogy, literary works as being like speech acts—at least in the sense that we want to understand not just what was literally said or written but the point of saying it in just that way—we have to understand both "*that way*" and how it works, and, in the case of certain works, the ambition to achieve some philosophical illumination thereby. In many other works, the point could very well be: to make something beautiful, or to entertain and hold a reader's attention, to experiment with literary form for its own sake, and so forth. But in works like James or Proust or Coetzee, I argue that we do indeed detect such an ambition, but still have to know how, by the means noted by Altieri, it is achieved in a distinctly literary way.

The one case he offers as an illustration meant to show that I have not attended to such aesthetic properties is what I say about *Othello*, a play I do not treat in any detail. He says that "Othello's final speech is certainly evidence that European culture was beginning to suffer from trying out subject positions that left the agent isolated and desperate for recognition. But to treat this as an example of what jealousy normally was at the time seems analogous to treating the ecstasy of St. Francis in behaviorist terms."<sup>5</sup> (I am not sure I fully understand the behaviorist analogy. Presumably Altieri thinks I am proposing that only external behavior is necessary to account for the action being the action it is. That

is hardly the case.) Altieri seems to be referring to a discussion in my chapter on Kant on tragedy of attempts by philosophers to “domesticate” tragedy by “explaining” the tragic collisions and so dismissing them.

I list several cases, including efforts to explain Othello’s jealousy by portraying him demanding a security in love that is not possible in life, a flaw in his character (*POM*, p. 32). But I am *objecting* to such philosophical moralizing about tragedies. I am opposing all philosophical attempts to rationalize tragedy; these are dogmatic denials of the tragic altogether, and for the reasons Altieri cites. I also mention Othello’s jealousy as a case of the emergence of jealousy even without any real evidence of unfaithfulness, but there I say no more about it, except that it is an extreme type. I also wrote a throwaway line in the chapter about Proust on jealousy where I express some skepticism that the depiction of Othello’s experience of jealousy could be so compelling and powerfully painful unless we could recognize something more general about jealousy itself, and not just a possible pathological reaction of an individual at some particular time.

And I don’t see why Altieri should think I would disagree with another example of what is supposed to be his alternative—indicative criticism—in the case of poets like Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, their efforts to “imagine ways for valuing the world in which we live now—ways that depend less on argument than on aligning our imaginations with the pressures of fact.” In fact, such a conclusion, based on an attentive reading of the aesthetic properties of the poems, seem to me a fine example of philosophical criticism, a method of exploring how a literary work might show us ways we could meaningfully live now, under the shadow of a suspicion that we have no such way. Such a method certainly seems to express an ambition to achieve something of some sort of generality in the effects of the poetry. (I’ve no problem whatsoever with what Altieri says is the goal of his alternative: “to elaborate a distinctive purposiveness, giving the specific work potential *exemplary* power as a particular” (emphasis added). Just so; exactly the typic form of generality noted above.

He also mentions the paintings of Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and Kazimir Malevich as attempting “to establish ideals of individual creativity as possible states of self-consciousness not quite bound to the alienating forces of social interpellation.” Why would the attempt to address a beholder with a demand to understand something, and so to subject the regime of art to the social requirements of meaningfulness, necessarily be alienating? And what would be a mode of “inner-directed



mindedness relatively free of those social discussions of ‘meaning’ that only rarely produce the sense of engaged conversation idealized by Pippin”? If the address of a painting cannot be imagined to elicit an attempt to understand the work by the beholder and critic, what status does the attempt to present a purely inner-directed mindedness have, and why would it matter?

This last question leads me to Altieri’s last concern: the issue of intention. Tying the meaning of the work to what we can show was the author’s intention is an indispensable way to secure claims of interpretive success (as against, say, attempts to show that such meanings can never be pinned down or secured are polysemous in the extreme). But the idea is not to revert to biographical criticism.

I will condense my explanation for why not. In Hegel’s account of agency, the subject’s *ex ante* formulation of an intention is only provisional, requires the “test” of its execution to see whether the subject-described intention turns out to be the subject’s real intention (instead of self-serving or self-deceived, for example), and the act description must have social credibility among those to whom explanations are offered. I take up as well Hegel’s use of that account to explain expressivity in artworks. The intention is not wholly inner but is also “out there,” in the public world when realized (and the provisional former may turn out to be different in the latter), when the public action reveals what I was in fact committed to doing or, often, not doing. The inner is the outer in a speculative identity, and we can “find” the true inner intention in the work, not in any biographical detail.

This does not mean that, as in reception theory, the work means whatever a social community takes it to mean—even social communities in the future, where vastly different conventions and habits of thought might thereby change “what the work means.” And it certainly does not mean that there is no “inner,” only the “outer,” as in behaviorism. This can’t be the case because the identity postulated is speculative, an *inner-outer* identity, and any meaning-seeking enterprise must first do justice to the work itself. This is true even though “the artworks bear the intentions they do in and only in a historical world” (*POM*, p. 141), given that this is an *inner-outer* identity. We can note in *Anna Karenina* the clear evidence of Leo Tolstoy’s intention to portray adultery as catastrophically destructive and so morally unacceptable, while “we” (today) can also see Anna as a woman trapped by conventions that are destroying her soul, the avoidance of which is only possible by violating the marriage proprieties of the time, and we can see that also

as an “intended” aspect of the work, whether “the real Tolstoy” would acknowledge it or not.

In my chapter on Fried’s photography theory and criticism that Altieri mentions, I am dealing with Fried’s interpretation of the photographs of Thomas Demand, often of paper models of real objects. Fried’s claim is that the intended meaning of the photographs is intention itself. I sum up what I am trying to say about Fried’s artworks this way: “So we can say that representing intendedness as such represents the idea of the bearing of meaning by a sensible object even as it exhibits that idea by bearing *that* meaning, and that the modality of its so bearing meaning is *aesthetic*, and in a *photographic* register” (*POM*, p. 138). This means there are two sides of one coin in the interpretive enterprise: an articulation of the intended meaning as realized in the work and understanding the work in terms of the dominant proprieties and practices of a social community at a given time.<sup>6</sup>

*I believe* Altieri thinks my proposal emphasizes the latter to the neglect of the former. I say this because he appears to think I would disagree that “we still honor critics like Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt for making observations about those labors that stand the test of time.” Or that “artists like Dante and painters like Giorgione make apparent that it was not sheer folly to believe in works of art as monuments created with the express purpose of resisting what history does when it manages to gain control of phenomena.” I hope the above account, by making clear that I have not proposed a historicist reception theory of meaning, also makes clear why I do not at all disagree.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Robert B. Pippin, *Philosophy by Other Means: The Arts in Philosophy and Philosophy in the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021); hereafter abbreviated *POM*.
2. Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). The whole point of the book is to explore what moral life looks like without any credible moral concepts available for subsumption.
3. See Stanley Cavell, “The Argument of the Ordinary: Scenes of Instruction in Wittgenstein and Kripke,” in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 77.

4. See the discussion in *POM*, pp. 6–13, and in Robert B. Pippin, *Filmed Thought: Cinema as Reflective Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), pp. 7–9.
5. This does not seem to me a historically indexed phenomenon. Think only of *Medea*.
6. Robert Brandom's interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in his book *A Spirit of Trust*, which Altieri mentions, has, I think, wandered so far from attention to the intention-as-realized in the work, and has not even given a thoughtful account of "how and why it would look to us as it does now," that we get much more Brandomian variations on a theme than an interpretation. See Robert B. Pippin, "All for One and One for All: A Reading of Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (2021): 728–33.
7. For more on why I posit no opposition between "immanentist" vs "contextualist" approaches, see the discussion in *POM*, pp. 5–9.