

Book Reviews

LITERATURE, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY: BRIDGING THE GAP. By Charles F. Altieri. UK: Routledge, 2023. 92 pp.

Education in liberal arts is increasingly being marginalized in universities. A number of factors including but not restricted to lack of funding, reluctance to appoint faculty coupled with a general resistance on the part of students to opt for courses that do not guarantee job opportunities have caused this situation. Charles F. Altieri in *Literature, Education, and Society* examines this issue and makes a powerful case for supporting and sustaining education in liberal arts. The work adopts a fresh strategy by focusing not on knowledge but on how literature and the arts provide distinctive domains of experience that stress significant values not typically provided by other disciplines.

Focusing on unquantifiable benefits to make a case for literature in itself is challenging. Altieri addresses the vexed question of ethics, arguing that while one cannot categorically affirm that a focus on arts improve behavior, its stress on art's purposive structuring of experience can affect how people construct values, something essential to education itself.

The volume is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter "The Gift That Keeps Giving: Why Education in the Arts Matters" the author examines the benefits of studying literature. "Imaginative texts exist for me in the domain of affectively articulated possibility rather than in the domain where explanation reigns" says Altieri highlighting the need for a differentiated approach while comparing education in liberal arts with education in other branches of knowledge like mathematics or science. Interestingly, Altieri's proposition on how literature engages our awareness of distinctive "experiences as" by acts of "doubling," resonates with the Indian aesthetic concept of *Sahridaya* (co-experiencing, the poet creates – the reader recreates).

The second chapter "Appreciating Literary Fictions" deals with the aesthetic experience of reading fiction. The resonance with the characters that the reader experiences is the focus of this chapter. "Significant works of fiction, like those that make it into teaching canons" encourages the reader "not primarily to judge the lives of the main characters but to establish sympathy for and understanding of their various ways of engaging the world through time."

In the third and final chapter "Plato's Allegory of the Cave Revisited: The Ecstatic "Is" as Bridge between Aesthetics and Ethics" he concludes his argument. Altieri feels that "the need for revising Plato's vision of *padeia* remains pressing because the force of the shadows pervading our social relations, our relations to the natural world, and our relations to ourselves is . . . no less imposing on our culture than on Plato's." Considering Plato's allegory and Heidegger's reading of the same Altieri shows how both thinkers envisage education as a force that brings actual states of the world and of the self out of the shadows into a condition of "unhiddenness." Altieri freely admits that "Aesthetic values need not be ethical values" but nevertheless plays a vital role in honing ethical sensibilities.

"Does literary education really help us appreciate how other minds and sensibilities work? Can it develop values that involve respect and care and strong experiences of social bonding beyond one's immediate interests? And if it can, shouldn't university education take these values as worth making special efforts to support?" These are some of the questions that Charles F. Altieri raises in the volume *Literature, Education, and Society: Bridging the Gap*. This slim volume is rich in innovating thoughts and can prove stimulating to a teacher of literature and arts in general. Moreover, the author uses

examples from fiction and poetry to comprehensively illustrate his points. The book is published by Routledge and is one of the volumes belonging to the series Routledge Focus on Literature.

SANGEETHA PUTHIYEDATH
EFL University, Hyderabad

LIVING IN WORDS: LITERATURE, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LANGUAGE, AND THE COMPOSITION OF SELFHOOD. By Garry L. Hagberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 304 pp.

Garry L. Hagberg's recent monograph *Living in Words: Literature, Autobiographical Language, and the Composition of Selfhood* (Oxford, 2023), continues to follow the intellectual itinerary developed in his last work *Literature and its Language: Philosophical Aspects* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2022) by narrowing the scope of his inquiry to more specific concerns regarding the relationship between literary depictions of subjectivity and topics in the philosophy of language. Whereas Hagberg's contributions to the 2022 volume focused upon the capacity of events in the life of an individual to anchor, and similarly alter, the semantic value attached to the terms of one's personal lexicon, *Living in Words* extends this project by reflecting on the structure of subjectivity as seen through the lens of narrative.

This robust account prominently comes to the fore in Hagberg's discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics*, emphasizing the reciprocal dependence among single episodes within a narrative both requisite and, in some sense, essential to the coherence of a given plot. Prior to addressing potential lacunae, Hagberg puts forth a faithfully Aristotelian understanding of narrative as referring not a "purely episodic plot structure that merely strings events together along a temporal continuum" but rather a causal thread responsible for stitching an array of disparate occurrences into a single, unified whole (106). This moment underscores a broader theme that itself serves to unify Hagberg's text: the difference between succession and simultaneity is the difference between what sediments the past and what constitutes a history. The accomplishment of this reading of Aristotle is to extract from the *Poetics* a recipe for the former's differentiation between "composition," "construction," and "constitution" (xxx). Whereas "constitution" connotes the lack, or even impossibility, of a subject's access to agency with respect to the genesis of his or her subjectivity, Hagberg's avoidance of "construction" as a term of artifice is part of a methodological attempt to suggest that, forceful as external factors may be, the shape they impart to us is regulative, not constitutive. By contrast, "composition" puts forth a musical analogy "suggestive of an active and creative undertaking, but within limits that are themselves interesting" (xxx).

Hagberg finds in the *Poetics'* famous account of tragedy a means of bulwarking the idea that composition provides the fundamental structure of plot narrative and personal identity. In one of his text's most engaging moments, Hagberg does so by raising the question of whether Aristotle is right to situate plot structure as what pre-eminently authorizes us to compare and contrast tragedies in terms of one another. If what accounts for the way in which plot structure hangs together is the author's illustration of ostensibly independent events through causal linkages that inexorably dovetail, then the structure of a drama provides a useful analogue for the structure of a life. But, Hagberg asks, does this imply that the structure of a plot also provides a measure of its veracity? "Or is it merely a measure of the *literary* value of that life-narrative wholly separate from any question of its truth?" (107). *Living in Words* develops a multifaceted answer far too nuanced to definitively situate itself at the site of either pole. The value here is the import that his unraveling of this question has for the aforementioned notion of "composition." Just as Aristotle tasks the author with an imperative to thread together the events of the work, the concept of "composition" likewise involves unearthing