

# Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

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Volume 5  
Number 2 *Winter 2006*

Article 2

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Winter 2006

## Review of Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*.

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### Recommended Citation

Ziarek, Krzysztof (2006). Review of "Review of Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 2

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**Derek Attridge, The Singularity of Literature.** London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 173 pp. (+ xiii) ISBN 0415335930.

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In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge gives us a brilliant and engaging reflection on how to think literature in terms of the singularity of its event, an event which happens as a complex relating between the work and its reading/ interpretation. The virtues of this smart and impressive book are many, and not least among them is the clarity and accessibility of Attridge's writing, which lets his text appeal not just to scholars of literature and literary theory but also to undergraduates and even an interested wider public. As the title suggests, the book's focus is on what makes literature singular, that is, different from other arts but also from other forms of writing; in short, Attridge is interested in what gives literature and the experience of reading and interpreting it their specificity, that is, their "literariness" or literary character. On the other hand, the title also indicates the parameters of Attridge's definition of the literary work as an always singular event of its reading. The view proposed by Attridge underscores the verbal happening or enactment, which characterizes the literary work. The work of literature is to be seen as an event, which involves the text and its reader(s) in a complicated and creative cultural, historical, and temporal relating.

Among the most important parameters of this relating are originality, invention, event, and singularity. By originality, Attridge means creation which possesses exemplary originality in Kant's sense, that is, originality which changes the rules of art and literature, which provides new patterns for future artists to follow as well as an experience of discovery and technical advance for the readers. What Attridge has in mind here is an exemplary originality which would distinguish among works that are original in an exemplary, rule-changing or rule-inventing manner, works that are original without being exemplary, and works that do not attain either originality or exemplarity. Obviously, while literature may be said to abound, there are few works of such exemplary originality, ones that have the force to change the rules and practice of literary writing. Such originality also needs to be inventive, which means that its effects, when accommodated by culture, can go beyond the created work: ". . . it may through this accommodation bring about the new configuration freely but uncreatively . . ." (42). Defined in this way, inventiveness is not, however, a permanent property of the created object but changes with history and comes to be assigned retrospectively.

What distinguishes artistic inventiveness from other kinds of invention, as Attridge shows, is that artistic invention is never just a matter of the past but, rather, repeats its inventive force and is always inventive "now": that is, it is (re)inventive in the moment of reading. One of Attridge's central claims is that what constitutes the work of art is precisely this ability not only to retain inventiveness through time but also to regenerate the otherness which the work's inventiveness brings (repeatedly) into culture. This ability to "renew its alterity," as Attridge puts it (51), gives the work of art its specificity and its characteristic force.

What in this context distinguishes literature is that the alterity "invented" by a literary text has to do with the workings and inventiveness of language and with the specifics of textuality characteristic of literary texts. It is precisely verbal invention that makes works of literature into literary events, events which take place as acts and enactments of reading, in which the original and inventive force of the work is brought into the open through the reader's relation to the text:

it is only when the event of this reformulation is experienced by the reader . . . . *as an event*, an event which opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling (understood as verbs), or more accurately, the event *of such opening*, that we speak of the literary . . . . This is what a literary work "is": an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or act-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read . . ." (59)

In this sense, the reading of literature is likewise creative and inventive: while it obviously does not create the work of art, it makes possible a "re-creation" of its inventive force and the otherness which the work inscribes into culture. The event of reading is, therefore, a kind of performance (95), which each time dislocates the reader and opens up the historical-cultural situation in which the reading takes place. It should be mentioned here that Attridge sees the reader and her reading experience not in terms of an individual or a subject, but through the prism of what he calls "idioculture," which refers to the "embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and behaviors" (21). One of the key elements which makes this renewed invention of the literary work in its reading(s) possible is the work's 'form': not to be understood as static and fixed, but seen instead as an event, "which includes the mobilization of meanings, or rather of the events of meaning: their sequentiality, interplay, and changing intensity, their patterns of expectation and satisfaction or tension and release, their precision or diffuseness" (109). In short, form and meaning are not separable, just as they never become fixed or stable. Rather, they are intrinsically temporal, as they come to be enacted in an act of reading, and what one might perhaps call their "continuity" comes, paradoxically, from their repeated opening, within

the changing context of reading, into new questions. Reading literature becomes inventive precisely because it reopens and keeps alive as questions the interaction of form and meaning figured in the literary text.

The linchpin of Attridge's approach is the idea that the literary work, insofar as it 'is' only in the act of its reading, constitutes an event of singularity:

Inseparable from the notions of invention and alterity is, as we have had many occasions to observe, the notion of *singularity*. The other, the unprecedented, hitherto unimaginable disposition of cultural materials that comes into being in the event of invention, is always singular, although that singularity can be experienced only as a process of adjustment in norms and habits whereby it is recognized, affirmed, and, at least partially and temporarily, accommodated. (63)

Singularity here is, strictly speaking, the event of singularization taking place as the reading of the literary text. Attridge's text throughout admirably illustrates what we might call here "the force of literary singularization," that is, the force which distinguishes literary works and makes them what they are: "literature." It is a complex force, with which literary language claims readers, calling them to (re)invent or re-enact precisely the singularizing parameters of the work. While this force comes from the work, it does not come into the open until and unless it is brought into the open through the act of reading. In this act, the reader is both passive (claimed by the force of the literary) and active (re-inventing this force in and as the act of reading). This passive-active complex of relations constitutive of the literary work's existence is each time enacted as a singular event. This means that there exists a certain capacity or elasticity intrinsic to the literary work, which makes it constitutively open to different readers and thus to the otherness which they bring into the artwork with their different and evolving "idiocultures." Thus, the invention of otherness which Attridge sees as the key element of the literary is itself open to otherness and its own re-invention.

For Attridge, the claim which the otherness of the literary language makes on the reader inscribes an ethical commitment to alterity and to the other into the work of literature: "What we experience in responding to the artwork, however, is . . . a call coming from the work itself -- the work as singular staging of otherness" (124). This leads Attridge to propose the ethics of literature as an act of responding responsibly to artworks by doing justice to the work as a singular other, that is, by affirming and re-creating the work's inventiveness, and giving force to the claims which this inventiveness makes upon culture. In fact, Attridge goes as far as to indicate that "it is in this apprehension of otherness and in the demands it makes that the peculiar pleasure of the literary response . . . is to be experienced" (131). The ethical claim and challenge of the literary works is thus constitutive of the

experience of pleasure, which is neither simply aesthetic nor ethical, but rather has to do with the transformative dynamic of the encounter with an artwork.

As is probably clear from the tenor of my review, I am not simply largely in agreement with Attridge's understanding of the literary work but find his book to be itself an inventive and compelling account of how to approach literature today. The succinctness and poignancy of Attridge's argument, combined with an exemplary clarity and an engaging style, make this a timely and significant contribution to rethinking the notion of the literary work beyond the conventional aesthetic optics. Perhaps the single, most important achievement of *The Singularity of Literature* lies in its recalibration of the literary as an event whose parameters have to be thought beyond the aesthetic optics of the subject-object relation, with its corollary notions of judgment and aesthetic pleasure. This emphasis on the literary as an event goes hand in hand with sustained attention to a singular dynamic of the artwork: its inventive and transformative 'act-event,' which tries to lay to rest the conventional notions of an inherent meaning or value of the literary text. For what makes a literary text literature is not its "lasting" cultural value or its particular coded message, both preserved and celebrated through aesthetic practices of reading and teaching, but its peculiar force of (re)invention.

In the contexts of these accomplishments of *The Singularity of Literature*, let me raise here in conclusion a few issues regarding Attridge's account which could be developed further and in a somewhat different tenor. At one point in the text, Attridge, explaining the emphasis on otherness pivotal to his approach, suggests that otherness or alterity associated with the inventiveness of the literary work is "a good in itself" (137), partially at least because, through its dislocating force and the opening-up of possibilities, it contributes to the idea of literature as a critical practice. Though Attridge deliberately frames his book as an essay eschewing quotation and direct engagement with other thinkers (thinkers to whom he acknowledges his debt for their inspiration in an appendix), he makes it clear that this way of thinking about literature, especially in terms of the invention of the other, draws on Derrida's work, in particular his texts on literature, and on Levinas's ethics of alterity. In this perspective, the other, and thus the otherness invented as the literary work, become intrinsically valorized and invested with critical importance. But what is it specifically that makes otherness and its invention, in the double sense of the genitive understood as both the invention of the other and also by the other, "good in itself"? In several places in his text, Attridge links the invention of otherness with the event of opening and the sense of the opening-up of possibilities, "a conscious and pleasurable opening of possibilities" (102).

It is precisely this sense of the event as opening possibilities that I would like to explore very briefly. My own inclination would be to point here to Heidegger (whom Attridge mentions as one of the figures behind his rethinking of the artwork), in particular to Heidegger's suggestion in *Contributions to Philosophy* that otherness is enabled by being's event, which, through its futural opening of the play of time-space, "makes possible and enforces otherness" (*Contributions to Philosophy*, 1999: 267). This otherness is enabled by the characteristic emptying and release into the possible, which Heidegger calls "the nothing" or "nihilation" in being. For Heidegger, otherness is there not because there are differences but, rather, there are differences because otherness is enabled and "enforced" by the very mode in which being happens, i.e. by its event. Since otherness is intrinsic to and enabled by the event, it happens beyond both negation and positing, beyond representation, sublation, erasure or exclusion. One might say that for Heidegger, otherness is a "gift" of being, which means that otherness is also the most "proper" way for being to give itself.

Otherness is brought into play by the fact that being unfolds as, in Heidegger's words, "the quiet force of the possible," a phrase which recurs in *Being and Time* and "Letter on Humanism." This force of the possible has the sense of freeing and releasing beings into their possibilities for being. This momentum of rendering possible (*Ermöglichung*), which Heidegger characterizes as a kind of tremor or vibration which constitutes the very force of 'to be,' constitutes freedom, openness, and letting be. In this context, we might think the force of literature as the force of freedom and openness, which come from the way in which literary language instantiates the quiet force of the possible. What 'works' in literature is the quiet force of the possible, the force which may be repeated in the event in such a way that, in each context, it resonates differently as the same force of the possible. While possibilities might evolve depending on the changing context, the force of the possible resonating through them is still there as an opening up of freedom.

In a similar vein, I would also suggest that the otherness rendered possible in literary works, as Attridge's text sometimes implies, extends beyond the relation to the other (human being), and has to do with attentiveness to being as the force of the possible which enables otherness. It is within this opening-up of possibilities that otherness and the (human) other unfold. Thus, in addition to the ethics of literature, if by that one understands literature as a form of relating to the other, one should talk also about its broader ethos, what might be called here the ethos of the possible, in the specific sense indicated above. What literature invents, and what comes to be repeated in the event of reading, is the force of the possible, which in turn means that literature opens up possibilities which would remain otherwise closed, giving them back their force as possibilities. In this specific sense, literature becomes an experience of freedom: not freedom of a subject, or of the other,

but the freedom in play in the opening and transformative force of possibilities. Responsibility of and to literature would be then responsibility to openness and freedom: to the experience of the quiet force of the possible as the event of freedom. Not personal freedom or even freedom of human beings, but freedom intrinsic to being and its time-space, which humans come to share only when, and this is most important here, they en-act it as an event of freedom. What this enactment of freedom work has at stake is, to refer to Heidegger again, the fact that being happens as always singular and 'one-timely.' A different occasion would be required to show how such an enabling comes to be at the heart of literary language and how language becomes the space in which an event of freedom takes place. But freedom as proposed here would be each time singular, and singularly enacted, enacted as language, invented as the literary work and re-invented in its reading. The singularity of literature would be then the mark of the singularity of freedom, which would also be the singular responsibility for bringing this freedom into the open and, as it were, keeping it working.

Through its lucid and engaging prose, Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature* keeps us keenly aware of such possibilities intrinsic to the literary work, showing how they emerge in different ways through rethinking notions such as creativity, originality, invention, singularity, performance, form, or responsibility, to name several most important ones. Redefining these notions, critical to our understanding of art and literature, Attridge succeeds in opening up anew the question of the literary work, redrawing and renewing its possibilities in our contemporary context. A concise and precise articulation of the concept of the literary work as an inventive event of repeated creation/reading, *The Singularity of Literature* is a much-needed intervention into debates about the nature of literature. While, as Attridge himself points out, aspects of this conception of literature as an event of invention have been discussed by several twentieth-century thinkers, *The Singularity of Literature* not only brings such insights together in a remarkable way, but also supplements and rearticulates them into a cohesive and powerful account of the literary work, an account which enacts a welcome challenge to literary studies and becomes a reference work for how to approach the question of literature.