THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
Sep '12 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* Nº 686

IS PHILOSOPHY LITERATURE?

Jim Holt

Is philosophy literature? Do people read philosophy for pleasure? Of course it is, and of course they do.

People savor the aphorisms of Nietzsche, the essays of Schopenhauer, the philosophical novels of Sartre. They read the dialogues of Plato (and they would doubtless read the dialogues of Aristotle too, had Western civilization not been so careless as to mislay them). Some even claim to enjoy the more daunting treatises in the philosophical canon. "When I have a leisure moment, you will generally find me curled up with Spinoza's latest," Bertie Wooster swankily announces in one of P.G. Wodehouse's "Jeeves" novels.

Now let me narrow my query: Does anybody read *analytic* philosophy for pleasure? Is this kind of philosophy literature? Here you might say, "Certainly not!" Or you might say, "What the heck is analytic philosophy?"

Allow me to address the latter reply first. "Analytic" philosophy is the kind that is practiced these days by the vast majority of profes-

sors in philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world. It's reputed to be rather dry and technical—long on logical rigor, short on lyrical profundity. Analytic philosophy got its start in Cambridge in the first decade of the 20th century, when Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore revolted against the rather foggy continental idealism prevailing among English philosophers at the time. Under their influence, and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein (who arrived in Cambridge in 1912 to study with Russell), philosophers came to see their task as consisting not in grand metaphysical system-building, but in the painstaking analysis of language. This, they thought, would enable them to lay bare the logical structure of reality and to put all the old philosophical perplexities to rest.

Today, analytic philosophy has a broader scope than it used to. (Many of its qualities were examined in a previous post in this series by Gary Gutting, "Bridging the Analytic-Continental Divide.") It's less obsessed with dissecting language; it's more continuous with the sciences. (This is partly due to the American philosopher Willard Quine, who argued that language really has no fixed system of meanings for philosophers to analyze.) Yet whether they are concerned with the nature of consciousness, of space-time or of the good life, analytic philosophers continue to lay heavy stress on logical rigor in their writings. The result, according to Martha Nussbaum (herself a sometime member of the tribe), is a prevailing style that is "correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically palid"—a style meant to serve as "a kind of all-purpose solvent." Timothy Williamson, the current occupant of the illustrious Wykeham Chair of Logic at Oxford, makes a virtue of the "long haul of technical reflection" that is analytic philosophy today. Does it bore you? Well, he says, too bad. "Serious philosophy is always likely to bore those with short attention-spans."

This kind of philosophy, whatever its intellectual merits, doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun. And it doesn't sound like literature.

But what is literature? That in itself might appear to be a philosophical question. Yet the most persuasive answer, to my mind, was supplied by a novelist, Evelyn Waugh. (Well, not just a novelist—also the most versatile master of English prose in the last 100 years.) "Literature," Waugh declared, "is the right use of language irrespective of the subject or reason of utterance." Something doesn't have to rhyme or tell a story to be considered literature. Even a VCR instruction manual might qualify, or a work of analytic philosophy. (Waugh, as it happens, was not a fan of analytic philosophy, dismissing it as "a parlor game of logical quibbles.")

And what is “the right use of language”? What distinguishes literature from mere communication, or sheer trash? Waugh had an answer to this too. “Lucidity, elegance, individuality”: these are the three essential traits that make a work of prose “memorable and unmistakable,” that make it *literature*.

So how does the writing of professional philosophers of the past 100 years or so fare in the light of these three criteria? Well, it gets high marks for lucidity—which, by the way, it not the same thing as simplicity, or easy intelligibility. (Think of Henry James.) Some prominent analytic philosophers can be turbid in their writing, even preposterously so—the recently deceased Michael Dummett, an admirable thinker in so many other ways, comes to mind. Yet precision of expression is, among their ranks, far more honored in the observance than in the breach. Indeed, it’s something of a professional fetish (and not a bad guide to truth).

Individuality? Here too analytic philosophers, the greatest of them anyway, shine. Stylistically speaking, there is no mistaking Willard Quine (spare, polished, elaborately lucid) for, say, Elizabeth Anscombe (painstaking, imperious). Or David K. Lewis (colloquially natural, effortlessly clever) for John Searle (formidable, patient, sardonic). Or Thomas Nagel (intricately nuanced, rich in negative capability) for Philippa Foot (dry, ironically homely, droll).

Finally, we come to elegance. This honorific has been overused to the point of meaningless, but Waugh had something definite in mind by it: “Elegance is the quality in a work of art which imparts direct pleasure.” And pleasure, though by no means an infallible guide to literary value, is (as W.H. Auden observed) the least fallible guide. What does it mean to take pleasure in a piece of prose? Is there a sort of tingle you feel as you read it? That can’t very well be, since then it would be the tingle you were enjoying, not the prose. (And wouldn’t such a tingle distract you from your reading?) Oddly, one of the most pleasurable pieces of analytic philosophy I’ve come across is itself an article entitled “Pleasure,” where, in a mere nine pages, all the reigning understandings of pleasure are gently deflated. Its author, the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1900-76), was among the dominant figures in mid-century analytic philosophy. He was also a supremely graceful prose stylist, the coiner of phrases like “the ghost in the machine,” and, not incidentally, a votary of Jane Austen. (Asked if he ever read novels, Ryle was reputed to have replied, “Oh yes—all six, every year.”)

Ryle may head the hedonic honor roll of analytic philosophy, but the roll is a long one. It includes all the philosophers I named above—especially Quine, whose classic article "On What There Is" can be read over and over again, like a poem. It also includes the Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam, whose logical lump is leavened by a relaxed command of language and a gift for imaginative thought experiments. It includes younger philosophers (well, younger than 65) like Kwame Anthony Appiah and Colin McGinn—both of whom, in addition to their technical and not-so-technical philosophical work, have written novels. (One of Appiah's is a philosophical murder-mystery bearing the title, "Another Death in Venice.") And it certainly includes Bertrand Russell, who was actually awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature—although not, I hasten to add, for his work on *Principia Mathematica.*

Literary pleasures can turn up even in the most seemingly abstruse reaches of analytic philosophy. Take the case of Saul Kripke—widely (though not unanimously) considered the one true genius in the profession today. Kripke's work can be dauntingly technical. The first volume of his collected papers, recently published by Oxford University Press under the arresting title "Philosophical Troubles," will be a treasure trove to his fellow philosophers of logic and language, but it is not for the casual reader. However, an earlier work of his, the revolutionary "Naming and Necessity," is so lucidly, inventively and even playfully argued that even a newcomer to analytic philosophy will find it hard to put down. The book is actually a transcription of three lectures Kripke gave, extemporaneously and without notes, at Princeton in January 1970—hence its lovely conversational tone.

Ranging over deep matters like metaphysical necessity, the a priori and the mind-body problem, Kripke proceeds by way of a dazzling series of examples involving Salvador Dalí and Sir Walter Scott, the standard meter stick in Paris, Richard Nixon (plus David Fry's impersonation of him), and an identity-like logical relation Kripke calls "schmidentity." There is not a dogmatic or pompous word in the lectures—and not a dull one either. Kripke the analytic philosopher reveals himself to be a literary stylist of the first water (just as, say, Richard Feynman the physicist did). The reader more than forgives Kripke when he remarks at one point, apropos of his unwillingness to give a thoroughly worked-out theory of reference, "I'm sort of too lazy at the moment."

I hope I have clinched my case for analytic philosophy as belles lettres. But perhaps I should give the last word to a real literary man, John Milton, who prophetically wrote of Kripke, Russell and

their kind:

How charming is divine philosophy!
Not harsh and crabbèd as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute
And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets...

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE
Is published weekly for its members by the
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.