



## Book Reviews

**Paolo Euron**

### **Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work**

**Brill – Sense, Leiden – Boston 2019**

Throughout the history of Western culture, the problem of interpreting literary works has occupied the minds of various authors – from philosophers and writers to artists and art critics. In his book *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work*, Paolo Euron emphasizes the necessity of a “historical approach” to the problem of interpreting literary works, by bringing together aesthetics, literary theory, critical theory, and linguistics. Such an approach is needed, as Euron points out, because a “comprehensive understanding” of contemporary trends, theories, and schools in interpreting literary works is not possible without “historical awareness”. As a long-time associate of Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok) and visiting professor at the European International University (Paris), Euron intended the book for a non-Western readership as an introduction to aesthetics. However, considering its volume and detail, this book also provides an overview of the history of aesthetics – which can certainly be of interest to both non-Western and Western readers. In that sense, the book is ideal for readers who “may have some knowledge of Western cultural background” and wish “a real experience of art and the literary work” (p. XIII).

The content of the book *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work* consists of an “Introduction” (pp. XIII–XVII) and 29 main chapters, which together count up to 133 subchapters. Thematically, the book covers the historical development of aesthetics in Western culture by emphasizing various authors, important ideas, and influential concepts related to the problem of interpreting

literary works. The main thesis of the book is the following: if we want to properly understand a work of art (especially a literary work), then we must not only take into account the historical development of art and artistic practices but also the theory that accompanied this development. And this theory is reflected in aesthetics – a primarily Western discipline that deals with the philosophical study of art, beauty, creativity, the sublime, taste, etc. Namely, in order to understand the “existence” and “meaning” of objects that enjoy the “status of a work of art”, we must keep in mind that:

“In Western culture what today is considered to be a literary work, and more generally a work of art, is the result of an historical tradition. It does not simply reflect the culture and society in which it has been created. In a certain way, it creates or determines at the same time the cultural and historical world. In order to understand it, we cannot avoid taking a historical approach.” (P. XIII.)

This, however, means that by studying works of art, we also learn something “important” and “essential” about ourselves. Given that art has continuously had different functions in Western culture – from religious and mythological to instrumental and commercial – by enjoying certain works of art we can also learn from the past, in addition to having a “transformative experience”. This is precisely one of the reasons why art is so close to “everyday life”. Literary works, for example, reflect certain cultural values, moral norms, and linguistic characteristics. With that in mind, Euron brings literary works into connection with “existential experience”. As he states in the book:

“... I will present the experience of a work of art and more precisely of a literary work, as an existential experience. What is at stake here is not just an understanding of the literary work and its strategies of meaning but it is an understanding of our life and the world and how the literary work can influence, mediate or determine an understanding of our existence and our world. It may sound strange but this existential experience is based on traditional forms, language, structure, signs, discourses, poetic mechanisms, and rhetorical and technical aspects which seem to

constitute the exteriority of the literary work and not part of our inner and personal experience of life.” (P. XVI.)

However, although it may seem self-evident, this is only possible if we understand works of art (i.e., literary works) as “objects of interpretation”. Euron notes that:

“In this way, the work becomes the place of a real experience, which is always an experience of the inner life of the work, of its peculiar reality and of its specific truth. We should not forget that the aesthetic experience is not just a part of philosophy (that is to say of our understanding of the world with its systems of meanings and values) but it is our understanding of the world (with its meanings and values) in the experience of a single work.” (P. XVI.)

Euron writes about the main thesis of this book consistently and comprehensively, referring to a large number of authors and covering different historical periods. The book is intended to encourage readers to think about “general aesthetic issues”, such as: (I) what is beauty, (II) what is art, (III) what is the function of art, (IV) does art have an existential relevance to us, and (V) what is the nature of aesthetic experience, but also to introduce them to certain interpretations of works of art (i.e., literary works). Thus, the introductory chapters of the book are dedicated to the period of ancient Greece, with a special emphasis on Plato’s and Aristotle’s reflections on art (pp. 1–17). After that, there are several chapters dealing with the historical periods of Hellenism and the Middle Ages, in which, among other things, Neoplatonic and Christian concepts of beauty are discussed (pp. 18–34). Here Euron mostly refers to Pseudo-Longinus, Plotinus, and Dante Alighieri. Chapters on humanism, the Renaissance, Italian Neo-Platonism, and the Baroque emphasize the intellectual achievements of Francis Petrarch, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Baldassare Castiglione, Leonardo da Vinci, and Giambattista Vico (pp. 35–58). Interestingly, the book also contains chapters dedicated to specific authors and their theories. The first such chapter is dedicated to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (pp. 59–61). He received his own chapter in the book because he is particularly important in the history of the development of aesthetics as a “philosophical discipline”. As Euron states:

“In the eighteenth century, we see the birth of aesthetics as a specific discipline. It is a turning point in the reflection on art and poetry. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) is the first philosopher to employ the term ‘aesthetics’ in a distinctly philosophical context. Baumgarten considered aesthetics as a particular kind of knowledge by means of sensitivity.” (P. 59.)

This is followed by two chapters on Immanuel Kant. The first deals with Kant and the

“origins of modern aesthetics” (pp. 62–71), while the second is dedicated to the “heritage of Kantian philosophy in romanticism” (pp. 72–75). Here, among other things, Euron discusses the following topics: (I) knowledge of nature and beauty, (II) connection between art and nature, (III) imagination and knowledge of reality, (IV) the necessity and universality of the beautiful, and (V) the concept of genius, while emphasizing the importance of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*. Euron rightly points out that:

“His *Critique of Judgement* (1790) is the actual beginning of modern aesthetics, conceived as a philosophical theory of beauty and art, as we understand it today. The aesthetic experience has to do with the senses, but it is *not only* related to the sensuous apprehension of the material object. Aesthetic judgement is related to pleasure and displeasure: by the representation of the object, we judge our pleasure and displeasure in relation to the form of the object (and not to the material object in itself). Aesthetic judgement is not a kind of knowledge about the concrete object (distinct or confused), but it establishes a relationship between feelings of pleasure and displeasure and our knowing faculty (the intellect) by the representation of the object.” (P. 62.)

In addition to Baumgarten and Kant, Karl Philipp Moritz (pp. 76–81), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (pp. 95–103), Arthur Schopenhauer (pp. 104–108), Friedrich Nietzsche (pp. 109–116), Benedetto Croce (pp. 129–132), Antonio Gramsci (pp. 143–146), Martin Heidegger (pp. 154–165) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (pp. 166–173) also received their own chapters. Among these names, Karl Philip Moritz stands out the most – because he is often overlooked in the history of aesthetic theory. As Euron makes clear, Moritz is important because he

“... considers imitation from a new perspective: it is not the *work* of art that imitates nature, but rather the *artist*. Art is the activity of the artist: the artist (and not the work of art) imitates nature, and he does it by *creating* works of art, just as nature creates. The artist imitates nature not its creations (objects or natural things), but imitating nature is a creative principle.” (P. 77.)

In the book, Euron also discusses various artistic and intellectual movements: from German romanticism (pp. 82–94), through symbolism and aestheticism (pp. 117–128), to structuralism (pp. 147–153) and post-structuralism (pp. 185–193). The chapters devoted to linguistics (pp. 133–142) and critical theory (pp. 174–184) are particularly interesting. For Euron, linguistics deserves a special place in the history of Western culture because:

“At the beginning of the twentieth century, we can see a new approach to the work of art, firstly and especially to the literary one. There is new interest in language and in the linguistic aspect of the work and, in general, of culture. Linguistics becomes

a new discipline and offers strategies for understanding the human world in general as a system, or more precisely as a system of signs. This new approach changes the understanding and, in some way, the object of the human sciences and has great consequences on aesthetics, literary theory and criticism. Actually, if we can find general principles to understand the mechanism of our language, we can explain a work of art or our very human world according to similar principles.” (p. 133.)

In this context, Euron places a special emphasis on Ferdinand de Saussure, Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky, and Roman Jakobson. On the other hand, critical theory – with its representatives in the so-called “Frankfurt School” – changed the understanding of the concept of “theory”. Although “theory” was previously thought to be objective, the Frankfurt School and its representatives

“... proposed the opposite perspective. Theory is always a subjective, historical and often non-disinterested activity. We need a critical position; we have to ask the meaning of apparently self-evident truths and commonly accepted theories. And, when we ask, we always have to think of what we are asking, why we are asking, what is at stake in our asking.” (P. 174.)

Later chapters are devoted to the practice of deconstruction (pp. 194–201), contemporary schools and traditions in literary and critical theory (pp. 202–210), and postmodern theories of art (pp. 211–225). Authors such as Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Italo Calvino were discussed here the most, while a large number of subchapters discussed “new theories” related to the problem of interpreting literary works. Therefore, it should be pointed out that Euron also wrote extensively about (I) feminist theory (pp. 204–205), (II) gender theory (pp. 205–206), (III) gay, lesbian, and queer theory (pp. 206–207), (IV) new historicism (p. 207), (V) postcolonial studies (pp. 207–209), and (VI) cultural materialism (pp. 209–210). In these subchapters, it is particularly intriguing how Euron sees the role of literary theory. Namely, he firmly believes that literary theory

“... gives a clue about something which is beyond the text, tackles complex problems, for example how the human world is organized and structured and how it can be understood, what is the meaning of ‘understanding’, what is at stake in our understanding of the world and which dangers we face in our attempt to understand it, why literary works always bring with them a theoretical meaning, and so on.” (pp. 202–203.)

With all of the above in mind, it is safe to say that Paolo Euron’s book *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work* is an excellent study of the history of aesthetics, that provides a detailed and comprehensive overview of main topics, ideas, and concepts in their historical context and development.

The argumentation of the main thesis extends implicitly or explicitly throughout the entire book – regardless of whether the (sub)chapters are dedicated to a specific historical period, author, artistic and intellectual movement, discipline, or theory. By bringing aesthetics into connection with literary theory, critical theory, and linguistics, Euron gave this book an authentic note – which sets it apart from other books that deal with art and aesthetic theory in general. In addition to introducing readers to the problem of interpreting literary works, the book also provides an original introduction to aesthetic theory in Western culture. But perhaps the most important part of the book, besides the interesting thesis and consistent argumentation, is Euron’s intention to remind his readers that in order to understand something so complex as a work of art (i.e. literary work), first of all, we need to enjoy it. And in order to enjoy a work of art to the fullest, we have to consider its “correct context” and its “specific artistic qualities” (p. XIII).

**Jan Defrančeski**

**Boran Berčić,**  
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## **Human Rationality**

**Festschrift for Nenad Smokrović**

**Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u**  
**Rijeci, Rijeka 2022**

The main purpose of this book was to honour the philosopher and professor Nenad Smokrović by featuring 17 contributions, written in Croatian or English language, commenting on, expanding, implementing or criticising various aspects of his philosophical ideas, with an additional review containing Smokrović’s response to the papers.

Smokrović’s field of work is in analytical philosophy, or that branch of philosophy that attempts to solve philosophical problems by trying to find various logical and linguistic tools that have their purpose in the context of the philosophical problem they are dealing with. Following analytic philosophy, or at least its