

THE PURSUIT OF FICTION

An Interview with Peter Lamarque

Helen Bradley

University of York

1 Work & object

HELEN BRADLEY: Peter, it's very difficult to know where to start with a career as illustrious as yours so perhaps the best way to begin is by asking about your most recent book *Work and Object*,¹ for which you won the 'Outstanding Monograph Prize' from the ASA in 2010. Congratulations!

PETER LAMARQUE: Thank you very much!

HB: As you say in the introduction, the book explores the idea of work. Could you tell us a little about what got you thinking about this topic?

PL: Okay, let's start with the title. 'Work and Object' obviously alludes to Quine's famous book *Word and Object*, and that's no coincidence. I wrote my BPhil thesis at Oxford on Quine—in fact on Quine's theory of ontological commitment—and this is a book on ontology. The second book I published was also a collection of essays, called *Fictional Points of View*,² which again has an echo of Quine and his book

¹Lamarque 2010.

²Lamarque 1996.

From a Logical Point of View. In fact I was going to call the book ‘From a Fictional Point of View’ [laughing]. So we’ve got that Quine resonance with the new book too even though it’s not really about Quine at all. But it is about ontology! *Work and Object* is a collection of some of my papers, and it started with a paper of the same name, which I gave to the Aristotelian Society in 2002.³ That paper was me breaking away from writing on fiction and literature, which of course I have been pursuing for some time. I was, to some extent, going into new territory with the ontology of art. What I did in that first paper was look at the distinction between work and object.

HB: Could you tell us a bit about this distinction?

PL: Very briefly the idea is that for every work of art there is a constituting object, which, at least partially, makes it the work it is, but which is not identical with the work. That’s my view, and it is by no means original—other people have come up with it before. So, as an example, take a painting: there is an object, namely the canvas, the pigment, the colour, and so on. Now, my claim is that that object is not identical to the work. Obviously it’s necessary to the work, but it’s not identical to it. The work is something different. Lots of metaphysicians have talked about sculpture—and I do as well—because they take it as paradigmatic of this distinction. So the question is: is the statue identical to the piece of bronze or the piece of marble of which it is made? Many people take different views on this but my view is that it is not. We’ve in effect got two objects here; we’ve got the physical object which is the bronze or the marble, and the work, which is a different kind of object—it’s a cultural object, it’s got different kinds of properties. Although, of course, they are embodied in the same material form, they aren’t actually the same.

HB: So is the thought that ‘works’ and ‘objects’ call for different kinds of descriptions?

³Lamarque 2002.

PL: Absolutely. They call for different kinds of descriptions picking out different kinds of properties. And some of the properties that interested me about works rather than objects are intentional properties and relational properties. So a work, for example, has a meaning, or a point, whereas an object probably doesn't have that. The distinction also relates to the responses that people have to a work, and I have the view, which I develop through the book and especially in that first paper, that without the possibility of people responding in an appropriate way to the work the work doesn't exist. So a work as a cultural object is embedded in a cultural world such that if that world changed radically, then the work would cease to exist, even though the physical object—the paint, the marble, the bronze—would go on existing. The idea of a distinction between just a 'thing' with its purely physical properties, and works, with their work-related properties, is essential if we are to get a good grip on understanding what art is.

HB: So thinking about this distinction between work and object, I'm interested to hear about the case of literature, especially as you've spent much time discussing it in your other work. What, in your view, is the 'object' that we contrast the 'work' of literature with? Is it just bare sounds or marks on a page?

PL: Well the basic distinction is between what I call a 'text' and a 'work'. A text is just made up of words and sentences. It's not quite the same, of course, as the bronze of the statue or the paint of the painting. Even so, a text is still, in a very loose sense, a kind of object, distinct from the work that is related to it very closely but again not identical to it. A text will have purely linguistic properties but a work will have meaning of a very specific kind and, in the end, it will have cultural properties, like being in a genre or being part of a tradition. Now a literary work, for example, holds more than just the meaning of its constitutive sentences. Those meanings could be given through a dictionary or through the resources of a language. In a literary work there are bigger meanings, themes that are being developed. So when you approach a text as a literary work, you're on the lookout for these

other kinds of properties—the intentional and relational properties ‘kick in’ in virtue of it’s being a work. And then you are responding to it as a work of literature, and not just as a text.

HB: I notice that your, by now familiar, conception of practice crops up in your discussion of what constraints we might apply to the theory of a work. Could you tell us a bit more about that conception more generally and the role it plays in your theory?

PL: That was a very important notion in my earlier book, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, which I wrote with Stein Haugom Olsen.⁴ But it’s not that I’ve lost that concept—I still think it’s absolutely central to all the arts. The idea of a practice goes back to Wittgenstein and the idea of a language game, or a game associated with particular kinds of discourses. I think the idea is very useful and very powerful, because it connects with the idea of rules. For a practice there are certain rules, which are both constitutive and regulative of the practice. So there are some rules that actually define the practice. For example, there are constitutive rules of fiction such that the very possibility of fiction depends on them. Only if those rules are in place can anything count as a work of fiction.

You’re quite right that the idea of a practice comes up in all of my work, so it connects to many of the themes I discuss in *Work and Object*. There it’s an idea of works being embedded in cultural practices, and there are practices associated, for example, with making and looking at paintings, or with making and reading poems, or with making music and responding to music. Those practices are related but very different, and there are different sorts of rules for each. Interestingly there’s also a kind of overarching practice, the art practice, which they all fall into. So there are commonalities across all the arts that can be explained in terms of what being a work of art is, and I think again the idea of a practice is illuminating here—in the idea of rules governing what it is to produce a work, what it is to respond to it as a work, how different kinds of works relate to each other, and how one practice re-

⁴Lamarque and Olsen 1994.

lates to other practices. Part of the job of the philosopher is to identify what these rules are—that's one of the key aims in exploring aesthetics. In this book *Work and Object* I am looking at the rules that govern these practices.

2 Truth, fiction, and value

HB: You've already mentioned the book you wrote with Stein Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. Could you tell us a bit more about how that partnership came about?

PL: Well there's an amusing story. I reviewed Stein Olsen's first book, *The Structure of Literary Understanding*,⁵ soon after it came out in 1978, and actually I had never heard of him! [laughing] The review was for *The Philosophical Review*, and I said what a brilliant book I thought it was.⁶ The only thing I disagreed with, somewhat to my amusement now, is his chapter on truth and literature. Because in those days I thought that literature had a close connection with truth and with knowledge, and that it was a way of expanding our understanding of the world and of ourselves, and so on. Stein, in his book, had been sceptical of that, and so I said 'well, I have some reservations on that point.' I think after that, if I remember correctly, he wrote to me thanking me for the review. We stayed in touch and we corresponded for a while. I was in Scotland at the time and he came over from Norway with his family, partly to work with me and partly, you know, for something to do! So he and I got to know each other very well. I was teaching then, a course on literature, and he would come and sit in and contribute.

So that was the beginning of a friendship and an intellectual partnership. We realized the stuff he was doing on literature and some of the stuff I was doing on fiction were connected, so we came up with the idea of writing a book together, on fiction and literature. The idea was that I would write the parts on fiction and he would write the parts on

⁵Olsen 1978.

⁶Lamarque 1979.

literature. But of course he was for the most part in a different country, and this was before the days of email. So it was much more difficult to communicate! But gradually the book took shape and it took shape round the point I was making earlier about the idea of a practice. In his earlier book *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, Stein developed an idea of practice, but he called it an 'institution.' This was the idea that there is an institution of literature, and in order to understand what literary works are you have to understand that institution. Although I was unsure about whether this could illuminate the case of fiction, I started to think that it might. So I was very much influenced by Stein. I hope that, in the end, it gelled together!

HB: It's very interesting to hear you say that originally you were quite impressed by the idea of literature and its connection to truth and its teaching function. But along came Stein Olsen and he changed your mind, and you end up developing a 'no-truth' conception of literary value. How did he draw you over to his way of thinking?

PL: Actually the difference was not all that great between my thinking that literature could contribute in some way to a self-understanding of human beings, and so on, and the view that we develop in the book. It might seem a narrow point, especially now I look back. What we're saying is that neither the notion of truth or the notion of knowledge are the key to understanding the value of literature. That doesn't mean to say, of course, that literary works don't engage humanly interesting themes: the big themes that occupy human beings and have always done so. Themes of life and love, despair, hope and duty, and so on; of course, the great works of literature explore, and I use that word advisedly, these themes in original, powerful, and engaging ways. It's obviously important to see that one value of literature is that it should do that.

What I learned from Stein is that literary works explore the big human themes in their own way, in the sense that they're not competing with philosophy. The way that philosophy tackles those big themes is largely through developing theories, which they put forward as true,

defensible, and reasoned. Philosophy is to do with reason and argument and truth, but literary works such as novels, plays, and poems are not in the business of producing theories. They are exploring these big ideas but in a different way. That had come out in Stein's original book and maybe I misread him as saying that literature had nothing to do with exploring these big ideas — but in fact he wasn't saying that at all. So I hope what comes across in *Truth, Fiction and Literature* is that literature has huge value in the realm of ideas and human self-understanding, and so on. In any narrow sense of truth, however, and by 'narrow' I mean the philosophical sense of truth, it's not an aspiration of literature to give us truth in the way that a scientific theory or a philosophical theory aims at truth.

HB: With all these different kinds of truths and uses of the predicates 'true' and 'false,' it seems very difficult to pin down exactly how the term is being used by the 'pro-truth' camps, concerning literary value. Do you think when these theorists talk of 'truth' they really mean something quite different? If so, is it something you and Olsen would necessarily disregard as integral to literary value?

PL: Well actually, when you look at the way that literary people talk about truth it does often turn out to be something quite different from the philosophical notion of truth. Philosophical truth is largely propositional truth; it's a proposition that sets itself up as either true or false, and one that can be defended or argued for. However, most defenders of literary truth, even philosophical defenders, say that that's not really what they mean by truth. What they mean is something like 'sincerity' or 'authenticity,' or 'truthfulness.' They don't mean truth in this narrow philosophical or scientific sense. At this point the whole debate changes, because Stein and I can just say 'well, we're not really talking about the same thing.' When we say literature is not principally to do with truth, we're talking about philosophical or scientific truth—but you're not. You're talking about a different kind of truth, and perhaps if we talk about truth in your sense, using notions like 'sincerity' and 'authenticity,' we can agree with you that they are indeed literary val-

ues. Though I think it's misleading to call that 'truth.' Partly because as a philosopher I come from a tradition of talking about truth where it doesn't mean 'sincerity,' and so on.

The main point I take issue with, and actually many philosophers have said this about literature, is that somehow a work of literature is only of value if it's good for you in some way—notably if you learn something. It goes back to Plato's demand that the arts justify themselves as useful in some way. That tradition has gone on, in a variety of ways, to defend literature in terms of what it can teach us.

HB: That tradition is very interesting. Cognitivism about literary value has many supporters and has developed into many strands, which harks back to that olive branch that Plato offered the arts.

PL: Yes, 'show it's useful and we'll let you back into the Republic'!

HB: But do you still disagree with those who say that literary value has less to do with truth and more to do with an education of sorts, perhaps an emotional or a moral education?

PL: It's important to get the dialectic right here because what I'm not denying, and I take it Olsen is not denying either, is that you can learn something from literature. Of course you can—you can learn things of many different kinds. You can learn lots of practical things from reading literature, you could learn about geography or etiquette, and of course you can learn about fictional characters. That can be important actually, because some fictional characters like Oedipus or Hamlet are utterly iconic; they are part of what defines our culture, they kind of embody it. If people are going to understand Western culture, or even certain human ideas, it's very important that they know something about these iconic fictional characters. So I'm not saying that you can't learn from literature. What I resist is only the claim that all literary value is invested in this learning outcome, particularly when it's expressed in terms of truth. That is the claim that literature is only valuable to the extent that it tells us something true about human be-

ings and thereby contributes to our understanding of human beings. I don't think that's the way to look at literature. Yes we can learn things, and we can learn things about ourselves, and some of what we learn about ourselves could be expressed in propositions that have truth-value. So the dialectic is difficult since I'm not dismissing the idea that some true propositions could be acquired from or can arise out of reading literature. I just don't think that's the principal value of literature.

HB: And is this idea still something you want to defend? Or have your views about cognitivism changed over the years?

PL: You mention an emotional education and that's an interesting case. Jenefer Robinson puts a lot of store on emotion, and you get the same in Martha Nussbaum and Susan Feagin.⁷ That has slightly shifted the terms of the debate about cognitivism because it is no longer focusing on truth and knowledge. It's focusing on the emotional experiences we have when we engage with literary works and the value attributed to that emotional experience. I am not denying that literature can give us a heightened emotional experience—it's what tragedy does, or sentimental literature—and we value them for that reason. But this is where I disagree with these thinkers: I don't think that that is what makes great literature great. I don't think that inducing a heightened emotional experience is the mark of great literature, although I do think that a work's ability to express emotion is sometimes important.

HB: You've been emphatic about what isn't the mark of great literature, but that raises the question of what, in your view, is great literature. What makes great literature great?

PL: Well, here I'm sort of flying a kite in a way. I suppose I have a view that really great works of art somehow transcend individual differences, cultural differences, and even temporal differences. We could

⁷Robinson 2005; Nussbaum 2003; Nussbaum 1992; Feagin 1996.

be reading them now or they could have been written 2,000 years ago, but somehow great works of literature speak to our human nature rather than just to our narrower cultural and individual natures, which of course are real and important. Still somehow, and this is the aspiration, great works transcend cultural differences. Hume believed something like this. The values we have been talking about so far, such as truth, knowledge, or a teaching function, are sometimes called instrumental values in art. This is the idea that art's value is explicable in terms of its consequences or what it brings about. So there has been an interesting shift from truth to, say, emotion. As I say, I don't deny that these consequences exist or that they are valuable, but I don't think they are at the heart of what makes the arts valuable. I did, perhaps rather provocatively I suppose, publish a paper entitled 'The Uselessness of Art.' The idea owes its origin to Oscar Wilde, who said that all art is quite useless, and I thought 'there's something in that!' In a way it kind of epitomizes my reaction to the claim that art is only good if it's useful, particularly if it's useful in teaching us something or stirs our emotions. What I wanted to pursue there, and is related really to everything that we've been talking about, is the thought that art has a kind of value in itself—an autonomous value—that is not reducible to any of these other instrumental values—political values, or cognitive values, and so on. That art has value for itself. And of course people say 'well that's just art for art's sake' and that view was totally discredited, and is connected with a crude kind of formalism. So I do need to defend my view against that charge. I don't think I'm a formalist, nor am I saying art is valuable just in virtue of its form, whatever that might mean.

HB: You gave the keynote paper at the Understanding Value conference at Sheffield in 2012, which was entitled 'On Not Being Too Formalistic About Literary Value,' so it seems that this charge of formalism is something you're keen to address.

PL: Well that was developing, in a way, the uselessness point. I wanted to show that you can defend art for art's sake without defend-

ing or being committed to formalism. I think that's right because I think pure formalism, which sometimes says that all that matters in a work is its form, is a non-starter. However I think you can hold this non-instrumental uselessness view without that commitment, and retain the idea of art for art's sake without formalism.

3 The future of aesthetics

HB: From your work it's clear that you think reading literature demands a different kind of attention from the way in which we read, say, philosophy. You seem to take literary criticism very seriously as a source for insights and intuitions about how novels should be read. Do you think more aestheticians should follow your lead?

PL: Well one always hopes that! I think that if you've got a set of ideas that you think are right then you always hope that other people will follow. For what it's worth I don't want to associate myself with the New Critics because I think they had too much of a hermetically-sealed vision of the literary work as a verbal icon, completely free-standing and cut off from its origins and other connections. But do I think people should take my line? Of course! My highest aspiration, intellectually speaking, and as someone writing about literature, is that literary people would read my stuff and come to share my views. Actually until very recently we've had literary theorists in their department, doing their own thing, and us literary aesthetics people in philosophy departments, doing our thing, and there's *no* connection. To some extent we read their work, but they think we just parody what they do and we don't really understand it—so they don't read our work at all. That's very disillusioning for someone like me who is interested in literature, and of course interested in literary criticism.

But thankfully I think that's breaking down now. I'm very happy to say I have a lot of correspondence with people in literature departments these days. People who have perhaps read my work and got in touch. And of course, people like to find out that their work is being read. Don't be afraid to write to people and express an interest in

their work. So I think my and other people's work on literary aesthetics is getting out into the literary community. I was pleased to see, although it was a double-edged pleasure, that Terry Eagleton engages substantially with both Stein Olsen and me in his recent book.⁸ He of course has criticisms but here's a very well-known literary theorist who has never before engaged with or taken seriously what analytic philosophers have to say, writing a whole book that is largely focused on the themes in my book *The Philosophy of Literature* and the book with Olsen. Anyway that's very heartening and I hope it will continue to happen. I've got a certain level of readership in the philosophy community and in the aesthetics community but I've got a *very* small readership in the literary community. But I hope that it's growing.

HB: In your most recent work you turn your attention to the metaphysics and ontology of artworks. Do you think that by answering metaphysical questions regarding artworks, aesthetics has a significant contribution to make towards metaphysics more generally, and perhaps to other areas of philosophy?

PL: I hope so and yes, I think so. One interesting case in point is Julian Dodd, who has written a very good book on the ontology of music. But he came to that from having no interest in aesthetics at all. I like to think that I had something to do with it because I gave a paper at his university very many years ago on the ontology of art, which struck a chord with him. We corresponded and he started writing on the topic, and indeed I published one or two papers of his in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (BJA). Then he developed his ideas in the book, and now he's a key figure in aesthetics. So here is someone who has moved from metaphysics, is still doing metaphysics, but now doing aesthetics as well. That's good because it exemplifies this two-way process. Aesthetics is learning from and being influenced by metaphysics from the outside, but people in metaphysics are looking at the work that's being done, for example on music, and that's helping to shape what's going on in metaphysics. So it's a two-way interaction. But there is a

⁸Eagleton 2012.

danger in all these sorts of borrowings from other areas that you lose sight of what's distinctive about art, so one must be careful. However, it can be, and has been, very fruitful in many ways.

HB: You spent many years as the editor of the BJA. Could you offer any advice to early career aestheticians hoping to get published?

PL: Well, I really hope postgraduates send work to the BJA and get it published—because it's a very good journal, along with others, and it's a great launch-pad for a career. The truth is that if young people and people starting out in philosophy were not publishing in journals like the BJA, such journals would just disappear. It's kept going and gets its life from new people coming in and saying new things and pushing it forward. When I was the editor I was conscious of the fact that, although it's always nice to get papers from well-known people, you can't only have that kind of work in the journal. You've got to get new people. They have to start somewhere and it's the responsibility of an editor to give them opportunities. That doesn't mean lowering standards, because the standard of postgraduate students in aesthetics is high across the board. And I know that the current editor, John Hyman, is aware of this idea and is sensitive to it. Besides, if we did just publish well-known authors the journal would become very stale, because these people often (and I know this is true in my own case) stick to the same lines of argument. What they're doing is just recycling what they've said before and a journal can't live off that. A journal has to keep at the cutting edge and has to keep pushing things forward. That's got to come from younger people. The rest of us just want to know what's going on, and what they're thinking. So of course send work to the BJA, and it will certainly be looked at sympathetically and attentively.

Maybe I'm speaking to all postgraduates here, but along with trying to get published you should also get yourself known as someone working in a particular field. Go to conferences, offer papers, don't be afraid of writing to people who have published something that interests you and follow up some points with them—then respond to them.

The job climate is tough now, but it always has been. But people *are* getting jobs in aesthetics, so there is no need to despair. Another piece of general advice is to try not to be too narrowly focused, really sell yourself to an employer by showing that you know about or can teach other things. You don't want to give the impression that all you know anything about is some narrow area in aesthetics. Of course writing a PhD is 'narrowness' exemplified, but try to keep your interests broad. Find out what's going on and keep up with what's happening in other fields so you can say sincerely in an interview that you have other interests. It's tough writing a PhD and it's tough looking for a job. But the jobs are there and my goodness the talent is there—I do know that.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE: Since 2000, Peter Lamarque has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of York. Before that, he was Ferens Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Hull (1995-2000), and taught in the Philosophy Department of the University of Stirling, first as Lecturer (1972-1993) and then as Senior Lecturer (1993-95). He has held visiting positions at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Tsukuba, Japan (1983-84), Cornell University as Visiting Associate Professor (1985, 1987, 1993), the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University as Visiting Fellow (1994), and the Programme of the Theory of Literature, University of Lisbon, as Visiting Professor (2009).

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Helen Bradley is a doctoral candidate at the University of York. She has a BA in Philosophy from the University of Reading, and an MA Philosophy of Art and Literature from York.

References

- Eagleton, Terry (2012). *The Event of Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Feagin, Susan L. (1996). *Reading With Feeling*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lamarque, Peter (1979). "Review of *The Structure of Literary Understanding*." In: *The Philosophical Review* 88, pp. 468–471.
- Lamarque, Peter (1996). *Fictional Points of View*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lamarque, Peter (2002). "Work and Object." In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 102.2, pp. 141–162.
- Lamarque, Peter (2010). *Work and Object*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lamarque, Peter and Stein Haugom Olsen (1994). *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (1992). *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (2003). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Olsen, Stein Haugom (1978). *The Structure of Literary Understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, Jenefer (2005). *Deeper than Reason*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.