

**Joshua Landy.** *How to Do Things with Fictions*. Oxford University Press, 2012. 266 pp. \$58.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780195188561); \$24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780199378203).

Joshua Landy's book presents an engaging case for literature as a form of self-fashioning. He isn't making a universal claim about all literature; instead, he makes the rather modest claim that some literary works can function to change the lives of those who read them. Although he acknowledges that literature can function in multiple ways, he is interested in works that are neither primarily didactic nor informative. Rather, the works that interest Landy attempt to show us something, i.e., exemplary ways that people might live their lives—they in-form rather than inform. After a programmatic introduction in which he outlines thirteen different proposed theoretical justifications for fiction, he presents a series of meditations on a series of authors whose literary works function as works that prompt *askesis* (in Foucault's sense of the term) in their readers. (Incidentally, it is noteworthy that, although Foucault's work is not discussed in the book, the work of the later Foucault is certainly relevant to Landy's project.) Invoking an author dear to both Foucault and Landy, we might say that Landy's book points to a tradition of literature that sees literature as "a way of life" (the phrase is borrowed from Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*). Following the introduction, Landy enlists an eclectic group to make his case: the works of Chaucer, The Gospel of Mark, Mallarmé, Plato, and Beckett. This is an eclectic group that Landy splits into three parts, "Clearing the Ground" (Chaucer), "Enchantment and Re-Enchantment" (Mark and Mallarmé), "Logic and Anti-Logic" (Plato and Beckett). I shall begin by providing an overview of the introduction and each of the readings before indicating the philosophical import of the book. The book's philosophical strength lies in its sophisticated readings of certain philosophical and literary works as ethically significant rather than morally didactic. As the above list indicates, these readings juxtapose literary and philosophical authors that many would not consider related; as a result, these readings will prove provocative for philosophers and literary scholars alike.

The introduction makes a case for a set of fictions that Landy terms 'formative'. He is trying to reclaim texts from those critics he terms the "meaning-mongers" (8). He begins the introduction with the story of a student in one of his classes who enjoyed reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, but she wanted Morrison to get to the point sooner (3). But, as Landy quickly points out, Morrison's book is not meant to present readers with useful advice or a message that needs to be decoded. He proceeds to provide thirteen different ways of looking at texts; while a few of these bear some similarity to his project, Landy makes clear that he is after something else. He divides these non-formative interpretations into three main groups: *exemplary*, *affective*, and *cognitive*. Proponents of fictions as exemplary, an interpretive strategy most common among early modern critics such as Sidney, Scaliger, Racine, and Rymer, either see individual characters as providing readers with models to emulate, or they see fictions as formal models (4). Affective critics, critics such as Richard Rorty, Lynn Hunt, Martha Nussbaum, and Wayne Booth, see fictions as appeals to emotion, particularly empathy. On this view, we read fiction to become more empathetic (4). The final group sees reading as a cognitive activity in which readers are meant to learn some new propositional content about the world through the act of reading; this has been by far the most common interpretive strategy. Fiction is not primarily about finding the various meanings hidden in the text, but neither should interpreters revel in the uselessness of literary fictions. Put simply, Landy is a proponent of pragmatics over semantics, but the pragmatic dimension must be conceived as ethically broad rather than morally narrow (this is Nussbaum's error, according to Landy) (9-10). While he does not deny that texts can be read a myriad of ways, he does believe that the category of formative fictions has

been neglected by interpreters of literature both past and present. Formative fictions provide readers with *know-how* rather than propositional knowledge, “rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip [readers] with are *skills*; rather than teaching, what they do is *train*” (10). In other words, in a term redolent with meaning for both Hadot and Foucault, these texts “present themselves as ‘spiritual exercises’” (10). The main problem is that these aspects of texts can only be communicated indirectly (14). (This leads one to wonder how Kierkegaard’s works would fit into Landy’s schema.) The chapters that follow give content to this this initial characterization of formative fictions.

Chapter One, “Chaucer: Ambiguity and Ethics,” presents Landy’s broader ethical task. He begins by pointing out the Chaucer’s texts require readers to either suspend disbelief or believe things that contradict commonsense beliefs today, for example talking roosters and prophetic dreams, but it would be absurd to claim that Chaucer believed in these things either. The propositional content of these tales confuse contemporary readers just as they would have confused readers during Chaucer’s time. So, reading Chaucer in order to tell us something about the world turns out to be a dead end. Perhaps we should continue to read Chaucer for the moral improvement that the tales inspire in us, but that turns out largely to be a dead end as well. Landy’s claim here is that things are more complex in formative fictions than proponents of moral exemplarity make them out to be. These texts do not contain a simple message, and they can provide readers with moral edification precisely if the reader is prepared to be moved by such claims. It is not the case, as some moralist would claim, that good literature provides moral edification while bad literature does not, but rather that literary texts can open a space for readers to reflect on their moral beliefs should they be prepared to do so.

In Part Two “Enchantment and Re-Enchantment,” Landy provides readings of the Gospel of Mark and of Stephane Mallarmé. He argues that the literary form of parable in the case of Mark and the poem in that of Mallarmé is an integral aspect of the meaning of these texts. “Without fiction [...] there would be no true faith” (43). The meaning of these parables is not to make faith easy; rather it is to problematize faith and thereby convert one reader at a time (53). For example, the Parable of the Sower means that the Kingdom of Heaven is available to some immediately “by training [themselves] to look down upon sensory phenomena” (61). The parable *does* sort readers into believers and nonbelievers. Much later, Mallarmé’s poems work in a similar way to re-enchant the world for modern readers who have become disillusioned by the mundane. Landy’s claim is roughly that Mallarmé’s poems function as training grounds for re-enchanting a world that has been disenchanting through scientific modernity.

The third part provides another apparently odd juxtaposition through a reading of Plato’s *Gorgias* and Beckett’s *Trilogy*. Chapter Four “Fallacy and Logic” takes aim at those interpreters who seek to redeem Socrates’ arguments. Put simply, Socrates in *The Gorgias* makes such egregious logical blunders so as to render such a project hopeless. Landy focuses on the contradiction between Socrates’ characterization of Pericles as a bad citizen because he lost the trust of the people of Athens and himself as a good citizen for precisely this reason (107). This contradiction is representative of other holes in Socrates’ reasoning, so Landy argues that Plato must be up to something other than portraying Socrates as an exemplary philosopher in the dialogues. The only way Plato’s portrait of Socrates can be redeemed is if the dialogues are read as spiritual exercises (119-120). In light of Landy’s reading of Plato, Beckett becomes a writer of spiritual exercises as well. With Beckett, we are not learning a doctrine of knowledge but instead learning how to content ourselves with a lack of knowledge. It is precisely this incessant desire to know that Beckett’s texts seek to tame. On Landy’s reading, Beckett is best understood as reviving the tradition of Pyrrhonian skepticism. It’s

not that we cannot know that is the problem; the problem is that we can neither know nor not know. In the background of Beckett's texts, Landy also detects Schopenhauer's pessimism. The problem for both Beckett's characters and for the readers receptive to Beckett's texts is not simply one of knowledge. In addition, Beckett's characters and readers face the issue of guilt at having been born and the irreducible pain of existence itself. Schopenhauer's prescription to overcome both the desire to know and poverty of our wretched existence is the overcoming of desire itself.

It should be evident that Landy has written a provocative, dense book that should appeal to literary scholars and philosophers of literature alike. As indicated, Landy's theory of formative fictions is incomplete, but this means that his book functions similar to his formative fictions: it provokes his readers to think about literature and philosophy alike as formative fictions rather than as bearers of meaning. For those receptive to it, this is a richly rewarding text.

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