

Sarah E. Worth. *In Defense of Reading*. Rowman & Littlefield 2017. 240 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781783483181); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781783483198).

Literature occupies a peculiar position in contemporary culture. While statistics show that the amount of time that people spend on reading literature in general has dropped significantly in recent years, literature nevertheless has arguably managed to sustain its position as what sociologists like to call ‘legitimate culture,’ despite pressure from the many forms of entertainment, popular culture, and social media. Even those who read books only occasionally still acknowledge reading as an important activity, and some even have a bad conscience about not reading enough. Another indication of literature’s deep-rooted value in our culture is that people frequently explain or even make excuses about why they have not been able to read more. Absence from Facebook, for example, does not prompt commensurate feelings and responses.

The picture that Sarah Worth paints of the contemporary state of reading in the opening pages of her timely and very welcome book on the values of reading, *In Defense of Reading*, is a bit gloomier. She too points to research showing that people spend less time on reading literature. Worth also notes how in schools, at least in the United States, literature classes are threatened with being replaced by what are deemed more useful subjects or by other sorts of reading that are considered more instructive for the future life of a student. In Worth’s view, another significant threat to reading literature has appeared on the horizon: social media. While she does not want to demonize the different variants of digital culture totally, she is concerned that people’s attention will, to an increasing degree, be drawn to Facebook and Snapchat rather than literature. This worries her particularly because she believes social media calls for a very shallow kind of engagement compared to the efforts required in reading a complex novel.

Worth’s concern centers on reading narrative literature because she believes it has some significant cognitive benefits. In this respect, she continues a line of thinking followed by such figures as Martha Nussbaum, Lionel Trilling, and others, who have emphasized the deep significance that literature can have on our thinking around moral problems and situations. Worth, however, brings new nuances and aspects to this tradition of thinking. Though the notions of empathy and moral imagination figure importantly in her account, Worth believes that the value of reading extends beyond the realm of ethics, improving our cognitive organizational capacity and our ability to make sense of our life experiences in a more general sense. Worth’s extensive look at the empirical research, from psychology to neuroscience, exploring how we process narratives, also brings new insights into philosophical discussions on the value of literature. For example, contrary to Gregory Currie, who has denied that there is any conclusive empirical evidence of the moral and cognitive benefits of reading, Worth believes that plenty of reliable research is, in fact, available. Despite citing numerous studies indicating the value reading can have, she ultimately insists that reading literature also possesses aspects of value that cannot be measured or quantified.

One of the many merits of Worth’s book is that, by engaging with such phenomena as digital, cultural and social media, it provides an updated setting for considering philosophically the value of literature. In the philosophy of literature, the question of the cognitive value of literature has been approached primarily in terms of the question of truth in fiction, that is, how a fictive literary work can say something epistemically significant about our real world. Worth thinks this semantic question provides a very narrow framework for considering the value of reading. She evaluates certain views put forward previously in the philosophy of literature as reductionist, arguing that, rather than focusing on the semantics of the literary work, philosophers should instead focus on the act of reading itself and in the interaction between text and reader that novels incite.

In Worth's view, the narrative structure of literature is the ultimate locus of the cognitive significance she attaches to reading. It mobilizes and improves our capacity for 'narrative reasoning.' This is different from logical reasoning that proceeds from premises to conclusion, in that it involves making a coherent whole out of the different elements of a narrative. Understanding a narrative, such as the story of a novel, consists of making connections between its different situations and characters, as well as being able to make sense of the reasons why characters act in the way they do. For Worth, this is a mode of inference-making. The different connections of the narrative, however, are not made explicit in the text itself, so the reader has to fill in the ties between its different elements and sequences. Narratives are in this respect full of gaps, which the reader needs to work through. This, in turn, 'calls upon a battalion of cognitive processes' (147). Worth explains these as follows: 'As a reader, we imagine characters' goals and emotions, make moral judgments about characters' situations, make logical inferences about relationships between events and causes, and evaluate and verify narrative truths based on our own knowledge and experience' (147). Worth argues that we use a similar kind of reasoning to make sense of experiences with narrative elements in everyday contexts too and hence, the narrative reasoning inspired by works of literature improves our engagements with the world in a more general sense. She admits that no single book will make us intellectually sharper. Narrative reasoning, however, can be taken as a 'skill' that can be improved by engaging with complex narratives, such as those found in great works of literature (128).

One of the philosophical issues that Worth considers more extensively is the status of our emotional reactions to fiction. Is the pity we feel in the face of Anna Karenina's fate a real emotion, even though we know very well that she is not a real person? Or are such emotional reactions in some ways irrational? This is the well-known paradox of fiction. Worth actually does not put forward any new solution for solving the paradox, but basically wants to dissolve the whole debate, by revealing some problematic background assumptions within it. She argues that philosophers addressing the problem have not paid enough attention to the way readers process the narrative structure of fictional literature. She writes: 'The paradox of fiction reduces extended narratives into individual lies and falsehood' (63). In other words, our emotional responses to fiction do not happen in the abstract, as it were, but as a result of cognitive processing that involves a host of other considerations apart from the fictive/non-fictive character of the story. This is why Worth proposes that the category of the narrative, rather than that of fiction, should be primary when reflecting on our emotional reactions to fiction. She concludes: 'The philosophical literature has, to this point, abstracted the idea of fiction to such an extreme that it is completely separated from the process of reading. Fiction does not even refer to a particular text *per se* but to an abstract notion of something merely imagined' (66). A defender of the meaningfulness of the paradox might of course insist that similar issues come up on the level of the narrative. Why do we get emotionally engaged with a narrative that we know did not actually happen? Perhaps the simple answer is that we just cannot help it. An excitement about stories is in some ways built into our being.

There are some philosophical issues that Worth could have considered more extensively, such as aesthetic cognitivism, namely the question of how a literary work's cognitive value relates to its value as literature. Do the literary features that constitute literary value overlap in some ways with the features that explain the cognitive benefits Worth ascribes to reading literature? Also, though she briefly acknowledges that narratives can be powerful means for pursuing questionable ends, such as denigrating minorities and oppressed human groups, the negative consequences narratives can have would have deserved a more extensive treatment. Narratives can arguably also sometimes be purely aesthetic constructs. Authors can pursue a certain kind of narrative structure for their work simply to make it aesthetically more enjoyable. But it is not clear whether narratives resulting from such choices can improve the narrative reasoning we rely on to make sense of narratives and our experience in everyday life in any straightforward sense.

But these are minor points, and Worth might have wisely chosen to leave these philosophical issues for another occasion for the sake of making this book more accessible to the non-philosopher. Worth's book will hopefully enjoy a large readership far beyond the circles of professional aestheticians. It presents a rich and carefully laid out defense of the importance of reading. It serves as an apt reminder of how rewarding experiences of thoughtful engagements with literature can be, and how important such moments of silent concentration are in our increasingly technological world where we are expected to be continuously online.

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